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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## George Suyeoka Interview

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Interviewer: Bridget Pasapane

Artist: George Suyeoka

In Person Interview: Artist's home/studio - Evanston, IL

Date: 4/29/2011 3:30pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*



**Figure 1:** George Suyeoka in his home/studio in Evanston holding one of his recent self-described “politically incorrect” Obama sculptures.

**Bio:** Born in 1926 in Hawaii, George Suyeoko was raised in Hawaii and graduated from McKinley High School. He served in the U.S. Military Intelligence Service during WWII in Japan. In 1953, he graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has been a fine art and commercial artist in Chicago ever since. He was married to the late Irene Suyeoka, a weaver, has two children, and lives in Evanston, IL.

Suyeoko's exhibitions include: Chicago International New Art Forms Exposition; Folkworks Gallery of Evanston; Honolulu Academy of Fine Art Extension; Honolulu Gallery; Best of show at SAN show at Illinois State Center; Columbia College in Chicago; One man show at Renaissance Court in Chicago Cultural Center; Beverly Art Center; K&L Gallery in Highland Park; Best of Show, Anti-Cruelty Society. He has exhibited at: Old Orchard, Old Town, Oak Park, and 57<sup>th</sup> Street Art Fairs; Artists Guild of Chicago; American Federation of Art; National College of Education; Art Institute of Chicago Sales and Rental Gallery; Evanston Art Center; Illinois Horowitz Galleries; and the Nina Owen Sculpture Gallery.

He has done illustrations and design work for World Book, Childcraft, Scott Foresman, Rotarian, Abbot Laboratories, Container Corporation of America, Encyclopedia Britannica, Playboy, Map for National Parks, and numerous advertising agencies in Chicago.

According to his artist statement, "In my fine art, my primary medium is wood and the themes usually are: politically incorrect, tongue in cheek; stylized animal forms; but I also have three bronze drinking fountains, one with Illinois animals<sup>1</sup>, another topped with two elephants<sup>2</sup>, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> with a pride of lions<sup>3</sup>, in the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, IL. Also a Bronze cat on a mushroom in a neighbors yard and a bronze rabbit for a south side doctor."

He has illustrated four Japanese folk art books and given slide shows and story telling sessions at the Evanston Art center; Chiaravalle Montessori School in Evanston; Roosevelt School in Berwyn; Congregational Church in Wilmette; Noelani School in Honolulu, HI; Barnes and Nobel in Evanston; City Day School, Chicago; Tanpopo [at the Japanese American Service Center] in Chicago; Buddhist Temple Children's class in Kona, HI; Maryknoll in Honolulu, HI.

He is currently working in sculpture and occasionally involved in designing children's toys and games and writing children's book stories.

<sup>1</sup> "The Fountain for the Young at Heart" located between the bear and wolf habitats along the outdoor visitor path of Pritzker Family Children's Zoo, this tri-cornered children's drinking fountain has a variety of near-life-sized small animal figures arranged fancifully. Donated by Betty Koenig Greenwald and Sally Koenig, it was originally commissioned for the zoo's first Children's Zoo (1964-2004) and relocated to its new home in 2006. (Lincoln Park Zoo Sculpture Map and Tour guide)

<sup>2</sup> "Elephant Drinking Fountain" was unveiled in 1992 at the Lincoln Park Zoo. It is located north of Regenstein African Journey near the Conservatory Gate. This fountain is mounted on a bronze podium and features an adult female and infant elephant drinking from a shallow pool that receives water from a drinking spout. Donated by Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Gelbin. (Lincoln Park Zoo Sculpture Map and Tour guide)

<sup>3</sup> "Lion Fountain" Located west of the Kovler Lion House along the public path, this piece features a lion pride drinking from a shallow pool that receives water from a drinking spout. Donated by Frank and Mary Vanker, it was unveiled in 2006. (Lincoln Park Zoo Sculpture Map and Tour guide)

**Bridget Pasapane:** Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

**George Suyeoka:** [I was born in] Hawaii [in] 1926, that makes me 85 years old today. Educated there, high school. Just the average kind of education, I did ok but didn't have to go to college because in 1941, my first year in high school, the war [WWII] started December 7th 1941.

Now that story about me delivering papers, so four months I think six months they used me as cannon fodder, which meaning we go out into the fields get pineapples and put them in crates and things like that or be a garbage man. It was short of people so but we did all kinds of crazy things in the kiave, they call kiave is a tree you know kind of like the one outside there with the tiny leaves what do you call it? Locus but with barbs on it. The idea was to, around the coastal area knock it all down and prepare for the invasion from Japan so, 6 months we did that sort of thing. It was a three-year high school, so then I worked in a naval yard and the war is still on. In my neighborhood which is still a coastal area kind of a fishing community around there. Japanese san-pan I don't know if you have ever seen one. You don't see them anymore but they are kind of unique looking you know. So after working for about a year there you know doing all kinds of plumbing and things. Uncle Sam came knocking so I was like okay, I'll give up, I'll serve. The war had not ended yet.

So in Schofield Barracks I had uh we were prime target of the military because we knew Japanese language and the use for us would be interpreter, translator you know in situations like that. So I had about three months of training and had to go to Japanese school before that so for about seven years. The military also gave us some of mediocre, basic training but the war was winding down and they knew they didn't have to do that much training for us. Then we learned Japanese but very, very bad. I mean it was a lousy program I mean and they didn't know what to do with us. There were about three hundred of us Japanese Americans in Schofield Barracks, which was our military camp.

So they were like, lets send them out to Minnesota outside of capital city. What is it? Minneapolis, St. Paul, there was a military camp whose name I forgot already but it will come back to me. We had training there for Japanese Americans and they still didn't know what to do with us we only had basic language training. And this was the war so they decided these guys might get sent to war as real soldiers too so they sent us down to Alabama to get basic training and that wasn't a very enjoyable experience. February in Alabama can be very cold at night, it freezes over. So we got through with that and they sent us back to the language area training near St. Paul. And for about two months they still didn't know if they were going to keep us there or what. They were establishing Monterey City, that's below San Francisco it's a beautiful area, at the time anyway. They had a huge army base there where they did all kinds of language training, but basic was Japanese. So we went there and stayed for about seven months. I had a wonderful time there, I loved the area.

Then we got on a crew ship to Hawaii and from there to Japan, 23 days on a boat, I got slightly sea sick. Prior to that, they gave us an option; if you enlist for one year you can go to Japan. Option out and in about three months you get discharged because we really didn't need that many interpreters anymore but I wanted to see and go to Japan and didn't know what to do, I was

nineteen. I had a little plumbing training and I didn't want to go back to plumbing so I was like okay I join one year and see it is like a vacation in Japan.

Then I came back to Hawaii. I just didn't know what to do and I used to draw when I was a kid. In high school my mother said, "Don't take art lessons, because you going to starve if you become an artist". And it [was] true, in those early days in 1949 and 1950 there was hardly anything in art, very few people were employed in that. So I thought okay, well maybe things will change so I applied to schools and was accepted to the Art Institute [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] here, I spent about three years there.

In the mean time, I met my wife who happened, at the time, [to be] a weaver. She wove for a design studio named "Reg/Wick" also Recon Signer [*Else Regenstein?*], well known by most weavers in the country it was a turning point in her career. But anyway back to the Art Institute, I got out and majored in advertising art and I start pounding the street. But luckily by that time I had married my wife, Irene<sup>4</sup>.

I tried about 6 or 7 studios and the one that accepted me was Burkridge studio [?] Which in those days they called it the design studio, that era is gone now. They had about seven or eight wonderful design studios large one employing more than 15 people and everything was quite well along that line and those designers were really proud people who would think out the process for making a brochure for a large company like U.S. Steel and that kind of thing. That was along the line of design studios. I worked there for about three years then moved on to another place called Astro Graphics then a friend of mine asked me why don't you join me in a studio and I did that.

By that time my friend, [who] was part Hawaiian, and he wanted to go back to Hawaii. He was doing quite well. We were on Michigan Avenue and there was no reason for him to go except he is part Hawaiian. And he had a connection there that wanted to produce ethnic books about the culture in Hawaii - that would be Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Caucasian, Hawaiian...very few Spanish and very few Blacks. And my friend told the publisher, "If you're going to make four books about the Japanese culture why don't you use George because he knows about Japan and is aware of the culture and he is a good illustrator." This was really part of the seminal periods in my life so I was like, "Sure I can do it". I wasn't sure if I could do it but one thing about artwork or any kind of profession is that if you don't go where the action is your not going to do much good. The artists that stayed in Hawaii, in a few years the work began to disappear and they went on to something else like post office or government work. But if you stay in Chicago at this time it was big, so there was a lot of work.

So I did end up doing the books and flew out there to meet the guy but told him I wanted to take them back and do them here because I wanted to stay in Chicago. I didn't want to stay in Hawaii doing it. So I produced four books - 1970 the top book sold probably about 50,000 copies, which for children's book is phenomenal. Children's books are usually 5-20,000 at most. The next one I did was around 35,000 copies, then the third probably around 20,000, which is still good. The

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<sup>4</sup> To learn more about Irene Suyeoka, who was a "New Bahaus" weaver, visit: <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/7/3/voices-of-chicago/>

other dude didn't do so well, and that's how I got into that. Through that I got to study my Japanese culture once again with the art and Japanese calligraphy.

[*Our interview was put on hold due to phone call.*]

[*Explaining whom he was talking to*] ...Paul, he was the past art director at Playboy. That was his wife calling. My wife's memorial<sup>5</sup> is going to be in May so she said he will be able to attend.

So the work the work I did was anything I could get, it was scrunch type, I was the jack of all trades, not just one. But I did all kinds of things; like I said about Playboy... I did maybe about 20-25 projects for them. They sent me to Hawaii to look for sights for the Playboy Club. Talk to the people there, I had a good time there. And I did [projects] for Britannica, World Book, Scott Foresman, Rand McNally. At least half a dozen... Salvation Army Magazine. I did a ton of stuff; I just said okay I do it.

One time I got a call from a kind of big shot in advertising and he said, so I hear you can do Japanese calligraphy, and I say yeah I'm pretty good at that. I wanted a job so I took it and what they wanted to do was on the belly of this balloon like cruise ship do Japanese Calligraphy so I says, oh yeah I can do it, so I did it. I went out to Minneapolis and spent about 21 days. For first time I made about 100 bucks a day and I was like, wow I am rich. Anyway I did it with oil paint on plastic panel, they don't last very long so every time a big ship come in it would strip the existing panel, I did odd ball jobs like that.

This one time I went to Japan with Donna Beachcomber. We were working for C. Brewer [& Co., Ltd], one of the Big Five in Hawaii. 5 commercial companies, we tour Japan, and the company told me we are going to set up a project called the Hawaiian Village - no high rise, but a beautiful concept...it would be this 2-story smallish bamboo specialty shop, bar, and another would be a Japanese ceramic type of things or artifacts.

So throughout my career I had steady work for Scott Forestmen, and World Book and had tons of little off set projects that really made life interesting. Around 1950, I got into sculpture [*see figure 2*], and I always whittled as a child so I started doing sculpture projects. Political incorrect, tongue in cheek, all in wood of course some fairly large. At the time the Art Institute had a wonderful program for the local artists called the *Lending and Sales Gallery*. People who were interested in renting or buying certain artwork could come and buy. So I sent pictures of my work and they accepted about 3 or no 4 of my things.

**BP:** Are you currently working on any sculptures/projects right now?

**GS:** Right now I am doing something on Sarah Palin. She is a very out spoken person and I am trying to connect her to the Tea Party movement. I am making an elephant shaped like a teapot. If you open the lid, Sarah Palin comes shooting out...hahaha!

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<sup>5</sup> Irene Suyeoka passed away in December 2010.

My daughter works on projects for these comedians, Jerry and Anne Stiller, and she wants me to do projects for them. So I conceive of an idea of a heart with legs on it and the head is formed like the jesters of 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, court jesters. I am going to color it and put all kind of eloquent type of stuff on it.

This year I just did an Obama piece [*see figure 1 above*]. He really got involved with that medical controversy, trying to get health care for everyone. The universal medical symbol is the staff with the 2 snakes and wings. So I made Obama in the center, and virtually he is naked and the snakes that wrap around it, one is a donkey and one is an elephant. He is kind of spread out with the wings like Jesus. You know at some point people say, “who does he think he is, Jesus?” Hahaha...anyway, I did that and it got in a show at the Cultural Center. Basically that’s it. I don’t have a regular gallery because I haven’t tried it yet. I am ready to go on the Internet. I think maybe its time to do that because of the sales of artwork has begun to change again. Amazon and the other ones and you know you can’t compete with those guys.

**BP:** What influences your artwork?

**GS:** I think my Japanese background. I studied calligraphy in Japanese school. I did watercolors and things like that when I was a kid. The best thing I did when I was a kid was watercolor paintings. I could not do Western type portrait painting. That’s the curious thing about oriental artists vs. Western artists...the oriental artists does beautiful work with calligraphy but essentially they are drawing a painting. The Western style artists, like watercolorists and painters like Rembrandt, they paint a figure or a scene with oils...they don’t draw it, they paint it. It seems strange but somehow they don’t mix.

Me I am more trained in oriental art so if I try to do Western painting, I don’t really succeed. I have to draw. I find a lot of oriental very good artists now and they come here and do the Western style just wonderful - free and you have to really practice it to overcome the flow and color and everything else. So I find myself doing oriental art - cat drawings, primarily cat drawings. I did wood block primarily for children and I have been selling it for forty years. I don’t do it anymore, but I did some Japanese wood block print.

**BP:** Now out of all the different types of projects you have done with the advertising, and illustrations and sculptures, what is your favorite?

**GS:** What do I prefer? Oh I think if you go to the Art institute, you come out with a kind of lopsided view of art, tunnel vision maybe. You tend to think of fine art as basic art of your life. Unfortunately that does not really transfer into advertising so I had difficulty but I always liked fine art. I always wanted to paint and draw in a style that’s more like fine art, including sculpture and wood block prints. So I really prefer the kind of thing I did with Japanese tools and what not. Not necessarily like a Japanese sculptor but a lot of things from Japan influenced me and my back ground in a way, so that was a factor. I like to do cartoons and things and certain things you cannot develop, it comes natural and then you can develop.

So essentially my background is in advertising not necessarily oriental art. I have done pages for pharmaceutical companies that involve Chinese style painting. I can do copy or not copy work

but in a style of Japanese Tang artists or one of those Ming artists in China. I can do a good copy of that. My art often ranged so that every time they look at my portfolio they don't know what I do. So it's hard to say, I don't have a single focus when it came to doing commercial work.

My focus now is sculpture and now I'm developing a process way to make by using foam and covering in cloth or use paint or glue to make a shell and then scoop out the plastic afterwards. Well there are so many projects I got involved in that it is...I would say that two factors in my life that was the biggest thing was that I decided I didn't want to be a plumber in Hawaii and in 1949- around 1950 when I tried to get a job there was almost a recession in Hawaii. Everybody was looking for work; it was just the beginning of the renaissance in America. The war started a huge projects going. We started building all sorts of things and supplies and stuff. So the industrial capacity was there. The other jobs were all professional type jobs; I didn't want to work in a pineapple field that was really hard work. So one time I sold my blood for 10 dollars hahah...because I have a special AB blood so they asked me you know. That was about the gist of it all.

**BP:** We'll let's go take a look at some of your work then!

**GS:** Okay

**END**



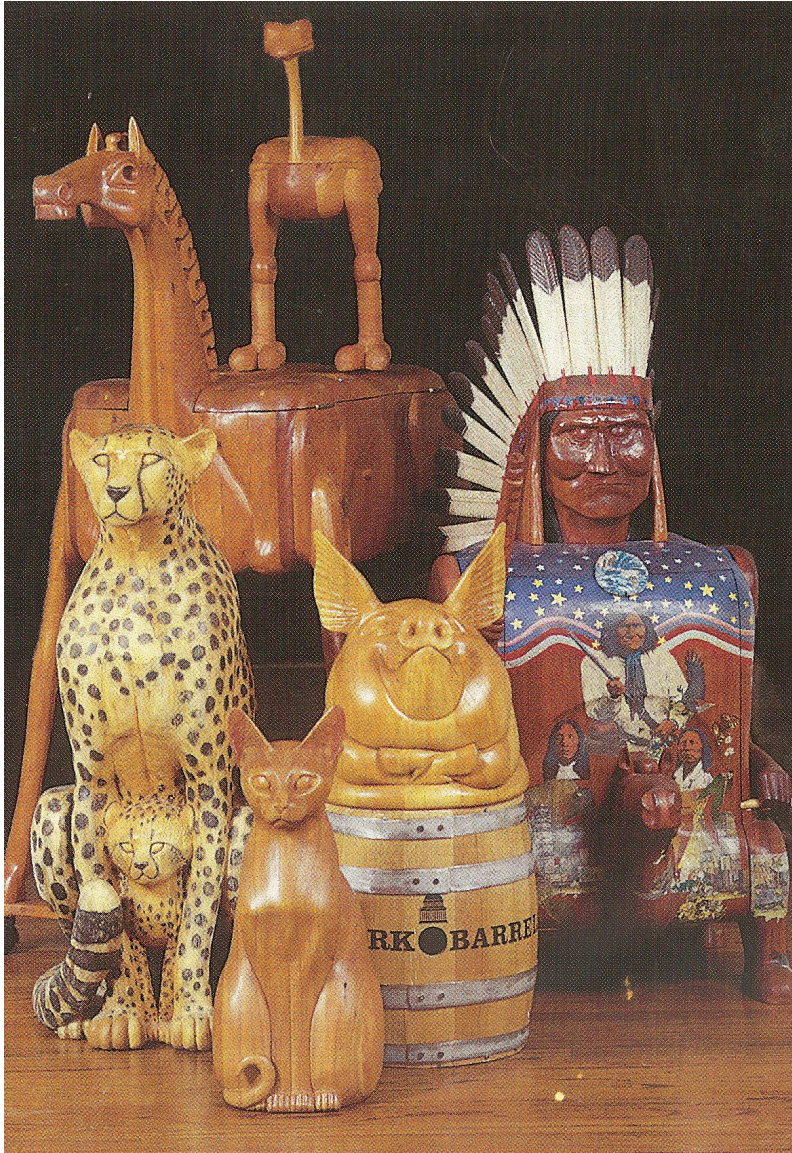


Figure 2: George Suyeoka work samples