



CHICAGO JOURNALS



Smithsonian
American Art Museum

The Smithsonian Institution

Roger Shimomura

An American Artist

Author(s): Anne Collins Goodyear

Source: *American Art*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 70-93

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/670685>

Accessed: 19/03/2013 17:31

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://staging.pubexchange.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press, Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Smithsonian Institution are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Art*.

<http://staging.pubexchange.jstor.org>



Roger Shimomura

An American Artist

Anne Collins Goodyear

During the course of his distinguished career, Roger Shimomura has consistently used his art to expose racial stereotypes, particularly those confronting Asian Americans. Shimomura, who originally trained as a graphic designer at the University of Washington (BA, 1961) and who later studied painting at Syracuse University (MFA, 1969), has developed a prolific and varied artistic practice, which includes painting, printmaking, and performance incorporating sound, video, music, and dance.

Born in Seattle to American parents of Japanese descent, Shimomura and his family were forced to abandon their home and take up residence at Camp Minidoka in Hunt, Idaho, at the outbreak of World War II. Although quite young at the time, Shimomura found his experience at the incarceration camp transformative and has reflected on its significance in many of his bodies of work, including *Minidoka* (1978–79); *Diary* (1980–83); *Seven Kabuki Plays* (1985–86); *An American Diary* (1997); and *Minidoka on My Mind* (2006–10). A key source for the artist has been the diaries that were kept by his paternal grandmother, Toku Shimomura, which he had translated into English in the early 1980s.

Yet Shimomura's artwork has not been shaped solely by the persecution his

family experienced during World War II because of their Japanese heritage. Instead, the artist has reflected on the abuse of ethnicity more broadly in American culture that reductively characterizes those deemed "different." As a student at Garfield High School in Seattle, an institution exceptional for its diversity in the 1950s, Shimomura recalls classmates clustering in racial groups and using racial epithets to distinguish one circle from another.

Shimomura's recognition of the powerful undertones of racism in American culture became particularly acute in the Midwest, where homogenous populations made Asian features stand out. A professor of art for thirty-five years at the University of Kansas (1969–2004), Shimomura thrived in this academic atmosphere, where he received numerous accolades. It was in this environment that he found the support and motivation to create a diverse body of work that interrogates cultural prejudices, seeking to dismantle them.

Shimomura has been sensitive not only to the thematic content of his work but also to its stylistic sensibility. To this end, he frequently adopts visually appealing pictorial idioms, such as the "look" of traditional Japanese woodblock printing, or incorporates well-known icons—such as famous cartoon characters or historical figures—to subvert our often unconscious

Roger Shimomura, *An American in Disguise*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 34 in. Eight Modern Gallery, Santa Fe, N.Mex. Photo, courtesy of the artist

acceptance of the values they convey. Appropriating cultural clichés, Shimomura forces his audience to attend to the frequently overlooked implications of those tropes.

Through his performance pieces, which he meticulously documents, Shimomura combines incongruous, almost surreal elements of Western and Eastern music and material culture—Superman, Mickey Mouse, barbed wire, Japanese screens, decor, and dress. Through jarring juxtapositions, Shimomura evokes the profoundly destructive consequences of the imposition of “American” culture and political power on citizens of Japanese descent forced into internment camps during World War II.

Although Shimomura has now retired from teaching, he remains active, the subject of a host of numerous recent and upcoming exhibitions, including a spring 2013 print retrospective at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University and a career overview being organized by the Museum of Art at Washington State University for the fall of 2014. The recipient of numerous awards and honors, including a 2011 United States Artists Fellowship, Shimomura has deposited his papers at the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art.

Shimomura and I spoke in August 2012 about his most recent series of paintings—*An American Knockoff*—portions of which have recently been exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and in Santa Fe at Eight Modern Gallery. With a characteristic mix of humor and seriousness, Shimomura has described the motivation behind this work: “Since living in Kansas, I have found it to be routine to be asked what part of Japan I am from, or how long I have lived in this country. Just as common, subtle references continue to connect me to stereotypical ‘oriental’ traits, both physical and behavioral. Far too many American-born citizens of Asian descent continue to be thought of as only ‘American knockoffs.’”¹



ACG: Roger, it’s a pleasure to be with you on the occasion of *An American Knockoff* [at Eight Modern Gallery, Santa Fe]. I want to begin our conversation by asking for your thoughts about your self-portrait *An American in Disguise*, from 2012 (frontispiece), which I find particularly striking. It depicts you wearing a Superman costume under what appears to be a kimono.

RS: Even though it’s not one of the larger paintings in the exhibition, it summarizes a lot of the ideas that appear in all of the other work. One of the primary themes in this series has to do with the physical appearance that Asian people in this country have and how that affects how other people perceive them, rightly or wrongly. In this particular painting I’m wearing a kimono not because I have ever worn a kimono for any occasion, other than maybe a costume party, but because people in the majority think I should look this way. They look at me and say, “This person is an Asian.” Now, along with that go a lot of traits and habits and so on that have no basis in fact, which simply are not there for people like myself who have been in this country for three generations or, for my children, four generations. They are no

- 1 Shimomura wearing a Superman shirt, ca. 1989. Roger Shimomura Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 2 Scene from Roger Shimomura's *Seven Kabuki Plays*, performed in stages of completion at various venues from February 1985 to March 1987. Photo, courtesy of the artist



more Japanese or Asian than a lot of their Caucasian counterparts, which is curious enough. But because the connotation of being Asian in this country has been so negative—because of wars, because of exclusion laws and so on, it is not a comfortable identity to be wearing. Not only is it inaccurate, but it's frequently insulting. By wearing the Superman outfit underneath I'm saying, "I, too, aspire to those American values that are in this country, to those rewards available for working hard and trying to attain success, like every other American, regardless of their cultural background or ethnic heritage."

Superman, as an emblem, is not new in your art. In fact, when I began preparing for this interview and consulted your papers at the Archives of American Art, the first file, quite literally, that I pulled out had on top an earlier photograph of you wearing a Superman shirt (fig. 1). In this instance, the T-shirt is underneath a more standard, if you will, Western-style blazer. It suggested to me that themes that we see coming out today in your work are ones that are deeply woven through your career. I believe the

photograph was made around the time that you were working on [the performance piece] *Seven Kabuki Plays* (fig. 2). And, of course, Superman features quite prominently in that project, which, as I understand it, is based on diaries that were kept by your grandmother, Toku Shimomura.

Yes, it is one of the first times that Superman appeared. Although, prior to the performance, there were some paintings in one of the early *Diary* series that I did in the early 1980s [in which Superman appears], and [when I was painting them] I immediately thought of Superman when I thought of America. What represents America? What is the icon? There wasn't even a contest involved in trying to decide—Superman immediately represented everything about America at that time, during World War II. It certainly wasn't a flattering depiction of America, but that's exactly how I intended it.

You bring a layer of nuance and complexity to your work by donning the Superman costume. It suggests that each one of us is implicated in the culture

3 Roger Shimomura, *American vs. Japanese, #3*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in. Byron C. Cohen Gallery, Kansas City, Mo. Photo, courtesy of the artist



that we occupy, even if it is in the role of an individual who critiques dominant narratives and tries to tweak them, perhaps, indeed, to play them back against themselves. As I was reading some of your thoughts about this most recent project [*An American Knockoff*], something that stood out to me was your comment that “this latest series of paintings is an attempt to ameliorate the outrage of these misconceptions”—some of which you’ve already alluded to—“by depicting myself battling those stereotypes or, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, becoming those very same stereotypes.”²

Right, and one of those stereotypes is that of a martial artist, because that is at the core of a lot of the pieces, particularly

the larger paintings, where I offer myself as that Asian American we all know (fig. 3). You know, one who understands the martial arts in some deep, profound, instinctual kind of way, which is entirely a fabrication. So, at the core of a lot of these paintings in the *American Knockoff* series, I am simply fulfilling the fantasy of the majority culture of being an expert in the martial arts—which helps considerably, you know, to be able to wield weapons or my fists, to control the situation. In real life I wouldn’t be able to do that.

There does seem to be an element of a fantasy of justice associated with these paintings. This imagery resonates with and intrigues me for a number of reasons. One, because of its popular cultural



4 Roger Shimomura, *Furlough, #2*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 24 in. Eight Modern Gallery, Santa Fe, N.Mex. Photo, courtesy of the artist

associations, which you've just spoken about: comic strips, action movies, that type of thing. But also because, of course, while you may not practice martial arts, you do have a personal history of service in the U.S. military, and you come from a family for whom military service has been significant (fig. 4).

This is probably a first to even have that [topic] enter into the conversation about my art making. There were several issues that happened—things, I think, of note. During college I went to the University of Washington, which required ROTC—Reserve Officers' Training Corps—for all of its male students. It was one of the most painful things for me, to go through military science courses for those first two years. I detested it. There was nothing about it that interested me at all, and I said to myself that I would gladly be drafted as a private rather than go in as a commissioned officer. My mind was completely made up. The evening before I had to sign the contract that stated I was terminating my military science training, my dad invited Shiro Kashino over to persuade me to continue with my training. Kashino was one of the most highly decorated veterans of the famous 442nd Infantry Regiment during World War II and a very old family acquaintance. He came over, and I was braced for this onslaught and swore that he would never convince me to change my mind on the subject. He reminded me that when the war broke out and the Nisei [second-generation Japanese Americans] were called to serve their country, they were not allowed to be officers in their own units. And he felt that it was up to the new generation—the Sansei, third generation like myself—to prove that they were capable of being good officers, and that this was an opportunity for me to do so. I saw that argument coming, but I was incapable of fending it off. After three hours he had changed my mind. The next morning I went in and signed the next few years away and became an advanced student in the ROTC and went on to serve in the military.

What you've described leads me to ask to hear more about your relationship with your parents.

It's pretty safe to say that my upbringing with my parents, especially my father, who was a very strong paternal figure, was always one of rebellion and tension and anguish. I mean, we got along fine until we scratched the surface of things, and then it got very tense very quickly. The divide between my parents' American-born generation and their parents, the immigrants, was huge. Traditional Japanese thinking and values were so different and sometimes exactly opposite of those born in America. These differences became even more apparent between the second generation (my parents) and third generation (me), where it was difficult to see or appreciate where these differences in values came from. Even today it is difficult to know whether my beliefs and values came out of my own natural development or out of sheer rebellion.

But my father had his own issues, as well. First of all, the incarceration was something that he wouldn't allow to be discussed in the house. I mean, it simply wasn't allowed to be talked about. But that was no different than most Japanese American families. They would talk about it amongst themselves, but they didn't discuss it with their kids. The more that might be forgotten, through the generations, the better. But when the time came to talk about this publicly—when the reparations were being suggested—my dad was right there to all of a sudden start discussing it. But he had a line drawn as to how far he would go. And some of the best stories that he had, he wouldn't allow to be published anywhere. There was always concern about what other people thought. I've always said that my grandmother cursed me for life when she used to tell me, "Remember, Roger, anything

you say or do in life, good or bad, will reflect on the entire Japanese race."

That's a lot to carry around.

Yes, and she told me that on a regular basis. And to some extent I think I bought into it.

Before we leave the question of your parents behind entirely, did your mother encourage your creative activities or your political engagement?

Like so many other Japanese American women, my mother's approach to things derived from being the typical Japanese woman and all that that stands for. She always said, "Ask your father." Her stance on most issues was not to take a stance, actually, which might have been a little bit more progressive than I give her credit for. Her brothers were sort of my role models. The three brothers were all successful artists, graphic designers in Seattle—but she knew that my dad was dead set against me becoming an artist. In that regard she never discouraged me from wanting to follow in their footsteps, but never encouraged me either.

Were her brothers instrumental in your decision after you left the armed forces to pursue a career in design?

No, they weren't really. They were highly visible professionals in the city but they never tried to talk me into anything. I don't know if they felt the tension that existed between my father and me about the subject or whether they didn't think I was talented enough. The evening before my first enrollment at the University of Washington, my father came in and said, "We need to talk about what you're going to declare as your major." This was not the first time we had talked about it. We had many conversations, but he knew that it was crunch time. And so he said, "You know,

I've always wanted to become a doctor." Because of the Depression, he, who was pre-med at the time, had had to take the quickest route to a degree, so he majored in pharmacy, thinking that one day his son might fulfill his dream. I said, "I want to be like Uncles Rick, Roy, and George. I want to be a graphic designer." And he said, "Can we compromise?" I thought, "Well, how do you compromise between being a doctor and being an artist?" Since I had been giving some casual thought to being an architect, I said, "What about architecture?" And he said, "What about dentistry?" It was at that point that I realized there was no hope of any kind of compromise, so I went and enrolled in graphic design, and from that point on he pretty much accepted it. Until my next change of interest, which was going to graduate school and studying painting. That really had him baffled. He had somewhat of a grip on what my mom's brothers did. But make paintings?

But ultimately, you found that life as a commercial designer was not satisfying, and you transferred after about a year, is that right?

I worked at it for three years or so. I had several pretty good jobs, the best of which was the account for the Polynesian Pavilion at the [1964] New York World's Fair. I did everything from menu designs to the main neon sign and so on. I got a real healthy dose of some of the better jobs. But I found that I detested working with clients. After I began teaching, it was common for students to ask me if double majoring in illustration and painting was a good idea; one major to make money and the other for self-fulfillment. I said it was a horrible idea because one activity was for commercial gain while the other was for the opposite, introspection and self. Most likely, at best, I warned, you would not be exceptional at either.

Did your grandmother play any role in your decision to respond to your sense of history by choosing a path as an artist (fig. 5)?

She had virtually no role, although I think she, too, believed that medicine was the highest calling. When I was at Syracuse—I think I'd just completed my first year there in 1968—she passed away. I had absolutely no idea that her diaries and other writings might connect her with my artistic life some day.

One gathers that you and your grandmother had a very special connection. You were the last baby she delivered, for example, and during the final decade and a half or so of her life you contributed to her diaristic activities by giving her a diary every year at Christmas.

There was a very strong attachment that I've always thought came out of being the first grandchild. That's why I was so surprised when I brought those diaries

5 The artist as a child with his grandmother, Toku Shimomura, at Camp Minidoka, ca. 1942. Photo, courtesy of the artist



back and began to have them translated that the entry on my birthday, when she delivered me, was so abrupt. It said, "Today Roger was born." What a disappointment! I really expected her to wax poetic about her life up to that point. But, you know, my mother told me, "She must have been really tired."

That's not surprising!

Yes, and my mother also said *she* was the one who was really tired, because apparently in Japan it's believed that it's better to be born at the beginning of a day than the end of a day. And so, at the home delivery, my uncle—one of the three artist brothers—was waiting outside the bedroom as his sister—my mom—was waiting to deliver me. Grandma kept telling mom to wait, wait, hold on, wait, wait. My mom was just screaming bloody murder, trying to keep me in. I actually used that in part of a performance, where images of these babies are flashing on the screen. You hear this ticktock, ticktock. And you hear this voice moaning, and you hear my grandmother's soothing voice saying, "Wait, wait, wait." Then, finally, at 12:01 she says, "Okay, now."³

So were you born at the very, very beginning of the day through her efforts?

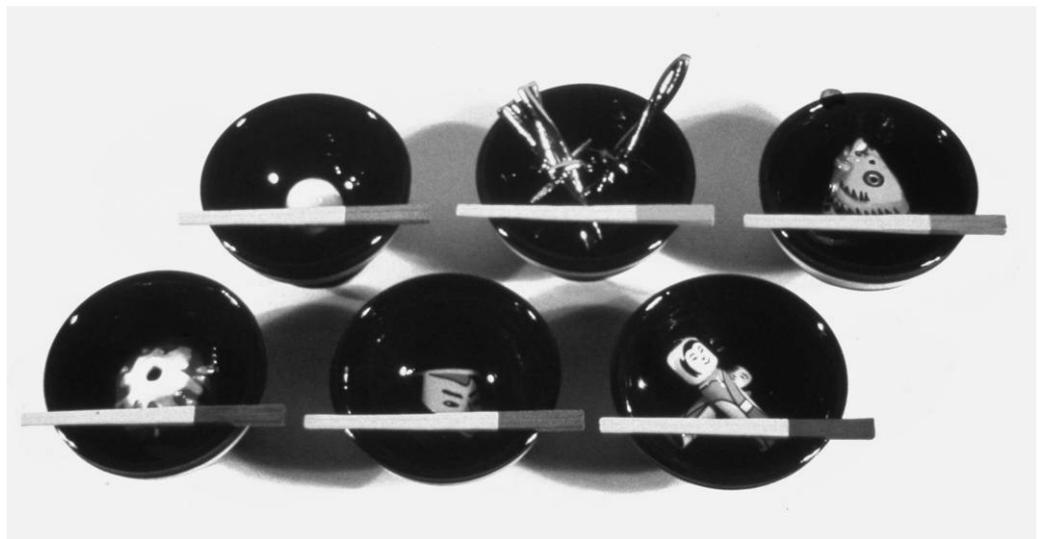
One minute after midnight.

That's wonderful. Well, clearly the diaries that your grandmother kept, particularly during the period of your family's internment, have had a major impact on your imagination, a point that I'd like to return to later. I am also interested in thinking about the degree to which your career as a commercial designer may have influenced your aesthetic and perhaps other aspects of your work.

Maybe I should back up a little bit, to the mid-1960s, when I decided to give up commercial art and become a painter. I decided that to do this I needed to take painting courses from the University of Washington, where I had received my undergraduate degree in commercial art. I spent about a year doing all these paintings, for the first time feeling the joy of what it was like to be a painter. I showed [this body of work] to one of the professors at Washington. I had no idea what I was doing. I was painting sort of abstractly. He saw promise and said, "I think you ought to come and take a lot of painting courses in the period of one semester. And then, if things go well, apply for the graduate program." So I did that. I took five painting courses simultaneously from five different teachers and did well. I loved it and ended up being accepted as a full-time graduate student.

But I was having one big, serious problem, and that was that my paintings started to become very pop. I was doing paintings depicting TV dinners, putting different kinds of things in each compartment, and just sort of playing around. Meanwhile, the drawings I was doing were very abstract expressionistic. And I'm doing this amongst this social climate that favors the funk ceramics movement that was going on in California with Bob [Robert] Arneson. It just blew my mind. Strangely enough, funk art gave me a starting intellectual basis for my work. Many of my best friends up there [in Seattle], like Patti Warashina and Howard Kottler, were forerunners of the funk ceramics movement. I was just in love with what they were doing. So I'm looking at the drawings and paintings that I'm doing and I'm thinking about funk art. One of my teachers told me, "You know, you really ought to just drop out right now and try to get your act together." So I decided that since I had never

- 6 Ceramic bowls with objects, 1979. Set of six, 6 in. each. Collection of Morgan Estate, Kansas City, Mo. Photo, courtesy of the artist



been back east in my life, I was going to start graduate school all over again, and I applied to a few eastern schools. But I knew that I had to get this pop art/abstract expressionism conflict in my work resolved, so I went to Stanford for the summer, and they were good enough to give me a studio with all the graduate students.

Right. That was 1967, I believe.

Yes. All of a sudden the possibility of combining painterly imagery with popular imagery, I saw, became feasible by what they were doing at the Bay Area figurative school, which was sort of painterly pop. I went back east [to Syracuse] and taught myself how to photo-silkscreen and then just let pop art sort of take me over.

I want to hear more about the movements and individual artists who influenced you. It's very interesting to hear about the role of Bob Arneson and others who were experimenting with funk ceramics. Were you ever drawn to doing ceramics as a practice?

Not as common practice, but I did have an urge to do my own show in ceramics

in the late 1970s, when I was teaching at the University of Kansas [Kellas Gallery, Lawrence, 1979], so I flew up to Seattle and spent a weekend getting a crash course in low-fire ceramics from Patti Warashina. I received a faculty research grant to pay Lynn Uhlmann, a graduate assistant in ceramics at the University of Kansas, and in the course of one semester, produced forty-five pieces (fig. 6). Lynn did all the throwing and firing, and I did the hand building and glazing.

When you were studying at Syracuse, did you find yourself traveling to New York City on a regular basis?

The wonderful thing about Syracuse is that it is about three hundred miles from everything, including Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Montreal, and New York. For a person who had never been back east, it was wonderful. It seemed like at least once a month we [Shimomura and his first wife] took some sort of road trip. Of course, we went to New York a lot, probably more than any of the other places. I remember one of the early visits in 1967, to Leo Castelli. Ivan Karp was working for Castelli, and he came out, gave us a big sales pitch. The [Andy]

- 7 Roger Shimomura, *West Lounge*, 1971. Color screen print on wove paper, 24¹⁵/₁₆ x 24¹⁵/₁₆ in. Private collection. Photo, courtesy of the artist



Warhols were going for fifteen bucks apiece, you know? You could get [Roy] Lichtenstein for ten bucks. The expensive stuff was the [Robert] Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns lithographs—and they were going for eighty-five bucks. That was out of our price range. I did buy a signed and numbered Warhol. A self-portrait, silver and black. And the story with that one goes, I framed it up, and my first year at [the University of] Kansas, someone accidentally kicked the glass during a party, the glass raked the print, and destroyed it.

Warhol, I recall you mentioning, was a particularly important influence for you (fig. 7).

More and more so, though initially not so much what he did, but what was written about him. We had a dean at Syracuse who was very insistent that all of his graduates be able to write a thesis paper. So we all had to come up with a subject to write about and then had to integrate our [own] work into that historical stream. Mine was called “The Objectified Image: Pop Culture and Andy Warhol,” and it ended with where I thought my work fit into this whole thing. Then we had to do a presentation of our paper. I decided to do the first performance that, as it turns out, I’d ever done. I rented every piece of equipment from the campus media center and lined up

all the projectors on a long table, and I flashed these images of Warhol's that filled up the whole wall and overlapped each other. I even forged one of his movies. I claimed that I had gone to the New York Public Library and found an uncataloged film called *Back*. I shot one of my students [Shimomura was a teaching assistant at Syracuse] without a shirt on, looking out a window. It's very grim, and flash frames are going by to make it look like it was shot by an amateur. It lasted about five minutes. I had everyone believing that I'd actually discovered this film. Then I faked an interview with Warhol, and I had one of the graduate students be Warhol, and I had a party tape of Viva, Ultra Violet, and all of those people, glasses tinkling, and the Velvet Underground playing in the background. I interviewed this graduate student who answered all my questions exactly like I wanted Andy to, in order to support my thesis paper. Everyone was so impressed, including the dean, that I had added so much to Warhol's history. Word got out to the local TV stations in central and upper New York State, and they wanted to broadcast it. So I said, "I have to own up to something" and told them the truth. They said, "This could cost you your degree, you know," and I said, "No, I don't think so, because it was really a conceptual act." They stripped out the fake film and they stripped out my interview, and what it came down to was just a real dry, straightforward lecture on pop culture and Warhol. They broadcast that for weeks and weeks. It wasn't something I was very proud of. But it ended my graduate career with a bang.

Are you aware of whether Warhol ever got wind of that?

No. I spoke to him once, but that was before I went back east. It was at a dinner party at my house, and we

were calling famous artists as a form of entertainment, because at the time they were all listed in the Manhattan [telephone] directory. So I called Warhol, and his mother answered the phone. She said, "He's not here. I have his phone number. He's in Los Angeles." I remembered he was working on the Exploding Plastic Inevitable nightclub. So she gave me his number in L.A., and I called there and he answered the phone. I had no idea what I was going to talk to him about, because I had never expected to get him. He said, "Well, what can I do for you?" And I said, being a needy potential graduate student, "I need a letter of recommendation," and he said, "Oh, I'll be happy to write one for you." No talk about who I was or what I did. Then he said, "But I have to tell you that the last three people I've written letters for never got what they wanted." And I said, "Okay, well, I'd still like to try," and he said, "Good." Due to the excitement I hung up the phone without getting his address or anything and even forgot to give him my name. That seemed like a fitting ending to my only personal encounter with Andy Warhol.

That's a great story. Hearing about your thesis presentation on Warhol suggests to me that at this early moment in your career there was evidence of a hybrid art practice that included film, audio, and performance. Of course, you're known for your theater pieces in addition to your paintings and prints.

Yes, when I went to Syracuse, I really lost myself in the whole world of film-making, which I just loved, and gave some serious thought to stopping my studies in painting and moving into film. So, that element was implanted at a pretty early stage in my career. Even as a teaching assistant for the two years that I was at Syracuse, where I

was teaching basic three-dimensional design, I always included an element of performance, except it was called “happenings” at the time. I would tell students that they had five minutes to do something in front of a Super 8 movie camera. They would come in. I’d turn the camera on, and they would perform. I was good at stimulating them to do things that went way beyond what they ever thought they could do. When I got to the University of Kansas, I actually asked, even though I was hired to teach figure drawing, to teach basic 3-D design in the freshman studies program. Then I introduced performance—this time with video equipment—but the department didn’t like it because they thought the students were having too good a time.

Could you speak a little bit about how your role as a professor at the University of Kansas has shaped your career and your approach to the artwork you’ve produced?

It was a location-location thing. By that I mean the lack of ethnic diversity in the Midwest. As relatively liberal as Lawrence is and has always been, there were still elements of racism that were quite visible. I wasn’t used to that. I started going to auctions [in Lawrence] and buying not only the household items we needed but also things that I was starting to collect, like tin windup toys, Disney memorabilia, etc. At one of those auctions I found a farmer standing next to me. During a break in the auction he said, “Excuse me sir, I was overhearing you speak the language, and I was wondering how you came to speaking it so well?” And he said, “Where’re you from?” And I said, “I’m from Seattle,” and he said, “That’s not what I mean.” He said, “Where are your parents from?” And I said, “Well, my father was born in Seattle, my mother was born in Idaho.” It was pretty clear

what he was after, but I thought I would just answer with straight facts. So then he broke into this sort of G.I. Korean, when he found out that I had served in Korea—he said he bought pictures of “them gishy [spelled phonetically] girls” when he was there. And they were wearing “them kimonas.” He wanted to know if I did pictures of that sort. I just kind of nodded my head and moved away. I’d had enough. This was a conversation I had heard so often in the short time I’d been in Kansas, but this one struck at how people had made me feel intensely foreign since moving there.

Had you had other types of run-ins along these lines?

Almost on a daily basis.

Right, but this one was really pivotal.

Yes, this one was complete. It covered everything. So, anyway, for the first time I decided that I would go home and do a painting about this. I got a book called the *Coloring Book of Japan*, and it was about ukiyo-e woodblock prints.⁴ I combined prints from a lot of different Japanese woodblock artists and put together this composition that I called, with tongue in cheek, *Oriental Masterpiece #1* (fig. 8). I had a show scheduled in Seattle [Manolides Gallery, 1971] and I was able to include *Oriental Masterpiece #1*. I put in seven other paintings that referenced comic strip identity—sort of comic surrealism. That’s what I was working on at the time. What was interesting was that the people that went to the show all gravitated to the painting of Japanese imagery. They said, “It’s so good to see you working like this.” And I said, “Why?” And they said, “Because you look like your work now.” That’s the first time I recognized the full creative potential of my ethnic identity to



8 Roger Shimomura, *Oriental Masterpiece #1*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in. Collection of Lonnie Kaneko, Seattle, Wa. Photo, courtesy of the artist

my art. So I decided that it would be worth doing more paintings that looked like that when I got back [to Kansas]. That's what led me to doing over one hundred more of the *Oriental Masterpiece* series.

If I'm not mistaken, in addition to paintings, you also did a related series of prints.

Right. In a period of one semester, I challenged myself to do two suites of editions called the *Oriental Master Print*

- 9 Roger Shimomura, *Oriental Master Print*, 1973. Color screen print, 21 15/16 x 21 15/16 in. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Gift of the artist. Photo, courtesy of the artist



series (fig. 9). I think that in the period of a semester I did about thirty editions in that series.

Did anything change as a result of that incredibly intense activity and thought?

Well, I never turned back, you know? It just sort of fed off of itself. And it's been like that ever since.

That's the period right around 1975 to 1977.

Yes. However, the big change from that point was when I decided to do the *Minidoka* series, which was the first time

that I dealt with any kind of narrative in the work (fig. 10).

One of the components that were instrumental in developing material for the *Diary* series was the translation of your grandmother's diaries, which I believe you began to undertake around 1980 with a graduate student in art education, Akiko Day.

Right. Day had been living in this country for eighteen years at the time and was quite proficient in both languages and always had an interest in my grandmother. I would point out certain dates that I thought were important, and she would, in turn,

- 10 Roger Shimomura, *Minidoka No. 3 (Diary)*, 1978. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. Photo, courtesy of the artist



translate and give them back to me. So I naturally started with the 1941 diary and December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, and actually had her read it right on the spot. I was that anxious to decipher the contents of the diaries. She read me the translation, and at that point, I knew right away that there was going to be a lot of information there that would lead to new work. At the time I was still connected to the idea of keeping with the stylistic appearance of Japanese woodblock prints, to retain that sixteenth-, seventeenth-century visual language. I remember having an argument with my former wife when I did the *Minidoka* series. When she saw them, she immediately said, “You’re perpetuating stereotypes. White America thinks we go home after work and put on kimono and eat with chopsticks.” I said, you know, I realize that. But by the same token, I have to somehow make

the work accessible. If I start doing just straight-up paintings about the incarceration experience, my dealers will not show them. Very few people were doing that kind of work at that time.

If you look at the paintings out of that original *Diary* series from 1980 to 1983, they have a real kind of decorative Japanese woodblock appeal to them. I liked the idea that people were bothered by the little bit of barbed wire depicted (fig. 11). We’d be talking about one barb that’s an inch long, and they would say, “God, I’d love to have that painting, but that barbed wire just bothers me,” which shows that they weren’t ready yet to accept the work based on its real intention. It wasn’t until I returned to the *Diary* series vis-à-vis *An American Diary* that I felt like I could be straightforward and tell the story of the incarceration in this sort of series of snapshots. And it wasn’t until I did the *Minidoka on*

- 11 Roger Shimomura, *September 2, 1942*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60 in. Collection of Jan Mar, Chicago, Il. Photo, courtesy of the artist

Corresponding diary entry reads: "September 2, 1942: The morning air was fresh. I woke up early to experience the peacefulness for a few moments."

- 12 Roger Shimomura, *Minidoka on My Mind*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 24 in. Collection of the Center for Children & Youth Justice, Seattle, Wa. Photo, courtesy of the artist



My Mind series, which was the fourth venture into the camp theme, that some of them became huge, in-your-face paintings (fig. 12).

One of the things that strikes me in your remarks is this notion that somehow the paintings needed to look palatable. While that may be a description of the aesthetic appearance of the works, this aspiration seems to have deep philosophical undertones as well, particularly given your attention to issues of appearance and the attendant assumptions that people bring to those appearances.

I think the one thing that's really underrated when you talk about art or the business of art is the importance of selling. That, unfortunately, the bottom line is if the work doesn't sell, you're not going to be around to be seen anywhere. I realize that I'm playing to a certain

extent on the appeal that ukiyo-e woodblock prints have. However, that would be totally untrue as to why I'm making paintings. And so I have to work that other element in there. You know, I'm proud of the fact that I never caved into the barbed wire being such a point of contention, with collectors coming up and saying, "If you paint that out, I'll buy it." Fortunately, we seem now to have passed that threshold in the art world.

It's wonderful that the barb should be a barb. Am I remembering correctly that when that series of paintings [the original *Diary* series] was on the market, there were very few collectors who were interested in obtaining the diary entry that went along with the particular work?

Yes, I think something like seven out of the twenty-five [owners of the paintings]



asked for the diary entry that inspired the work. Just like the barbed wire example, they didn't want the real story behind it.

What's so interesting to me is that the diary entry provides an important narrative gloss that enables one to appreciate certain elements of the imagery more deeply. To pull that away is to pull the substance away from the surface appearance. I wonder if you could speak a little more about narrative techniques that you have developed in your art.

One of the most difficult things is picking [diary] entries that are pregnant so that you're not just illustrating but always implying that there's more beyond what's being said. In *An American Diary*, I would read a whole entry that might be two paragraphs long and pick just one short sentence out of that because it conjured an immediate image to me.

Let's look at *Diary: December 12, 1941* (fig. 13, front cover).

Right. The whole Superman thing came right at the very end. I had no idea that that was going to happen, and yet it happened in a very important kind of way that led right into the usage in the performances. Those two actually go hand in hand, because every act of the *Kabuki Plays* has [in it] a painting out of the earlier *Diary* series. Later on, as I started to uncover my grandmother's autograph books and other books where she wrote poetry and songs and lyrics to songs and short stories and all that, my mind would just be flooded with how to use these things, and the only way I could do it was in performance. You can't hear music and you can't recite haiku with paint. In the mid-1980s I bought a video camera, and that's what changed everything. I knew a choreographer, Marsha Paludan, in Lawrence, who had her own dance troupe, and she would come over to my studio every Wednesday



- 13 Roger Shimomura, *Diary: December 12, 1941*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 50 1/4 x 60 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the artist

Corresponding diary entry reads: "Dec. 12, 1941: I spent all day at home. Starting from today we were allowed to withdraw \$100 from the bank. This was for our sustenance of life, we who are enemy to them. I deeply felt America's largeheartedness in dealing with us."

night. I'd put on all kinds of music, and she would wear a kimono, and she would do these dances. She would just improvise. I would shoot images by video and look at them and then suggest things that might be done. Then she started inviting some of her dancers to come, and pretty soon we had three, four, five people dancing in my studio to all kinds of music but dancing mostly in kimonos. Then I got an invitation from the university theater to write a stage piece for an original musical composition for their annual Contemporary Music Symposium. Before I said yes, I decided to do a small piece in a local gallery that combined lights, music, dance, property, and video. We pulled it off, and it was really kind of intoxicating. So I agreed to do this symposium project and decided at the same time that it would be act 1 of *Seven Kabuki Plays*.

One of the things my grandmother did before she passed was to write a letter to her living relatives in Japan outlining her life in America. She also had her husband, my grandfather, do this. Before she mailed the letter, she recorded it with a tape

recorder. When my grandmother passed away, my grandfather used to listen to her all the time, and my dad said you could hear the tape being played in my grandfather's bedroom because he was missing her so much. And then, one night in a rage, he tore the tape out of the tape recorder. My dad saw it all over the floor in shreds, picked it up, and put it all back together again. Later on I discovered that tape.

With all its splicing?

Right. I mean, that's a good example of something that can't be used in any other way than performance. How do you make that into a painting?

Those tapes are integrated into *Seven Kabuki Plays*. Is that correct?

Right. My grandmother's voice, during intermission, comes in, and you hear her reciting her letter. I used the tapes in another piece I did, with a fifteen-minute meditation that incorporated a flamenco dancer.

My grandmother wrote a lot of haiku poetry in camp. I think one of the most interesting things of all were folk songs that she wrote the lyrics to. These were Japanese folk songs, and these lyrics were all about how pissed off they were at being put in camp. The story goes that they were very docile about it and accepting and went into camp and suffered quietly and all that. But these poems, these poems within the songs they sang, indicate that they were very upset over being treated so rudely by a country that they had invested in. When you have information like that, you've got to find a way of sharing it.

That's a fascinating form of resistance. Your mention of haiku, which, of course, distills an experience, also makes me think about the degree to which some narrative techniques that play out in the realm of literature also seem to have



14 Roger Shimomura, *American vs. Disney Stereotypes*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 in. Collection of the artist. Photo, courtesy of the artist

resonance in your visual work. I'm thinking particularly of the dense layering of many of your images, for example, a recent painting of you fighting Disney's stereotypes (fig. 14). There is a sense of lots and lots being pulled together into a single frame.

Yes, a lot of that is trying to achieve this balance between the story line, or the message, as it were, and something that's interesting to paint. If the painting is not interesting to look at, then it's not fully functioning. At least, that's the way I see it.



15 Roger Shimomura, *Roger Tracy*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in. Byron C. Cohen Gallery, Kansas City, Mo. Photo, courtesy of the artist

Roger, with the recent paintings that you've done integrating figures such as Hello Kitty (*American Hello Kitty*, 2010) or Dick Tracy to create *Roger Tracy* (fig. 15), one thinks a great deal about popular visual culture, which I know is something you've also dabbled in as a collector of objects. Could you speak a little bit about the relationship of those two activities—your role as collector of tchotchkes and other revealing cultural artifacts and then your role as a painter who enshrines popular imagery in other contexts or through other means?

Dick Tracy, Captain Marvel, those characters were part of my childhood, and I loved them all. Sometimes people mistake my usage of them as painting the enemy. But it really comes out of visual reverence for them. My antique toy collection was highlighted by comic-book characters. It

was all the better if the antique toy was Popeye and not just a generic sailor.

As a historian, I'm tempted to peel apart the layers or to tease out the connections between things that may, on the surface, appear to be incongruous, and I wonder if you mind if I use that as a segue to a slightly different form of appropriation in a more recent painting that has recently been on view at the National Portrait Gallery: *Shimomura Crossing the Delaware* (fig. 16). Clearly, the work is a play on Emanuel Leutze's famous 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Could you speak to the different influences that went into this and perhaps what you meant to accomplish with this work?

This painting had a lot to do with ego. I came up with the idea of doing a series of works that placed me, as a Japanese American, in various key roles and positions in the history of this country. Of course, one of the first things that came to mind was [George] Washington crossing the Delaware. I was aware that other artists had taken this on, such as Bob [Robert] Colescott. But I liked the question that this posed: What if George Washington was Japanese American? You know, that's such a staggering "if." Just imagine. I mean, it's mind-boggling. It was such an absurd idea that I decided it was the right one. Then to even consider how history might have changed after he crossed the Delaware if he were Japanese American. Particularly with a crew of nine Japanese rowing him across [the river]. What would the circumstances have been for nine Japanese to be rowing this Japanese American, who treats himself as though he were Caucasian by assuming the costuming, you know? There are just so many layers there that go way beyond my imagination.

I think part of what makes it so effective is the really seamless integration of an icon of art of the United States with very



16 Roger Shimomura, *Shimomura Crossing the Delaware*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 3 panels, 72 x 48 in. each. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Raymond L. Ocampo Jr., Sandra Oleksy Ocampo, and Robert P. Ocampo. Photo, courtesy of the artist

strong elements of Japanese woodblock printing—Hiroshige and Hokusai, for example, come to mind. It also raises the question of patriotism. Clearly this question of what is an American, what is American-ness, is at the core of what you do as an artist. We spoke earlier about your military service, but I think this work forces us to address the complex question of patriotism, especially with the inclusion of the American flag at the center of the painting.

Well, I agree. The main question here in the end is how does this painting affect the way we see patriotism and what's important about patriotism, or how blind is patriotism? That question, that issue, comes to the forefront in just about all the work that I do. Anything that has to do with race, ethnicity, Americanism asks that very same question. Really, how absurd is it that a Japanese American might lead a boat across the Delaware? Then, as well, that a crew of Japanese nationals would be rowing the boat? I think it becomes philosophical after a point.

Speaking of the question of patriotism and the complex issues of race and ethnicity it can engender, particularly at transformative historical moments, I wondered if you could speak to a painting you have recently completed: *Not Pearl Harbor* (fig. 17). It's a fascinating reflection on the implications of September 11, which immediately drew comparisons with the Japanese aerial attack that brought the United States into World War II. Could you speak to its scale and its pictorial style and narrative strategies? What inspired you to develop this response to this traumatic event approximately a decade after it transpired?⁵

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was preparing to take my wife to the Kansas City airport to catch a plane to LaGuardia [Airport]. I turned the TV on just as reports were coming in that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. Then I watched the second plane hit, and I knew my wife would not be going to New York. Within hours, comparisons were being made to the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor



17 Roger Shimomura, *Not Pearl Harbor*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 4 panels, 72 x 36 in. each. Collection of the artist. Photo, courtesy of the artist

and how the world would change forever. When I heard this parallel, it didn't take me long to think of the comparisons between what ultimately happened to the Japanese Americans following this attack, and what might happen to other innocent Americans should the events of September 11 be proven to be an act of terrorism. Within days I received a call from a gallery in Washington, D.C. [Anton Gallery, since relocated to Monterey, California], asking if I would provide a painting on the World Trade Center attack to be sold as a fund-raiser for victims of this tragedy. I happily agreed to do so. In it I depicted two stereotypical "Japs" with Taliban facial hair wearing turbans. In the background a Japanese Zero fighter plane crashes into an unseen target. I don't think the parallels need explanation.

Over the next few years, I produced several variations of this painting. Many

years later the idea to do a major work on this subject began to germinate, based on some of the conversations I heard on talk radio regarding the possibility of incarcerating all people of Arab extraction as part of the war on terrorism. During times of national crises, the American government has shown the ability to forget lessons learned from past history. In 1941, owing to wartime hysteria, the attack on Pearl Harbor ultimately led to the wrongful imprisonment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry. Earlier events like the Iran hostage crisis (1979) and Operation Desert Storm (1991) spawned paranoia, resulting in excessive police surveillance and Muslim-bashing rhetoric. The World Trade Center attack, with its comparisons to Pearl Harbor, rekindled serious interest among some segments of American society in suspending the rights of innocent people of Arab descent and practicing

Muslims in an attempt to ferret out the guilty.

The painting *Not Pearl Harbor* depicts many of the main characteristics and historical events related to and resulting from the attack on the World Trade Center and is meant to stimulate dialogue on whether mistakes committed in 1942 could possibly be repeated today. The prevalent smoke that covers the painting emanates from the World Trade Center. The two left panels depict historical issues of the Middle East, while the right two panels depict issues related to the attack on Pearl Harbor. In total, the painting is intended to ask the question: Just how far have we come in exercising good judgment where racial profiling and religious tolerance are concerned?

Roger, does it strike you that art—visual art, performance art, perhaps ceramics and other pursuits—has a special role to play in framing these sorts of political issues?

There is an ambiguity level about visual art that interests me. Every object comes with its own set of meanings and inferences, you know. As an artist, if you're going to use a Coke bottle, you'd better be aware of everything that that Coke bottle means culturally and commercially, because those are all the different takes that are going to be had on that bottle.

Roger, what would you anticipate or hope that your legacy as a visual artist might be?

If my work is seen as raising more questions than it answers, I'd be pleased, because I'm not sure what those answers are. People might argue this—that maybe I suggest answers—but I don't really mean to. I would hope that as soon as one answer seems to be more important than another, then another question will come up that will shift the discussion in another direction. It's only through a healthy dialogue

by a lot of different people that ultimately we're going to make this thing function in one way or the other. What's important is that we've created a climate where we all listen to each other, and maybe debate what the right answers are, for that time at least. Because I think they do change over time and generations.

Well, on that note, perhaps we've come to a good point to wrap up, and I'll just ask one final question: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Somehow I feel that a lot of the ripples that I experienced earlier in my career sort of smoothed themselves out. Much of that has to do with the fact that as you get older, people become less critical of your work, they become more accepting, "This is what he's going to do regardless of what's said about it." There's a certain kind of peace about that. There is, for lack of a better word, a nice kind of peacefulness about just sort of plugging away and working and feeling at home. And that's something I couldn't have said ten or twenty years ago, but feel good about saying now.

Notes

- 1 Roger Shimomura, Artist's statement for the exhibition *Asian American Portraits of Encounter*, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2011–2012.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 This performance, entitled *The Last Sansei Story*, was held at Haskell Indian Junior College, sponsored by the University of Kansas New Directions Series, Lawrence, Kansas, on April 20, 1993; and at Johnson County Community College, The Theatre, Overland Park, Kansas, on October 15, 1993.
- 4 *Coloring Book of Japan* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Bellerophon Books, 1971).
- 5 The interview content related to the painting *Not Pearl Harbor* comes from a September 25, 2012, e-mail exchange between Goodyear and Shimomura.