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Jave Yoshimoto Interview

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Interviewer: Serina Mancha

Artist: Jave Yoshimoto

Phone Interview: Jave Yoshimoto's Studio; DePaul University

Date: February 16, 2016 2:00 PM



Jave Yoshimoto
(Picture courtesy of Jave Yoshimoto)

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts/Culture during the 2016 Winter quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Bio:

Jave Yoshimoto is an artist and educator of multicultural background. He was born in Japan to Chinese parents and immigrated to United States at a young age. He has since traveled and lived in various parts of the country, which influenced his artistic practice. Yoshimoto received his Bachelors from University of California Santa Barbara in Studio Art, his Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Painting and Drawing and Masters of Art in Art Therapy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and his Masters of Fine Arts in Painting at Syracuse University. He has worked as an art therapist/mental health professional in Chicago, IL, as well as a painting instructor at Syracuse University and as a teaching artist in Seattle, WA. As an artist, he served as an artist-in-residence at various artist colonies across the United States. Yoshimoto has been published on multiple publications and websites, received a letter of recognition from the United Nations, and exhibited works nationally and internationally. He has also shown in solo exhibitions in New York, Chicago, IL, Portland, OR, Seattle, WA, Alva, OK and Lincoln, NE. Yoshimoto currently works as an Assistant Professor of Art, teaching foundations level courses. Bio by Jave Yohimoto from www.javeyoshimoto.com

Interview Transcript:

Serina Mancha: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? Like where you grew up and when you were born?

Jave Yoshimoto: Sure. I was born September 17, 1974 in Tokyo, Japan. My parents were Chinese. I was born in Japan so I grew up with a very mixed cultural identity. It was a little confusing because of my family being Chinese living in Japan. I had to learn Chinese growing up to honor my heritage, but then I moved to the United States when I was ten. This caused another feeling of displacement because I had to readjust being a foreigner again in a whole new country with a whole new language and a whole new culture, so that was confusing. This is the reason why I make art today because it's about me trying to figure out myself, who I am, and where I belong.

SM: Thank you. And where do you currently reside right now?

JY: In Omaha, Nebraska.

SM: When did you move to Omaha?

JY: Last August.

SM: How would you define or categorize your art or yourself?

JY: Uh, wow that's a tough one. I wouldn't say that I am in some specific category, but I would just say that I'm an artist. I don't really want to consider or call myself Asian American artist because I feel like it's narrowing myself into a small category. As for my works, it's partially inspired by the Japanese woodblock print aesthetics, but also inspired by contemporary visual design softwares, (i.e., adobe Photoshop, Illustrator), things like that. It is because of this that I use a lot of flat colors, but the compositions I use are different on each painting, but I would say that my works are more western and contemporary.

SM: When, how, and why did you decide to become an artist?

JY: That's also a tough one... I guess like most people who started out drawing, I was drawn by things I thought were aesthetically cool and that's kinda how I got into drawing. But it wasn't until I was in college that I was challenged to think about the context and content of my work and if I had something to say. I was told one day by a professor of mine that I should be more aware of the issues in my surroundings. So in undergrad I became more interested in using my art to talk about topics related to social justice. So, I had this internal dialogue that I was trying to cope with, about how I was contradicting my initial interests. However the bigger picture about how art has the power to really say something and make a difference in people's minds started to pique my interest. I guess to answer your question, it started around 12 years ago in 2004.

SM: Thank you. Could you tell me what inspires the *Godzilla Invading* series you have?

JY: Sure. As I was saying earlier, it was about me trying to figure out where I fit into and where I was going. Ever since I moved out of Japan, I found that feeling of displacement especially true in the US. I grew up in San Francisco but then I joined the United States Army so I moved and trained in Oklahoma, then Maryland. Since then I've moved around quite often. I've lived in Nebraska, Syracuse, Chicago, and New Orleans for a short while. Every time I moved, I felt attacked by different stereotypes and it reminded me of when I was watching *Godzilla* movies as a child. In those *Godzilla* movies, Godzilla gets attacked by the locals wherever he went, and I imagined just how incredibly of a lonely feeling that might've been. At least that's how I felt for myself because wherever I went, I felt like I was being attacked by stereotypes and racism based on the regional stereotypes of Asian-Americans. So in short, *Godzilla* is symbolic of my autobiography.

SM: That's interesting. I wouldn't have thought about that.

JY: Ha ha yeah, most people don't.

SM: Can you explain your inspiration for the *Disaster* series and maybe go into detail about one of your favorite ones from that one?

JY: Sure! *The Disaster* series was a spin off *The Godzilla* series. Back in March 2011, when I was in grad school, my now wife/then fiancé, was visiting me at Syracuse University. That's when the earthquake of 9.0 magnitude hit the northeastern region of Japan. When I saw the news, it was unnerving. I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to help and give back but I just wasn't quite sure how. I saw a lot of people were setting up charities but I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to use my talent somehow and give back in that way. I ended up going to an artist's residency at Art Students' League of New York and started on this "Scroll" project. I happened to have this roll of 30 feet long paper, and I just started working. I spent the next 328 days on this painting on this particular BFK Rives paper on the earthquake. I have never painted like this before- the size, the physicality, the mindset- it was like a lightbulb going off in my head. I painted every day and I took the work with me everywhere to Chicago, Vermont, Nebraska and back to New York. When I was done, I was given a solo exhibition in Manhattan where I made these reproduction prints to be sold at the show. All the proceeds from the exhibit went to a non-profit organization in Japan to provide art classes for children. That's what set off this new purpose for my work.... I wanted to use this painting to commemorate important moments in history.

SM: What would you say was the hardest thing you had to overcome in your career?

JY: I think it is normal for any artist to go through ups and downs. After I was done with graduate school, I was close to that point of quitting art making. The main reason was that my wife and I just got married, we were living off food stamps, were volunteer workers, and we were barely making enough money to get by and I hardly had any time to be making work. Sure, I worked as a "Teaching Artist" but what good is that if I didn't have enough time to make and show work? This was by far my largest challenge but luckily I found a teaching job as a

professor later and it took me to Oklahoma and now I'm out in Nebraska. While, financially we are better off, I still struggle to find time to make work on a consistent basis.

SM: That does seem like the hardest part about being an artist is like not knowing where you're next.

JY: Yes, not knowing if I'm going to be able to take care of myself or my family. Not having the time or the desire to make work, for sure.

SM: So how would you describe the term Asian-American?

JY: I would describe it as the hyphen in between the word Asian and American because as an Asian-American you already belong to the old culture of where you're supposedly from but you're not really fitting in with "America." You're constantly reminded that you're not from the local area (even if you were born here) based on your looks, and that you are just different from everybody else. It's a strange place to be, but I think the term "third culture" fits here in a way. It is a terminology used to refer to identifying with a new culture where you were raised as opposed to the older culture of your parents. Anyway, I say "hyphen" because for me as an Asian-American I am always in between multiple cultures, and it is like being in purgatory.

SM: So you would just describe it as a purgatory?

JY: Yes. Because you're waiting to get somewhere. You're not really getting anywhere. Your own culture is somewhere else, at least for me and my past experience.

SM: So do you ever address Asian or Asian-American identity themes in your artwork?

JY: I think I used to, but I don't anymore because this is more of an internal struggle. I do not want my work necessarily associated with labels by outside sources of being an "Asian" or "Asian-American" work, so I try not to address those things in my work. I'm more concerned with different messages or opinions I'm trying to get across, so my trying to talk about my ethnic identity became less important over time because again it's more of an internal struggle than an external output.

SM: I can see that.

JY: Yeah.

SM: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian-American?

JY: In undergrad I was in "Asian" themed art shows, but not much since. Although, when I'm showing artwork people have labeled it as "Oh, this guy's from Japan" or "this guy represents Japan" or the US, so that was odd to me because they never asked me to identify myself, they just marketed it that way, so that was strangely odd to me. I don't even have the opportunity to speak any Japanese anymore because here, now in Nebraska, I always have to speak English and

my wife is white, so I have no chance to practice. So yeah, it's kind of weird for me when they're making assumptions about my "culture." I don't know, if they advertise me that way, I guess it's fine but it just makes me feel a little weird and it makes me a little sad.

SM: It does, yeah. What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

JY: I think for me my career has been steadily progressing. I started out from small group exhibitions that were more local and then to larger markets and bigger regions, to now where it is national and international art competitions, and now I have booked more of those types shows, so it is really growing based off of prior experiences. I don't think this progression has anything to do with my identity at all, but maybe it does, I'm not sure. Funny thing is, I hate it because I contradict myself and say that I am Asian-American or that I'm not Asian-American, but my work uses Asian influences. As I was saying earlier there's the Japanese block colors or aesthetics, and people would say "Hey, that's a Japanese lettering style" so people connect those references. So due to some of those practices, I can't quite escape myself from it because I use a particular style influenced by Asian art. So if I didn't do that maybe I'd be able to progress in ways that I wouldn't be associated with being an "Asian" art. However, I'm still learning to be Asian-American after all of these years, but I don't really know how to make my work in other ways, either. My apologies for the tangent. I'm not sure how to answer this question because there are other larger contexts that may be at play as far as the progression of my exhibition opportunities goes, but I don't really know.

SM: Well-

JY: [says something overlapping] Sorry, go ahead.

SM: No, that's fine, you can continue.

JY: It's more like a lifetime trying to find out how to answer that. It's figuring out how to come to terms with it because everyone else tries to tell you what you are, or who they think you are. So that I guess is more of an external thing than internal thing sometimes. Again, I'm contradicting myself here. Anyway...

SM: Well, what do you plan on working on next?

JY: I have a couple projects coming up. I want to do a couple painting series based on the earthquake in Nepal that happened in 2015, so I'll be going over to Nepal this summer and start interviewing the locals and humanitarian aid workers to get their first hand, ground level stories on what it was like for them to go through the earthquake. What it's been like to rebuild their lives and infrastructure since, what still needs to be done for repairs, and what kind of personal trauma they went through, so it's very micro-level interview process. I'll be taking photographs, videos, audios and sketches then use the collected data to bring back to the States and create some paintings based on those testimonials.

The second project is to go to the Lesbos island in Greece to interview Syrian refugees to find out what they've been through, being forced out of their home country, to stop by this purgatory of an island to hopefully find a new life somewhere in Europe. It's just heartbreaking to hear their stories like "Yeah, we had to leave our country because our city and homes was destroyed. We have nothing but what's on our bags, and just the clothes on our backs." These refugees are trying to figure it out and I think that's a terrifying thing for anyone. These people have to trek across Turkey, only to overload these small boats to go six miles across the rough waters. I think it's just so hard to take in and comprehend, so I want to capture and retell their stories. However, I also want to speak the locals and what they are going through. I want to hear the stories of how they are helping these people, how they made personal sacrifices too so that they can help people get on land and how they had to adjust their city infrastructure to accommodate these thousands of people, all the time. Life is incredibly tough for the refugees, but it is similarly difficult for the locals as well. Consider the fact that Greece is a country that is hit by recent economic crisis, a country that has little to no money to be doing these kinds of amazing humanitarian efforts are simply phenomenal. In the end, I'm interested in capturing these stories of the humanity and courage it takes to do those things. Perhaps it is my way of finding out who I am and what it means to be an artist, or a human, really.

SM: That's really interesting to stray away from your own culture, I guess, and go out to the different ones.

JY: Yeah, I guess it's what it means to be human. I guess in some ways, ethnicity means nothing, you know? Me taking pictures and such is simply surface level so I just want to find a way to get to the core, more important narrative, or what I believe might be important anyway.

SM: I think it is important, especially for us to focus on all of humanity instead of those only sticking up for their own race and not caring for others. I think we need more of what you're doing.

JY: Thanks, and I don't know, as far as things we've accomplished in school, or the academy, I realized that I have problems with the high-art world--it becomes a commodity, a collection item for the rich. It teaches mentality for the artists and art students that this is what they should want, developing egos, and creating desires to want to be admired by the rich, the collectors, the curators, the critics and such so that they can become famous too one day--a way into the club of elite artist exclusivity. It is a road out of their current social class. I think that's the wrong way to make art. For me, I don't want my works influenced from the rich, or the collector base, because it really is a strange world for me. I think in school, I've seen enough competitions, insecurity and pettiness and I really don't want to be like that. I don't want to be an asshole. I just want to make art that I believe in making, the important things that are happening currently that I think is worth capturing and retelling... Anyway, I went on a rant here, sorry.

SM: That's fine, those are actually all of the questions I had for you

JY: Oh, okay. Do you want me to clarify anything, or?

SM: I'll go over my notes and everything and email you with any questions I have?

JY: Sure.

SM: Thank you for your time, I really appreciate it.

JY: No problem, thanks for your call.

SM: Alright, goodbye.

END.

Godzilla Series

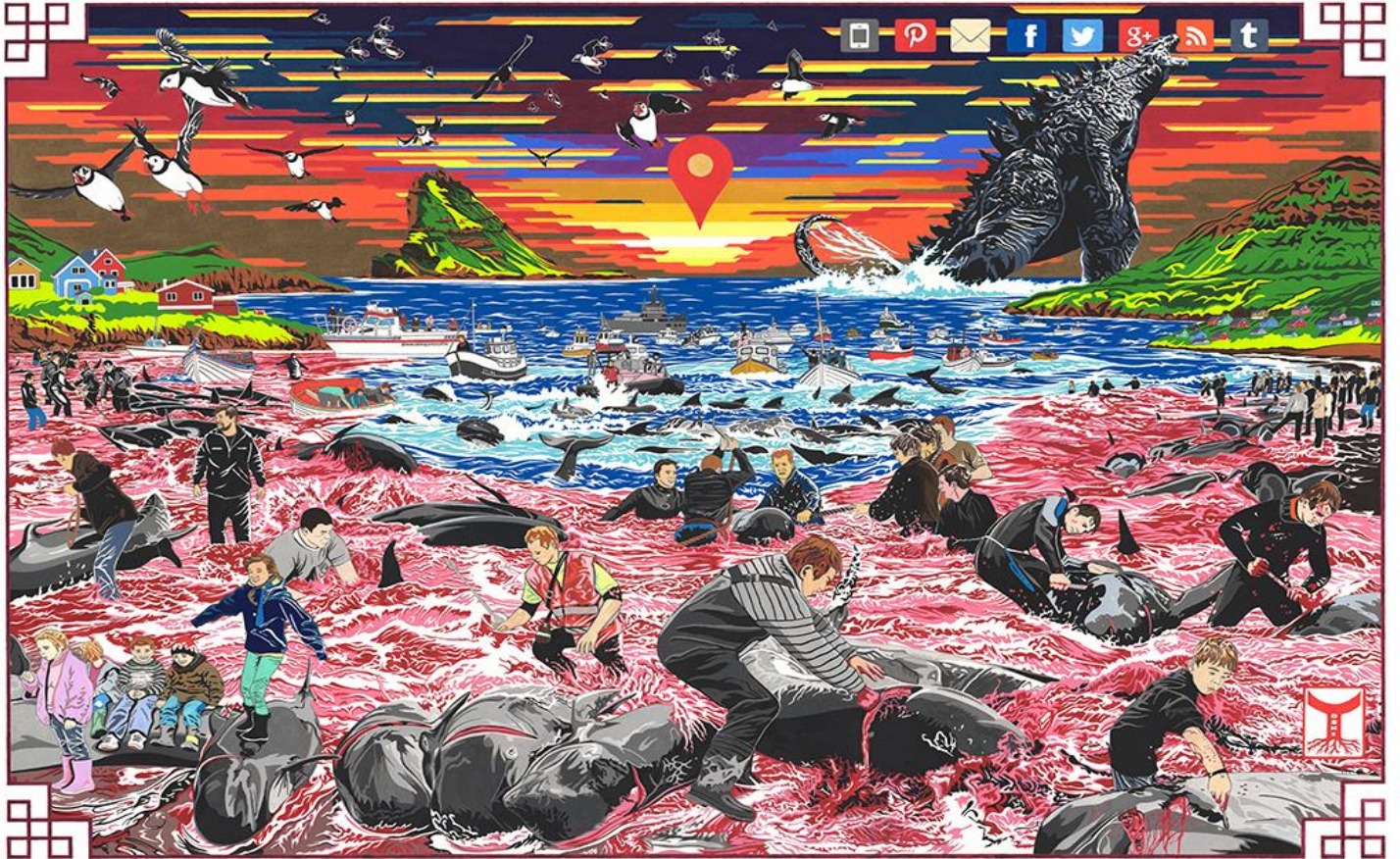


Stray Dog Strut
Digital Illustration, 120"x228", 2010
Courtesy of Jave Yoshimoto

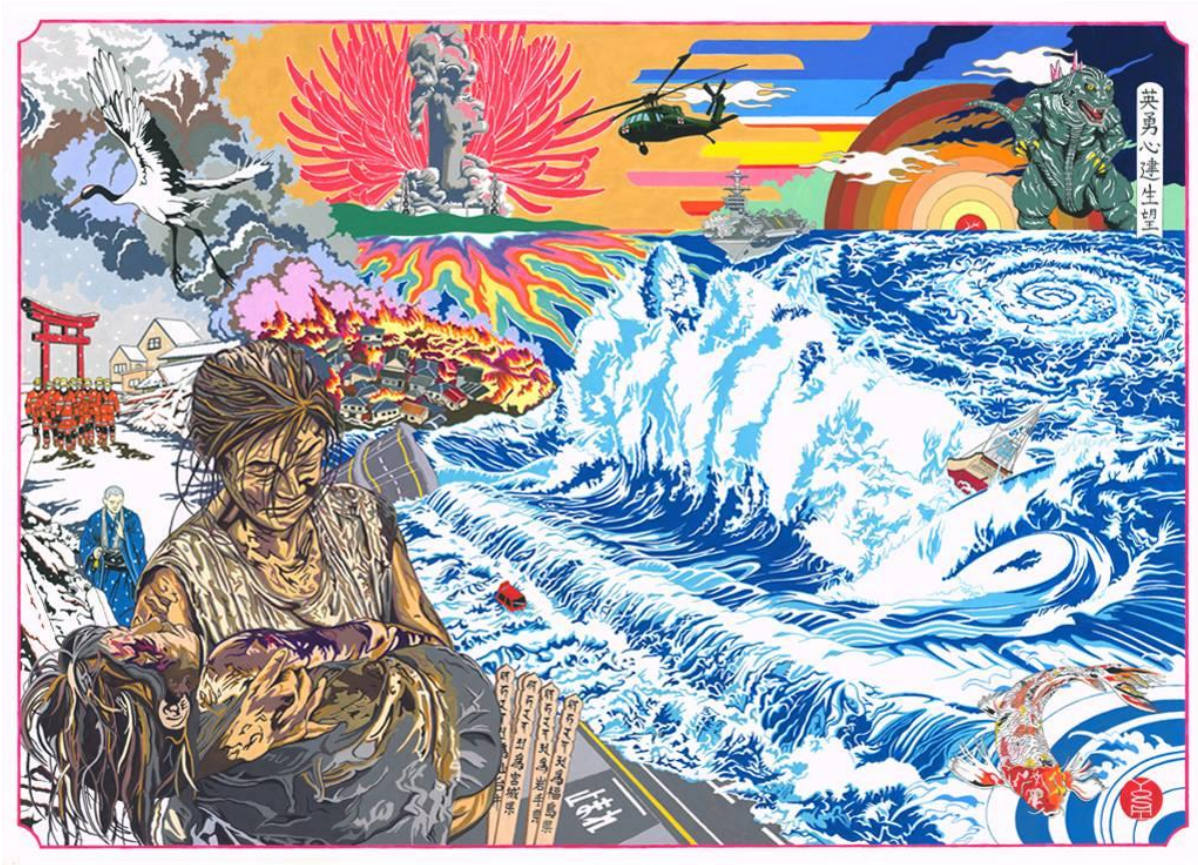


Sun Tzu, Chapter 4
Watercolor and ink on paper, 18"x24", 2009
Courtesy of Jave Yoshimoto

Disaster Series



Numinous Lethologica
Gouache on paper, 30"x44", 2015
Courtesy of Jave Yoshimoto



Harbinger of a Late Winter Day's Dusk
Gouache on paper, 30"x41", 2012
Courtesy of Jave Yoshimoto