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Kevin J. Miyazaki Interview

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Interviewer: Anthony Santoro

Artist: Kevin J. Miyazaki

Location: Telephone call, Chicago, IL and Milwaukee, WI

Date: February 7, 2017



Photo courtesy of the artist.

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART200: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, and Media & Design.

Bio: Kevin J. Miyazaki is an artist and photographer born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Japanese American parents originally from Hawai'i and Washington state. His artwork often focuses on issues of ethnicity, family history and memory. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II is of particular interest to Miyazaki, whose father spent time at both Tule Lake and Heart Mountain camps. His work has been exhibited in a variety of locations, including The Center for Photography at Woodstock (New York), The Haggerty Museum of Art (Milwaukee) The Rayko Photo Center (San Francisco) and Photographic Center Northwest (Seattle). His magazine assignment clients include The New York Times, Travel + Leisure, AARP, Martha Stewart Living and Architectural Digest. Miyazaki holds a BA in Graphic Design from Drake University and is a member of the adjunct faculty at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. www.kevinmiyazaki.com

ANTHONY SANTORO: Tell me a bit about yourself- where are you from? What was your upbringing like? Education?

KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI: I Live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I grew up here actually, in suburban Milwaukee— a suburb called Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. And um, born of Japanese-American ancestry both sides of my family, my mother is from Hawai'i and my father is from Washington state. I grew up in Milwaukee with two siblings, and went to public school here...went to university for graphic design, and have a degree in graphic design from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and have worked as a photographer for my entire life though, [I] never practiced graphic design.

AS: You were a photographer prior to starting the design program?

KM: No...well, I started taking pictures early in life. I was very interested in photography from finding these old cameras in the attic of our house that had belonged to my mom, and so when I was an early teenager I started to take pictures with those old cameras...a "brownie box" camera was my first camera which is this very kind of old-school, old-fashioned camera. The interesting thing about that camera was you had to manually wind the film. I was about 11 years old and I would forget to wind the film so the result would be these double exposures, which were really pretty interesting and compelling. It'd be like my cat superimposed over my dad's face, so it was kind of an early spark for me, and it held. I took pictures all through my junior high and high school time, I took pictures for the yearbook, the school newspaper...and then through a career day at school I was introduced to a photographer named Heinz Kluetmeier who was a *Sports Illustrated* staff photographer, and he had daughters at my school. He became an early mentor for me, I used to cut his grass and shovel his walk while he was traveling, he was always some place in the world photographing some great sports event. But he was very kind to me when I was in high school and kind of showed me the life that I was hoping to lead at some point, so I was very fortunate to know what I wanted to do at a very early stage in my life.

AS: You've actually already addressed some of my next question, but when did you first become an artist and was there a specific moment in time when you remember realizing that was your calling?

KM: Well, the photography that I was interested in early on was news photography, so I became a newspaper photographer when I graduated from college. I did some internships during college, worked for some small papers, medium papers, and finished as an intern at *USA Today* as a senior in college. I really wanted to do the newspaper thing, and I did that for about seven years right out of school. So, it wasn't really about artwork for me, it was more about doing documentary work, but I gradually began photographing the feature side of the newspaper. I was working at a newspaper in Cincinnati, Ohio, and enjoyed doing the food and the fashion and that kind of work, more portrait work...so I gravitated away from newspapers and did work for city magazines in Cincinnati, and in Milwaukee, on their staffs for about seven years, and then for the past ten years now— or let's see, maybe twelve years— I've been working as a freelance magazine photographer to make a living, and that sort of coincided with making artwork. For about the last fifteen years I've also been making artwork, prior to that it really wasn't something that was part of my practice. It was something I was interested in but it took getting away from that documentary world, I think, to begin making things as an artist.

AS: So, it was more so after you got comfortable with the field a little bit, you could step back and start digging into your own stuff?

KM: Yeah, I think so. I think the process of doing documentary work is really about being present at a place and observing, and documenting what's happening, and...artwork is a pretty different place in your head, because it's really about conceiving and creating. I think the further I [got] away from that assignment-and-reacting sort of photography, the easier it was for me to begin thinking about what I wanted to make.

AS: How would you define or categorize your art?

KM: It's very introspective, a lot of what I think about and am making images and objects about deals with family history, and in a broader sense ethnicity and cultural identity. The work I'm making now has a lot to do with my family story— roots in Japan, history in Hawai'i and Washington state, and Japanese internment...and it's personal to me and my ancestors and my family, but I think it's also really relevant. Especially in the last few years I think it's incredibly topical and important, this idea of thinking about where we've all come from and what we've collectively...our collective histories that have made this country what it is.

AS: You frequently address Asian American identity and history as well as your own cultural history in your work- is there one project that you feel represents these things more strongly than the rest?

KM: The project *Echo* which is the newest body of work that I've been making, at least photographically, deals with...they're diptych photographs, they combine two images, and the idea is that it's physically structured as a family album. I had done a video piece called *Yuki's Album* a few years ago and it was all the pages from my maternal grandmother's photo album. It's a beautiful physical object that belongs to a relative in Hawai'i, and I spend a lot of time copying old photographs from the family members in our family, just creating an archive of images. [For] this album I had photographed every page, it's sixty pages, and I had shown that video in an exhibition about identity, and it's just sort of a slide show of each page. I was looking

at that form for quite a bit and understood that this idea of the family album was a really nice vehicle for a project like *Echo*. *Echo* combines old family photographs and some documents, previous project pictures I had made that relate to our family, and new images that I'm creating. Put together, these combinations of two images into a diptych...they can be fairly random within that scope of the images I'm working with. They can be an old family photograph combined with a new picture I've made in Japan a year and a half ago, but that sort of models off this idea of the family album as well because one of the fascinating things about looking at her album was that there are facts there, there are photographs of people standing in places at a certain time, there are misleading or unidentifiable things...there are people that I don't know who they are, my mother doesn't know who they are, there are places that are unlabeled and I don't know where that is, there are pages where pictures have been taken out that you can tell are missing. So, I think the family album is this interesting model in that you can learn things, but there's also some mystery and there's also missing stories that are passed along. *Echo* for me...if a viewer sees these diptychs they may not understand the relationships between these two pictures. They might be very thin lines that connect the two images, but it models that incomplete record. It's a record but it also raises questions about the relationship between the images. I started an artist residency in Woodstock, New York not this past summer but the summer before, and really started making pairs of the images and that's gonna be moving forward. I have another set that will be coming within the next year.

AS: I was looking through *Echo* a few weeks ago and you definitely tell that some of [the content] is newer and some of it is much older, but contextualized with what you just said...looking at these pieces side-by-side, for example the photograph of the mountain next to a painting of a mountain, you can tell that there's a common thread between them. They feel from a different era but you can feel the connection between them, even if you don't know what it is.

KM: I think that's exactly right. In that particular piece that you're talking about, the photograph on the left-hand side of the diptych portrays Mt. Rainier, and it was taken years ago. I was in the area and my father whose house in Tacoma where he grew up before the Japanese internment, they had this beautiful view of Mt. Rainier. I've thought about Mt. Rainier as it relates to Mt. Fuji, my deeper ancestors' relation with Mt. Fuji and the history of that...and so that view of Mt. Fuji was my first view of it, flying over it in an airplane, and to me there's a really strong connection between those images. Like you said, maybe a viewer can see that to some degree and maybe not...but I love that mystery, that little bit of mystery, but also that sort of timeline and factual aspect as well.

AS: Everything you just mentioned, I definitely felt all of those things while I was flipping through those images, especially looking at your other project *His Journals* as well. I know that you had mentioned *Yuki's Album*, which I couldn't find in your portfolio, but looking at *His Journals* I know what you mean about the family album format. Looking at your portfolio I want to reach out and touch these things, the book format would be really cool.

KM: Those journals are so interesting because, on my mother's side, that was her grandfather...my great-grandfather, who studied medicine in Japan, came to San Francisco in the late 1800s, got a degree in medicine from a small medical college in San Francisco, and then eventually ended up in Hawai'i where he practiced with a doctor, started a newspaper...in fact,

Echo comes from the newspaper he started in Kona, Hawai‘i called the *Kona Echo*. He was a real pioneer on the Big Island of Hawai‘i, he started the Japanese language school, and all these things. He’s this really interesting, important, charismatic figure in my history, and those are his medical journals from Japan, which were passed on to me from an Uncle who had them for many years in Japan. My goal is to copy the pages of those, [it’s] a pretty daunting thing, I think there’s by my guess about 3,000 pages, and...I recently met with some book conservators at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who gave me lots of information about the materials themselves, and a basic way to copy the pages. That’s a project that’s just technically getting underway but will probably last for a few years.

AS: It definitely seems like quite the undertaking.

KM: Yeah, and I don’t read Japanese, so I don’t really know what the albums contain. One of the interesting things that came out of that meeting in Madison was that the conservator we met with said “Well, you know...we don’t know the content, it may well just be notes from medical school, but it also could be research that he did.” The goal would be to copy the pages and ultimately find out more about the content, and then donate those electronic versions to any institutions that might be interested.

AS: I think the mystery of not knowing [must be] what makes it so compelling to want to do.

KM: Absolutely, I think that basic interest in family history is also this idea of what it was like to live in a certain time. I think about the Japanese-American internment story– and I use the word “internment” kind of by nature, but it’s not “internment” that’s preferred anymore, “the incarceration of Japanese-Americans”– and I think a lot about what it was like for my father and his family to be in that situation and that fuels a lot of the work too...just in the back of my mind trying to understand what they went through.

AS: Do you feel like your connection to your cultural heritage was what pushed you into the art world, or was it creating art that encouraged you to dig deeper within your family’s history and your ancestry?

KM: I’ve always been interested in those stories, but again the one side of my brain, the photography that I do to make a living is what’s called editorial photography, so I photograph for magazines and publications. And I love that kind of work, it really drives me. But it’s also not personal in any regard, you know, photographing for a travel magazine or for a food magazine. While I’m really interested in those kinds of artistic pursuits the fine artwork that I make really draws inward, I think because of that reason– it just kind of goes ultimately personal. In any kind of artistic project, you just have to be motivated to a very high degree in the subject matter to make work about it. It’s ultimately what makes you sort of need to put this stuff out in the world, and for me it’s this topic. It might not interest a lot of people but I think there’s connections that make these sorts of broader subjects that currently we can all appreciate.

AS: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as contextualized as Asian or Asian-American, or been labeled as an Asian or Asian-American artist by an outside party?

KM: I was in a two person show with Jon Yamashiro¹— who is a terrific photographer and artist— at the Stockton College in New Jersey. Both of our work related to Japanese American incarceration, but it wasn't a group show. I guess it was the fact that our work sort of complimented each other, but I don't think I've to my recollection been in a group show that specifically was about Asian American artists. I wish...in fact I wish there were maybe more opportunities for that. The *Camp Home* project that I've done deals with architecture of the barracks from the camps that were reused by homesteaders, and so in two places where my father's family were incarcerated, California and Wyoming...both places they reused the barracks buildings and gave them to homesteaders who set up houses and farms in the area after the war. It's been a project that— it's still technically continuing, I haven't worked on it for a couple years— but I'm fascinated by this idea of the repurposing of institutional architecture, these buildings that were built for a horrible purpose but then were...have been reused for better reasons in the past decades since. That work can cross some barriers, and it's been in group shows that deal more with home or with architecture and space, but also could translate into discussions about politics and history and all those things.

AS: I'm a bit curious, you said in the description [of *Camp Home*] you've also interviewed some of the people that live in those repurposed buildings?

KM: Yeah, the project is really about physically discovering those buildings and the first time I actually realized they existed was when driving from San Francisco to Seattle...I stopped in Tule Lake which is where one of the camps was in Northern California, and I just wanted to see the place. I figured there would be some kind of monument or something to visit. This was I think in 2006. I found a monument there on the side of the road that commemorated the spot, and then I was pointed to this small historical museum in town— it's a very small town— and it had an exhibit about the camps but it also talked more about the homesteaders that settled the region, and really make up the whole area at this point. It was a very desolate, wide-open area when the camp was constructed. But the exhibit talked about how they repurposed these buildings, and so I received a grant here in Wisconsin to make a trip the following year, and all I really had to go on was the idea that these buildings were all over the landscape. You could see that...there's a physical military barrack style architecture that was used at all the camps, and you can see the same shapes when you drive down these country roads; a house is that same shape, a barn is that same shape. All the buildings around there really came from the camp, so I just started knocking on doors. It was interesting because I had been a newspaper photographer for, including college internships, for about ten years, and doing that kind of work you really have to put yourself into situations that are different every day and sometimes challenging. You basically just need to find a way to blend in and talk to people in any given situation, so I felt like that was a pretty good skill I had. But this really made me nervous because I was just knocking on the door of a rural California farming family and I'm this sort of Asian, Midwestern person standing there with a camera.

AS: I'm sure the military style architecture didn't help much with that.

¹ A 2017 interview with photographer Jon Yamashiro is also featured in the DePaul Asian American Art Oral History Project.

KM: Right, I mean, some of them still looked like the barracks buildings if they were a barn or something...they may have done nothing to it, and others were houses that were kind of charming, but you could tell by the shape of them what they were. Long story short it was pretty reaffirming, because I was accepted for the most part. There were only one or two occasions where people weren't so friendly but for the most part people were open to hearing. I would tell a bit about my family history, there were stories shared between the homesteaders' families sometimes. Sometimes the houses were rented out and the people there didn't really even know anything about [Japanese incarceration] and the history, but in general it was pretty encouraging. People allowed me into their houses, into their spaces, sometimes I was there for a couple hours. I've shared meals with some of those people. Sometimes people just said "sure, come in for five minutes" and then I took some pictures and went on my way. But I did that, I made two trips out to California, and then two trips to Wyoming, and more [often] than not I think it was a really positive experience where [these buildings] represented two American stories. They're very different, you know, homesteaders settling the west, and Japanese-Americans being forcibly removed from the west coast, so, you know, it's a very American coming-together of histories.

AS: That's definitely one of the more interesting aspects of this project. I know that when I looked at it I got a very, not necessarily positive feeling about it, but it felt like you had a very positive experience talking with these people and learning about their lives and homes. But there's definitely a darker undertone with the history of these buildings and things too, it's an interesting parallel.

KM: In that project, I took away frankly a fairly positive experience from the whole thing because, again, I love telling the history of my father's family to anybody who will listen, or any kind of format of artwork because I feel like the story of what Japanese-Americans went through is important. So, to stand on a doorstep and briefly tell the fact that my father had lived at the camp when he was thirteen, even sharing that was pretty interesting. In turn I heard stories from veterans and kids— all the homesteaders by the way were veterans— you needed to have been a veteran to get land, most of them had come back from the war just before they came to get this new land. So, sometimes it was their children that I talked to, and heard stories about those veterans and what they had been through during the war.

At this point the phone call cut out briefly, and we picked up from the point of Mr. Miyazaki discussing the personal importance of educating people about not only his own family history, but the history of Japanese-Americans in general

KM: I had the chance to talk to a group of seventh grade students last week here in Milwaukee, and they're reading the book *Farewell to Manzanar*, which is a really terrific book written in the seventies written about the experience [of Japanese-American incarceration.] It was terrific because these are really young people and they were very curious and asking me all kinds of questions not only about my father's family and his experience, but also just about Japanese culture. It was predominantly African-American seventh grade students, and the conversation was really lively and fun and eventually got around to talking about Japanese food. I grew up eating a lot of rice in the house, and all these kinds of things and the kids were really interested and fascinated by that. Any opportunity to broach that subject, I think, is really good for everybody.

AS: Absolutely, I think I went a bit off the script for this part of the interview but it seems like this is an intensely personal subject for you, it definitely comes through your work a lot so I really wanted to touch on that before we end. In a more general sense, have the types of exhibition opportunities available to you changed since the start of your career?

KM: I don't think so, mostly it's been photographs that have been exhibited and I think the thing that's changing in my practice at this point is that I've started in the last year to make object based work, sort of readymade object forms. I did a few artist books, but I also recently completed this small piece— it's a metal bucket, and it's *Relocation Welcome Kit for Persons of Japanese Ancestry*. It sort of takes a bit farther the concept that I had in creating this artist book called *A Guide to Modern Camp Homes*. That artist book was a publication that was designed to look just like a period piece from the 1940s, and described the internment camp living conditions as it would in a Sears home catalog. It's modeled after that structure and uses the same language of the day to describe the living conditions and what you would encounter in the camp. Taking that a step further, this *Relocation Welcome Kit* is a black metal bucket, and it's got things in it like a bandana, a hammer and nails, ear plugs, a small picture frame, some screening material, and basically a whole set of things that would have been really helpful to people who were sent to these camps and really didn't know where they were going. The bucket as well, serves as either a stool because there's no furniture in these spaces, or a chamber pot because people used those as well. So, it's a piece that's meant to act as a sculpture with these readymade objects but again furthering the discussion and thought about what it was like to live in these camps.

AS: So, it's a modern kit of artifacts from the time?

KM: Absolutely, it's a set of objects, and all of them have this timeless feel to them— the hammer, and clothesline, and nails and things— and everything feels like they could have been the same objects from the 1940s. But that's the kind of work I'm moving towards, making more objects to compliment the photography. I'm also making— this is actually something I'm just currently working on which I'm interested in— I found at my mother's house a piece of craftwork that I made in fourth grade and it's the state of Wisconsin. It's a burlap and yarn and felt creation that talks about what's great about the state of Wisconsin. The football teams, and the nature, and the state bird and all [this] kind of stuff...the Wisconsin history section of our public education. I'm starting to create the same sort of craft pieces based around the state of Hawai'i and the state of Washington where my parents would have been in their fourth-grade years, and then hopefully bring it beyond that to create fourth grade pieces for ancestors from different regions of Japan.

AS: Almost like a child's framework of your entire family history?

KM: Exactly. Where I was, I grew up Japanese-American in suburban Milwaukee, which wasn't too common, and so that was my fourth-grade place...and the other thing is these kinds of projects for me...ideally, the whole time I'm working on them I'm doing research but I'm also just trying to put myself in the place of my family members and ancestors, and to think about and learn more about their past.

AS: What comes next for Kevin Miyazaki? Obviously, you've already got your upcoming readymade projects, and your childhood framework project of your family history, any upcoming photo exhibitions or anything else as well?

KM: Nothing at the moment, or nothing in the near future anyway, but as a photographer there's photography review events that [are] a great way to have curators and museum people and gallery people see your work so I'm always putting work out that way.

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