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Osamu James Nakagawa Interview

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Interviewer: Myumi Ware

Artist: Osamu James Nakagawa

Location: Skype interview – Chicago/Indiana

Date: February 3, 2016

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Photo: © 2015 Michio Hayase and bio courtesy of the artist.

Bio: Osamu James Nakagawa was born in New York City; raised in Tokyo, Japan and returned to Houston, Texas at the age of 15. He received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Houston in 1993. He is the Ruth N. Halls Professor of Art at Indiana University and a recipient of the 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship and 2010 Higashikawa Award: New Photographer of the Year, and 2015 Sagami-hara Photographer of the Year in Japan. Nakagawa's work is shown internationally and his monograph *GAMA Caves* was published by Aka Aka Art Publishing in January 2014.

His recent work, *BANTA* and *GAMA* series was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; 2012 Les Rencontres D' Arles, France; Fries Museum, Netherlands; Nikon Salon, Tokyo; and others. Nakagawa's work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; George Eastman Museum; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Sakima Art Museum, Okinawa; The Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; and others.

Interview Transcript:

Myumi Ware: Alright, so, I just wanted to ask you a few general questions to start, so can you tell me a little about yourself? Like where did you grow up? What school did you go to? When is your birthday?

Osamu James Nakagawa: I was born in New York, 1962. My father was transferred to New York by his company and I was born while he was working in New York. My family went back to Tokyo 7 months after I was born. I lived in Tokyo until my 3rd year in junior high school. When I was fourteen, my father was transferred again, this time to Houston, Texas. I have lived mostly in the US since then. I went to high school and college in Houston. After I finished my degree, I went back to Japan to work as an apprentice to my uncle, the photographer Takayuki Ogawa. I then decided to devote myself to fine art photography and returned to Houston to start a career. After I came back to the United States I worked part time for a while, and then I went to the University of Houston to get a Master of Fine Arts. My final project for the graduate program won second place at the First Tokyo International Photo Biennale, and published in the Aperture magazine in 1995. After that I worked as a visiting professor at the University of Houston, and as an assistant professor at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, then I came to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana where I am now a Professor of Photography and the director of the Center for Integrative Photographic Studies. It has been 18 years since I moved to Bloomington.

MW: So what did your father do?

OJN: He worked for a major Japanese trading company. So when I was fourteen, he was transferred again to Houston and I decided to go with him.

MW: Just you and your dad?

OJN: Yes, I lived with my father for almost a year then my mother and brother joined.

MW: Did you struggle with language at all? Did they put you in ESL (English as a Second Language)?

OJN: I lived in Japan as an infant so my native language is Japanese. I returned to the United States at the age of fourteen and I was not able to speak English at all at that time. Of course all classes were taught in English in Houston and I did not understand them at all. But, since I was still young, I was able to learn how to speak fairly quickly through hanging out with my friends. But I remember when I read textbooks, I had to look up almost 90% of the words using an English-Japanese dictionary and all the classes were very difficult because of my poor English. I don't think ESL classes were available yet.

I can only speak from my high school experience but my school was predominantly white, upper class students. I was one of only a couple Asian students in the entire school. I sensed some discrimination and bullying towards minorities. Students weren't that big in their freshman year of high school, but that changed dramatically after their second year. Before that happened,

however, I had confronted the students who had initially harassed me. So, even after they became bigger, they showed me respect. Houston is now an international metropolis with large Hispanic, Asian, and African-American populations. It also has a very sophisticated cultural arts scene, but back in 1977, especially straight out from Tokyo, I felt that I moved to a wild southern town with oil businessmen wearing cowboy boots and ten gallon hats. Probably this is my Japanese 15 year-old's stereotyped memory of Houston.

MW: Okay, so when did you first get into photography?

OJN: I was exposed to photography from early on in my life. My maternal grandmother owned a camera store in downtown Tokyo. Back in those days, camera stores developed black and white film and made prints for the customers. I remember the smell of chemicals, prints coming out from the dryer, and the old rangefinder cameras in the show windows. My grandfather died before I was born, so I never met him, but before he opened the camera store, he was a western furniture designer and owned a woodshop with his brother. Then he got into photography, and started to import photographic chemicals as the side business. Perhaps I can say that my inherited creativity is coming from maternal side of family. His son, my mother's youngest brother, Takayuki Ogawa, became a successful professional photographer. He was the first Japanese photographer to have a solo exhibition at the George Eastman House in 1970, his photograph appeared in *Life* magazine, then he turned into a commercial photographer a few years later. He did TV commercial work too. I didn't know I was going to become photographer but I was exposed to his TV commercial shoots, posters, etc. from a young age. I joined the elementary school camera club in Japan as well so I did some photography when I was young and I think that was my uncle's influence. Also, after I came to the U.S. in 1977, I had a hard time communicating in English, I started to draw pictures on my notepad to communicate. Quickly, I learned that drawing on the notepad was a much faster way to communicate than looking for words in the dictionary and also much lighter to carry around too. I was young but I was using the drawing as a visual communication.

MW: Hmm... that's smart. [laughing]

OJN: I was studying drawing, painting and sculpture as an undergraduate but eventually I became interested in photography as expressive art medium. I was doing mostly street photography at the time and looking at photographer like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Harry Callahan, Duane Michaels, and others. I also took a workshop by Ray Metzker at the Houston Center for Photography and I was struck by his ability to create a range of work from very formal street photographs to more experimental large-scale constructed photography. After I graduated from college in Houston, I went back to Tokyo and worked for my uncle assisting commercial photography as well as TV commercial cinema photography lighting. I learned so much that year about working together as a team, creating high-end studio and location lighting for Japanese commercial. Also through a mutual friend, I was introduced to National Geographic photographer Michael Yamashita and started to work for him as an interpreter and assistant. The experience of assisting Michael opened up opportunities to assist many other American editorial photographers assigned to photograph the annual report for Japanese companies. I worked for *National Geographic*, *Time/Life* photographers, and *Magnum* photographers. I learned a lot from the commercial photography environment and editorial photography in a very short time but I

started to question product and consumer images in the commercial photography. I also realized foreign photographers often used stereo-typed and exoticized images of Japan in their magazines. I decided to go back to Houston and pursue fine art photography instead. I worked for a Japanese grocery store for a year, creating a portfolio to apply for the University of Houston MFA photography program. After a year of this independent work, I got into the MFA program. For 3 years, I worked under Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom, husband and wife team, known as “Manual” and George Krause. It was kind of a soul searching time for me in terms of trying to find my own voice and context. It was a struggle, but these people are truly my mentors in the sense that they directed me to expand my personal concerns to collective cultural concerns. And my MFA thesis work *Drive in Theater and Billboard* series was published in the *Aperture* magazine right after graduating and won the 2nd place in the Tokyo International Photography Biennale in 1995.

MW: Oh okay. Did you always want to be a photography professor or is that just something that happened?

OJN: I was working in the Japanese grocery store for a year to test myself—I had to make sure that I really wanted to pursue fine art photography. Between assisting my uncle and editorial photographers in Japan, I was making fairly good money but I didn’t want to continue assisting photographers anymore and pursue my photographic works. I quit after a year, came back to Houston and try to make my own photographs. By that time my friend had gotten into grad school in Houston, and encouraged me to apply for the University of Houston graduate program. I lived in a one-bedroom garage apartment at that time and my bedroom became a darkroom for processing and printing my portfolio. I got accepted to the program that year. For 3 years in the graduate program, I truly immersed myself in photography. At the time, Houston was becoming a major center for photography. The Houston Center for Photography was established in 1982 and the Houston International Fotofest started in 1986 so Houston was going through exciting new development of international photographic community and I was so lucky that my undergraduate to graduate experiences overlapped with them. I met Anne Tucker at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, she was involved with all these photo-community developments and bringing in important exhibitions, like the *Robert Frank: New York To Nova Scotia*, and Ray Metzker: *Unknown Territory*. She started collecting my work soon after I graduated. After graduating, I started teaching at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston. Plus, I had a visiting professor position at University of Houston for one year then to the tenure track position at the Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas prior to my current tenure at the Indiana University.

MW: So you enjoy being a professor now that you are?

OJN: Yes, I love teaching but my goal was not become professor at all when I was young. I just wanted to become fine art photographer and teaching was one of the ways to sustain a living and continue to do my work. As I said earlier, I tried to work for commercial and editorial but after that experience in Tokyo, I made a conscious decision not to go that rout. I think only a hand full of fine art photographers are making living with the only sales of their art work. Since it is so difficult make living with fine arts, I thought teaching was definitely one option. Fortunately, the US is one of the few countries that integrates the studio art education into the liberal art

universities and so many places have photography departments in their art program. I think that without teaching at Indiana University, I wouldn't be able to keep taking the risks and creating the scale of work I am making now. I'm exposed to so many different ideas and attempts by my students, that pushes me to think about photography from different perspectives. Perhaps it's directed to myself, but I always ask them to push beyond their own expectations, take risks, and surprise themselves with their work.

MW: So they teach you too, huh?

OJN: Yes! I like to challenge students to think about what is relevant in photography now. I am interested in how photography has been changing, but teaching makes me examine how it relates to my own work. I am seeking new ways to represent my ideas in the photographic medium and am very fortunate to be able to pass on my experience and knowledge of what I do as an artist to the younger generations.

MW: Awesome. So, how did you start working in Okinawa?

OJN: My interest in Okinawa was in part influenced by the fact that my wife is originally from Okinawa. I also think that there may be something in common between my upbringing as Japanese and American, and Okinawa's socio-historical makeup as colonized by the Japanese and the Americans in the past, with this complex identity.

When I visited Okinawa for the first time by myself I spent two weeks exploring the islands, and thought that it was a lot like Hawaii, just like a paradise. And all the photographs coming from Okinawa were exoticized versions of this paradise, mainly by Japanese travel magazines, beer commercial etc. They promoted that exoticized idea of the island. However, 20% of the main island is still occupied by US military. This gap struck me first time I went there. So, I wanted to do something more critical but I thought that it would not be easy to make images of Okinawa in conventional ways, but at the same time, I also felt close to Okinawa. That is, I thought that Okinawa is also in the "hazama,"(in-between) as they adapted to both American and Japanese culture, at the same time they were betrayed by both countries. That is probably why I feel comfortable in Okinawa. In Tokyo, where I spent my elementary and junior high school days, now I am considered a "foreigner." In the United States people see me as "Asian." Either way, I am marginalized... I feel Okinawa shares my sense of belonging nowhere.

MW: Okay, so I'm interested in your *Gama* piece (figure 1). How did you get permission to get into the caves?

OJN: Do you mean is it open to the public? Some of them are used for peace education. Okinawa main islands are made up with the coral limestone and there are hundreds of these caves.

MW: Oh, okay... so you can just go?

OJN: You can go in, but these are sacred places for the Okinawan people and there are taboos. The process of getting into the caves and knowing the tides is important and most of these caves are deep in the jungle, some of them are very hard find.

For Okinawan, the Gama cave is a place that Okinawan ancestor spirits are and it's a very sacred place. It shouldn't be entered casually. My wife's relatives were very concerned that I will bring back unwanted spirit. And they arranged for me to meet Yuta, Okinawan shamans. So she said I was born in the year of the tiger, and that I have a power to release spirit and she told my cousin that I was called by spirits to do this project. And with this permission, I entered the caves. At the same time, I had an exhibition at the Sakima Art Museum with *Banta* cliffs (figure 2), which is my work about the suicide cliffs from the WWII in mainland Okinawa. Through that exhibition, I got tremendous support from Okinawan artists and one of the photographers, Mao Ishikawa, introduced me to a guide Mr. Kuniyoshi who knows how to access the caves and walk through the jungles. Without him, I wouldn't have been able find some of these caves that I photographed. The *Gama* series took me three years to complete.

MW: Wow, why so long?

OJN: Because it's not conventional, straight photography. It's like a painting. One piece takes sometimes six months to finish. It looks photographic, right? It is. I took photographs but the color and all that it's done in computer. In the beginning, I really thought about how to make these images in the caves with spending a lot of time in the cave, just like with *Banta* cliffs are made up with hundreds of image files. Its possible to pop the flash, and depict the entire cave in one shot. However, I was interested in drawing out the detail and texture in the cave, so I decided to expose the pitch dark cave with a flashlight in my hand, open the shutter of my camera and walk around and paint the cave with light. Depending on the size of the cave, the exposure runs between 10-20 minutes. So actually, I am in the image painting these caves with flashlight, but the viewer can't see me because of the long exposure. I would spend 5-6 hours at a time in the dark photographing the caves. Then when I got back to my studio in Bloomington, I work on these image files with Photoshop in post-production process. People sometimes ask me, what is the true color of the cave? However, inside the cave is pitch black. So it's kind of hard for me to answer truthfully, because when I use the flashlight, I only see the parts of the cave. I use my imagination and experience of being in the cave to draw out the images with Photoshop.

During WWII the caves functioned as Japanese military field hospitals, foxholes. And also the islands were being bombed by U.S. naval battleships, and people needed somewhere to go for shelter. But Japanese military tried to drive them out, in order to shelter themselves and taking away their food instead. U.S. military used flame throwers or pour gasoline and try to drive people out from the caves. You can still see the burn marks inside some of the caves from these fires. Also, the Japanese military encourages the civilians to commit suicide rather than being captured. So people were driven to jump off from cliffs or Japanese military distributed hand grenades, one to each family, to blow themselves up before getting captured.

MW: I noticed that *Remains* (figure 3), *Gama*, and *Banta* all relate to the Battle of Okinawa. How were you affected by it?

OJN: When I first visited the Peace Memorial Museum in Itoman, Okinawa main island in 2001, I watched the 8mm Kodachrome color film on the Battle of Okinawa. I watched this film very carefully. It was close to the closing time at the museum and I did not have a chance to explore other parts of the museum, but I did stay in front and I watched the film. This film caught my attention because I did not know Okinawa experienced such an intense, devastating battle. 200,000 people died and 100,000 were Okinawan civilians. I had never seen this kind of documentary film before or been taught it in Japanese or American school. Coming out from the peace museum, you are faced with black war memorial walls inscribed with Okinawan, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and American names, then you are standing on the top of the cliff looking out to the intense blue sky and ocean but my imagination keeps going back to the film I just saw in the museum. 1,500 naval battleship parked out side of the coral reef shooting toward me... 5 years later, I came back to Okinawa during my sabbatical leave to see the surface of the cliff. I thought cliff surface witnessed the atrocity of the intense battle between my two countries. Then, *Banta* cliff started and my work evolved to *Gama* and so on...

While I was working on *Banta* cliffs in 2007, Japanese Ministry of Education tried to revise and soften the language of high school history textbooks on civilian's mass suicides like inside the caves were mostly voluntary acts instead of military forced suicide. This news made 100,000 Okinawan people to get together and rally against change in the textbook. I think this instance triggered me to consider going into the caves and taking photographs after *Banta* series. While The *Banta* and *Gama* series were created with discreet projects in mind, the *Remains* series is a product of years of observation and collecting with my camera. This work allows me to constantly engage with this history and consider how it continues to inform the present. This history is one that has trapped Okinawa between Japan and the United States since 1945.

I'm situating myself in between these two cultures because I'm American and Japanese. Instead of being nostalgic or simply admiring your own heritage, I am compelled to disclose and investigate the loaded history of United States and Japan that is still going on today.

MW: Right. So it's like you're struggling with identity.

OJN: Right. I came back here and saw the residue of this violence. I really wanted to see the surface of the cliffs from the point of view of the battleships. But you can't just stroll down a cliff, so I spent a month looking for a way to go down to the base. One day I saw a fisherman down there, and I thought there was hope. Later on, I figured out a way to use the low tide time of day to access it. When I finally got down to the bottom, I looked up, and I was so surprised. I felt that something had happened there. The surface shape of the cliffs looked so unusual because the bombs hit the surface. The surface of the cliff some times looked like faces screaming, red marks on the rock seemed like blood. I felt this was just unusual. I went back home without shooting anything that day. It was so intense.

I am not a documentary photographer. Rather, I see the cliffs as a metaphor. For example, what motivates the painter to paint something that s/he internally feels. In the same manner, what I always think about when I'm beginning to make my images is how can I recreate the feeling that I experienced in front of the cliffs. That is, through my photographs, I want viewers to see and

experience the feeling that “something has happened there” or “something must have happened there.” I am not interested in creating beautiful nature landscape photographs, nor do I want to write down my thoughts and opinions to explain, “here is what happened.”

Thus, when I installed *Banta* cliffs at the Sakima Art Museum, I wanted everyone to be surrounded by the cliffs and stand in front of the work look and feel as if they were standing by the actual cliffs. The hyper real quality with altered perspectives creates sense of vertigo with these photographs. I hope that sensation gives viewers an opportunity to questions “something may happened there”

MW: Yeah, just to see the aftermath of it...

OJN: Right. So in a way the cliff is kind of witness. And *Gama* too.

MW: So how big are they, your photos?

OJN: *Banta* cliff work is 20” x 60.” And *Gama* is 40”X60” and 40”X80”

[Showing one of his *Banta* pieces]

I altered the perspective to make everything straight and in focus, so in each section everything has to be in focus, I take 5 to 10 of the same photograph that have different focus points, and put it together with Photoshop. Then I alter the perspective to make everything straight from top to bottom of the image. I noticed the camera position looked like floating in the air and not from down below, kind of similar to Chinese and Japanese scroll painting multiple perspectives.

MW: So, that’s what you’re inspired by?

OJN: I noticed this perspective shift that is not possible with a single lens camera after the first test shoot, which I attempted on the side of a building before I went to Okinawa and I thought it would be interesting to try this technic to the cliffs.

MW: So it seems like a lot of people supported you in Okinawa, but has anyone ever given you a hard time for being Japanese working in Okinawa?

OJN: In the beginning, yes. Some people were suspicious of me for wanting to dig into history of Okinawa. But they warmed up after finding out that I don’t belong to Japan or America and that I am Uchinah Muku (husband of Okinawan) too. But mainly, after I had a solo exhibition with *Banta* cliffs work at the Sakima Art Museum, I received support from many people, especially from Mao Ishikawa. She introduced me to a specialist, and that opened up access to the caves. Because the caves are in the jungle, you have to enter through a small hole.

MW: Wow that’s very interesting. Next question, have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an “Asian” or “Asian American artist”? If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

OJN: I wish I can identify myself as simply as Japanese American. That would make my life a lot simpler... Technically I was born in the United States, but I went back to Japan as an infant, and I simply grew up as a Japanese kid until junior high school. When I was in high school in Houston, somehow I read about the Manzanar internment camp for Japanese Americans during WWII. I was still learning English at the time but it made me feel that my idealized point of view about America had to be questioned. It was the first time that I felt technically Japanese American. And although the history was in the past, I thought that this kind of thing can happen to me here. I had idealized being American before I came here and American people were so nice and frank. I felt a tension between those two realities.

I think of myself as second generation because my parents came here, and I was born here. But I also think that my identity as Japanese American is not inherited, it's something that evolved.

MW: So you're proud to be Japanese, right?

OJN: Yes, but not so quite sure about the recent Japanese government changing constitution to increase power of defense force, controlling the media and not disclosing the information about radiation and Fukushima.

MW: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

OJN: When I graduated from MFA, it was the height of postmodernism, so pluralism and multiculturalism were influencing so many African American, Latino, and Asian American exhibitions. Margo Machida is one of the important Japanese American curators who included me in these exhibitions. And that gave me opportunity to show my work more at that time. Also, my work is often selected for technology related group exhibition and more recently, one of the *Gama* prints was included in the War Photography exhibition curated by Anne Tucker in Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Since my show in Okinawa in 2009, I received several photography awards and opportunities to exhibit in Japan increased recently too.

MW: Alright, so to conclude everything here, what are you currently working on?

OJN: I just finished a piece called *Yami (Darkness)* (figure 4). And I want to make work that's more about sensory experience than depicting a representation of reality.

MW: What kind of experiences?

OJN: I saw Richard Serra's drawings at the Menil Collection in Houston a few years ago and realized that as the viewer, I felt I was wrapped in darkness, seeking something in his large scale black drawings. I experienced similar sensations when I was inside the cave trying to initiate conversations with the spirits. I would like to invite the audience to experience what I have experienced in the caves. At the same time, I'm questioning the representational image. Photography tends to be literal. I want my worked to function at the abstract level and for the viewer to get into their emotional space.

Yami (Darkness) is my forth and most recent work about Okinawa. My attempt to push what I drew forth in the *Gama (Caves)* series back to the edge of invisibility – a blind search to face my own internal darkness as well. The work was made by printing a 7'X12' high-resolution digital photograph of the cliff surface on Japanese Awagami paper. Then I painted over it with black *sumi* ink and rust. I hope that the intangible experience captured in the photograph will find presence somewhere between the ink and the image. The work was created for the *Photography: What you see and you don't* group exhibition in Tokyo University of Arts last year.

END

Figure 1 – Osamu James Nakagawa, *Gama #009*, 2010, Archival inkjet print, 40" x 60"





Figure 2
Osamu James Nakagawa, *Okinawa #007*, from
the Banta series, 2008
Archival inkjet print mounted on aluminum
board
20" x 60"

Figure 3 - Osamu James Nakagawa, *gate, buddha, skull* from the *Remains* series, 2001–2009, Archival inkjet print on paper, letter press text, 15.5” x 22” each



Figure 4 - Osamu James Nakagawa, *Yami (Darkness)*, 2015, Sumi,ink Rust, Archival Inkjet Print on Awagami 7’x 12’

