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## Migiwa Orimo Interview

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**Interviewer: Jessica Ruiz**

**Artist: Migiwa Orimo**

**Location: Via Telephone - Yellow Springs, Ohio/Chicago, Illinois**

**Date: April 27, 2018**



*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200 / AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2018 as part of the Asian American Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

Migiwa Orimo is an artist whose primary work takes the form of installation. Orimo was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan. After receiving her degree in literature and studying graphic design, she immigrated to the US in the early eighties.

In her process of creating installations, she begins by entering a space of language. Often her installations consist of disparate elements--text, painting, drawing, objects, video and sound. In attempting to establish relationships and tension between those elements, similar to constructing sentences, she explores the notions of gap, slippage, and “a realm of disjunction.”

She exhibits her work nationally; her work has been shown extensively in Ohio and around the USA -- the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, Headlands Art Center, CA, San Bernadino Museum, CA, the Richman Gallery, Baltimore, MD, and in Ohio, the

Springfield Art Museum, Dayton Art Institute, OSU's Urban Arts Space, Riffe Gallery (Columbus), Oberlin College's Baron Gallery, and SPACES Gallery (Cleveland).

A four-time recipient of the Ohio Arts Council Individual Artists Fellowship/Individual Creativity Excellence Award for her interdisciplinary art projects, she was awarded to the Headlands Art Center Residency Program in 2012 and SPACES Gallery's SPACES World Artist Project in 2014. Orimo lives and works in Yellow Springs, Ohio.  
<http://migiwaorimo.com>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Jessica Ruiz:** If you could please start out with a short introduction about yourself.

**Migiwa Orimo:** I was born and raised in Tokyo and I'm the only child of two somewhat eccentric parents. My mother was a hat designer, my father was a writer, and they both led kind of a bohemian lifestyle. I was born in 1957, so when the Tokyo Olympics happened in 1964, I was seven years old. After the Olympics, the country really changed quite a bit. It went into a rapid economic growth period. The Olympics gave Japan an opportunity to demonstrate that the country was a member of the developed world, rather than just a country in Asia. So, growing up in Tokyo at this time, I witnessed a huge growth and change. Culturally, especially in Tokyo, it was exciting to be a teenager. So, that was my background growing up in that city and also during that time the educational system in Japan became famous for cram school. Do you know cram school?

**JR:** I'm not familiar with it.

**MO:** The focus of their educational system was really to cram all the information in the students' mind. Everybody studied pretty hard to pass examinations to enter the best public-school system, high school, or college. I was in the midst of that. I majored in Japanese literature and went to study Graphic Design after that. After you finish school, at that point in the seventies and eighties, everybody's dream was to enter the best company and become a part of it for the rest of your life. A lot of my friends and the community I was a part of were very much against that trend. In my mid-twenties I decided to leave the country and travel for two years, to look at my own culture from the outside. I headed to Europe and on my way, I stopped by Ohio, where my aunt and uncle lived, to learn English, then go on to travel to Europe, and back to Tokyo to figure out my life. Things happened and I'm still in Ohio, I've been living here since then. I've lived and stayed in different countries and cities since then, but I've been mainly living and working in Ohio.

**JR:** How would you define/categorize your art or yourself?

**MO:** My main form of practice is an installation art and also some of my projects explore an interdisciplinary space. Not only with just the gallery space or museum, but I'm interested to explore a place for the art conversation to occur between viewers and artist. I've been doing different types of projects--social practice, dialogical art-- for around fifteen years or so. For example, in a project called Visit/Revisit, I take my art to individual homes and create a one-on-one exhibit. I bring my "art box" to each home—a stack of red boxes containing an artwork that addresses questions about home, private and public space, and personal and collective memories. Following this sharing of my work, the families in turn walked through their homes and talked about memories that were imbedded in nooks and crannies of their living spaces. Through conversation with a host, we explore his or her home as a container of memories.

**JR:** Upon browsing the work you have uploaded on your site, I noticed there's quite a variety of media you choose to work with. Do you have a specific preference, or do you prefer to do a little of everything?

**MO:** I don't have a preference with material because I choose the material based on the concept. If a material fits with the concept, then I will use that material. For example, this was 2005-2006, after my mother passed away I took her obi, which is the Japanese Kimono sash that you wrap around, I took her obi and I started taking thread off of it. I pulled silk thread, weft, a strand at a time. I chose the obi as a material not because I am a fiber artist, but because the obi is this woven object very much tied to Japanese women's culture. The obi is a metaphor for my cultural heritage and its process of weaving symbolizes time. This reversed process of unweaving counts time forward and creates something completely new with its own merit with a ghostly image of the past still visible. It's about memories, grieving, looking back and going forward.

So, I chose this material not because it's a fiber, but because it holds the meaning.

**JR:** I also noticed in your artist bio you use the term "slippage" could you explain what that means to you and how you incorporate this idea in your work?

**MO:** Slippage... Over the years, I tried to figure out exactly why I am drawn to this concept. Being an immigrant and having to navigate my daily life using two very different languages, Japanese and English, I have learned to operate out of a space of between-ness. This space of betweenness for me was for a long time so narrow, almost a line of division. A line or edge that you go back and forth between jumping from one to another. But more recently in the last 15 years or so, that space of betweenness got much bigger, wider. It turned from a line of division into a space to occupy. And as I got comfortable being both Japanese and American simultaneously, I started to really push that space of betweenness to a much wider space where I can move around a bit. Once I got into the space I started seeing a concept of disjunction,

slippage or the notion of gap more clearly. This is an interesting space to explore. Using “notions of gap,” “slippage,” and “a realm of disjunction” as a point of entry, my work explores what lies between the shown and the hidden, and the public and the private.

**JR:** In your three part installation project “Three Rooms of Kioku” you explore themes of remembrance/memories. Did you aim to capture your own personal memories in these installations or recollections from larger group of people?

**MO:** The piece was a commission by Ohio State University’s Asian Studies Center and they wanted me to create new work. Because it was a commission by Asian Studies Center, I decided to use this opportunity to explore my own experience as a Japanese American, but also my own relationship to my Japanese heritage. I created three room sized installations. They each measured nine feet cube. It is a size of a typical small Japanese room, but also, it’s a size of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony room. It’s a human scale, it’s not huge, but it’s large enough to operate daily life in it. I decided to create three different rooms to deal with recollections of memory. One room is about my personal memory, and the second room was my body memory. The third one is about storage of memory. In that sense the three rooms do address both my personal and a more larger sense of memory, collected memories. I was very interested in the concept of storage of memories. You never really operate your daily activities inside the storage room. You put things into a closet or storage room and shut the door. In a way, they’re thoughts in waiting, being organized in a particular space. And I thought it was a very interesting way to explore the collected memory. How we organize them within the hidden space and how do we make them accessible, in what order do you prioritize them. I combined the notion of our historical way of looking at our history through that lens of a storage room.

**JR:** You’re currently involved in the “Still They Persist” art project which collects various signage from recent protests and marches. How important is activism in your personal artwork?

**MO:** I guess I’ve always been active in terms of activism both on a local level and a national level. In the exhibit called “Still They Persist,” currently touring the county, I have a couple of my banners in the show from the Washington Women’s March in 2017. I have been making banners for quite some time for the last twenty years or so for different occasions. The first big event that I started making banners for was the big, local endeavor to save farmland from being developed. It was an enormous mobilization within my small village and I started making banners and really using the public space for visual communication then. I realized how powerful and effective it is to have big banners or big, large signs. A few years ago, I also started being involved in the Black Lives Matter movement by creating a lot of banners. But the Women's March was the first occasion when I made a banner just for myself to carry. It was my banner. Up till then, all of my banners were for others to carry, and unlike my other art work, these banners did not bear my name.

This particular line of artwork - I don't even call it art. I am doing it as a citizen artist. Not an artist, but being a citizen first. I do it as a member of society. My banners are created very quickly to respond in a short notice and to call for action, I would just do it overnight. Unlike my other work, where I would do a lot of research for a long amount of time. All these banners are being stored in one shed in the village. It's a "lending shed." People can come and pick them up and use them for any rally, then bring them back to this location. They're intended to be taken to various marches, rallies, and direct actions. So, that's my way of participating in activism. Being an artist who has a skill to create an effective visual communication device in a public space, I can help these social actions be visually engaging and transformative. Also, you get more media attention if the news media comes in and they see big banners. It's quite likely to be in the footage. They show up on the local news. It's a very different way of communicating with the public. Especially, in a Trump era, artists need to imagine and extend our roles in society. Which I see this trend a lot.

**JR:** Do you have a piece of work that you feel has defined yourself as an artist?

**MO:** Yes, you won't see it in my website, but there's a series of work which was done from year 2000 to 2005. As I told you, I'm an only child, a girl, a daughter, and you know I've been living in this country since the early eighties. My mother was living by herself in Tokyo in the year 2000, my father had passed away when I was 19. So, my mother was living by herself, well of course she was surrounded by cousins and nephews you know, sisters and what not. In the year 2000 my mother had a massive stroke, it left her left side paralyzed. We have a term in Japanese called "oya-fuko." The "oya-fuko" is a term to describe kids who don't really take care of their parents and it's a big cultural no-no, I'd been that "oya-fuko" daughter for about thirty years. My mother was in great need of help and I ended up bringing her from Tokyo to Yellow Springs and we, my husband and I, set up her bedroom next to my studio. I took care of her for five years until her death, she could not regain her walking ability, so she was in a wheelchair and needed 24/7 care. For those five years I took care of my mother and created work in my studio next to her bedroom.

I would say the work that I've done during that time, even though my free time was compromised, was very important because for the first time since I left Japan, the Japan that was far away from me for a long time, came to my house in the United States. Two cultures were living under the same roof. The way I see my own identity and the work I created during that time was greatly influenced by that. Those two worlds living under the same roof... re-establishing the relationship between myself and my mother, also re-establishing my own relationship within myself of the two cultures that I have been holding. I did a lot of work that explored the relationship of the two cultures. It became a point of initiation, conflict, compromise, all of that was an interesting concept to explore during that five years. I think that was a very important time period.

**JR:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

**MO:** There's always kind of a love, hate relationship to that term and push and pull. One of the things I always try to tell - well first of all- This notion of Asian American artist identity or theme I express in my work can always come from outside expectations. When they see me as Asian American they have a certain expectation of the type of work that I do and I'm very self-conscious of it. For a while, I was really resisting to it. I've seen a kind of approach in some artist's work that combines "kimono and sneakers," that's kind of a blunt example—marrying two cultural iconographies— but that's the kind of work that people sometimes expect from an Asian American artist. I always tell people that no matter what I create, my identity comes through. I am interested in, not the kind of emblematic flower that you find in a different culture, but the soil content that allows to produce such flowers. The property of the soil from which different flowers bloom. It's a lot subtler way of looking at the culture, but I am interested in how moist the ground is and what kind of taste the soil might be rather than what kind of exotic flower, cherry blossoms, or whatever you find. I always try to be mindful of that soil and it's a foundation for any of my work.

**JR:** 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"?

**MO:** Not really recently! I remember in the late 80s to 90s I saw more of that, you know Asian American or Japanese American art and what not and that shifted to a different term like "transcultural identity" in the late 90s, early 2000s. But I haven't really experienced that as a framework in which my work is introduced to. Once in a while people ask me to do a workshop that addresses Japanese culture. Because I'm Japanese American artist, sometimes I get asked to do calligraphy or flower arrangements or those types of art forms. But I'm not a calligraphy artist. Or a traditional Ikebana flower arrangement artist. I have enough respect for those art forms that even though I have some training in calligraphy, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

**JR:** If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

**MO:** I don't want people to come in with a set of expectations. I'd rather not have that as a point of entry. I think one would find the code, once you enter. But I don't want to point out a particular door that says Asian American, you know? In terms of my creating installations which are all about the space, there's a big difference between Japanese spatial aesthetic and American spatial aesthetic and I'm very aware of it when I create my work. For example, I always use examples when explaining the difference--in Japanese home you live on Tatami mats, grass mat room. We describe room size as four-tatami-mat-room, or six-tatami-mat-room, and so on. These mats are like large tiles, which have very defined edges. Your sight is punctuated by these edges. In United States your eyes glide on wall-to-wall carpet. There's no edges for your eye to stop, it

just goes on and on to the wall. The same is true in landscape, the rice paddies in Japanese landscape, the land is cut into sections, in contrary in Ohio, corn fields go on and on without stopping. This kind of different spatial aesthetics, one would cultivate being in it. Even in eating, take a bento box for example, you eat food in a compartmentalized box, on the other hand, a Thanksgiving Turkey dinner, you pile all these different things on one big plate, mixing and blending this and that. So you know, those kind of differences are very important for me in terms of how we relate to our living space or our visual space.

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

**MO:** Tokyo is a cultural center in Japan. But Japan is so small, even for people outside of Tokyo, everybody is in a same cultural conversation, everyone is pretty much part of it. When I landed in Ohio and decided to live here, I underestimated the size of this country, and its cultural distances between regions. At the beginning I thought, “Well New York is there, Chicago is there, and it’s a little bit far but LA, the west coast is there. No big deal.” Sometimes it’s really difficult to feel like what you’re doing is part of a larger conversation even though you work at it. If you are an artist working outside New York, LA, you do often feel place like Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, these Midwest states are in flyover zone. So, that was kind of a difficult realization early on but over the year especially at my age I’m still here and I am very excited and eager to continue working out of where I am now, and I am not really interested in marketplace in terms of the art market. For the last ten, fifteen years I’ve been consciously choosing to make the kind of art that is not easy to translate into a marketplace because my work is all installation, I don’t really have all the ready-to-hang, ready- to-place, object or painting to sell. So, it is difficult to navigate financially but that’s one way to try to be true to myself. In a sense, what I’m consciously trying to do is to explore the idea a little bit “off grid.” It’s an interesting challenge, a rewarding exchange.

**JR:** What are you currently working on?

**MO:** Right now, I’m working with Antioch College media class, and we are, all of us, are researching Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in three archives and creating work from the research. One is the Air Force Museum which is only twenty minutes from here. This is a huge aviation museum and their holdings include the plane that dropped the bomb Fat Boy, on Nagasaki. And an archive in the Peace Resource Center at Wilmington College. They have the largest Hiroshima, Nagasaki archive collection in the world outside of Japan. The third archive we are looking at is a National Archive. I’m creating five cabinets and, each cabinet addresses a notion of memories in public and private spaces: where memories are shared, internalized and stored. So, my theme of looking at the storage and looking at disjunction continues in this new work too.

**End.**