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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Kioto Aoki Interview

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**Interviewer: Austin Sandifer**

**Interviewee: Kioto Aoki**

**Phone Interview Chicago**

**Date: 5/24/2018**



**Artist Bio:**

Kioto Aoki is a conceptual photographer and experimental filmmaker who also makes books and installations engaging the material specificity of the analogue image and image-making process. Her work explores modes of perception via nuances of the mundane, with recent focusing on perceptions of movement between the still and the moving image. She received MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is currently a 2017-2018 HATCH artist in residence at the Chicago Artist Coalition.

[www.kiotoaoki.com](http://www.kiotoaoki.com)

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

**Interview Transcript:**

**Austin Sandifer:** Can you tell me a little about yourself?

**Kioto Aoki:** I am a visual artist and a musician. I'm a conceptual photographer and filmmaker and I went to school at School of the Art Institute of Chicago for my undergrad and masters. I'm also from Chicago.

**A.S.:** Alright.

**K.A.:** Yes, I'm a visual artist and I also play traditional Japanese music. I play taiko and shamisen and I'm part of an organization that my father runs in Chicago called Asian Improv aRts Midwest (AIMRW)<sup>1</sup> and we work to promote the traditional Japanese art mastery and Japanese drumming, which is taiko and Japanese traditional dance. Shubukai<sup>2</sup> is the name of that group and [Toyoako is the name of the] shamisen group, which is the Japanese lute. We also have an incubation program that I curate and we help incubate up and coming Asian American artists in Chicago.

**A.S.:** You kind of answered this one but how do you define or categorize your art or yourself?

**K.A.:** To categorize my art – well, I am an artist so it's part of my life and music. I do traditional Japanese music so I come from the lineage of Japanese artistry and our organization works to maintain the traditional aesthetics of Japanese music. We do traditional kind of work and then contemporary. [For] the taiko group, we have a large ensemble [Tsukasa Taiko<sup>3</sup>] group that I run. We also do very contemporary works so I play with a lot of jazz and experimental music and [with] musicians on the West Coast. Art is my life and I have different avenues of art and art making and music and music making.

**A.S.:** When how and why did you become an artist?

**K.A.:** Well visual art...I didn't really decide to become or pursue that path until college, I think. I went to art school. I actually didn't know what was happening then, you know. My father [Tatsu Aoki]--he's an experimental filmmaker so I was around work and avant-garde creative music and traditional music. I grew up playing music, I grew up with music, and grew up on stage playing with my father and my brother and then my sister joined so that is just something I did not really understanding what it meant until, you know, as you get older...

**A.S.:** Yeah, you start to...

**K.A.:** Yeah, you're kind of able to contextualize...

**A.S.:** ...put the pieces together.

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Improv aRts Midwest. <https://airmw.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Shubukai. <http://www.shubukai.org/about/>

<sup>3</sup> Tsukasa Taiko. <https://www.taikolegacy.com/>

**K. A.:** I'm doing traditional Japanese art right so I'm able to see what I have been doing and what it means to have been doing it since I was very young. But the visual practice, I am just in [this the] last couple years. I wanted to go to grad school because I found a space I really wanted to pursue. I really wanted to be a working artist, and that was that.

**A.S.:** Tell me about your involvement with Tsukasa and Asian Improv aRts Midwest.

**K.A.:** Yeah, that's Tsukasa Taiko. That is the taiko group that is one part of our organization. Asian Improv Midwest is our nonprofit arts organization with my father and taiko is the drumming group within the organization.

**A.S.:** Oh, OK.

**K.A.:** Our group is the largest in the Midwest and we are the newest [group]. It's important that we are under the umbrella of an arts organization and that we have community members and many public performances for the community and with members with our community throughout Chicago that are funded by the city. We do educational programs from elementary to college level with schools that have Japanese language programs. We go and do presentations about Japanese culture in the language. We're the only group that can actually speak and teach in Japanese and it's a lineage through my father, who is the director of Asian Improv aRts Midwest. He came from Japan so he brought all of his music and knowledge.

**A.S.:** Yeah, to Chicago.

**K.A.:** ...which he learned from his mother and grandmother so I have a direct family lineage.

**A.S.:** Yep, yep, that's good.

**K.A.:** Yeah. I teach at taiko as an instructor. That's how I know Laura Kina [Kina's child is a member of Tsukasa Taiko]. I do tutorial management. I'm a professional performer so I'm also a professional taiko player and that's also important within our organization to have working [professional] artists that are not just community members playing music.

**A.S.:** You have actual artist that do it for a living.

**K.A.:** Right, right.

**A.S.:** Alright question number 5. I guess you kind of answered this one already but how has your art been influenced by your fathers work?

**K.A.:** Yes, music definitely...you know he's been passing it on to me since I was young and it's something that I feel very lucky to be a part of. Especially because I grew up in the states and that kind of helped form my understanding of being Japanese and Japanese American and what that means and in the arts. It's certainly lineage and music and very much [an] influence on my work.

**A.S.:** That's cool. Question number 6. I guess you kind of answered this already too but do you ever address Asian or Asian American themes or history in your work?

**K.A.:** My music work, yes. Because my instrument is the Japanese drum and when we do traditional presentations, I play taiko and tsuzumi, which is a small hand drum. And then I also play shamisen so that's all very cultural specific musical instruments. But my visual practice, I don't actually address any of those themes. I'm not interested in making content about the Asian American experience so my visual practice is more philosophically and aesthetically grounded in a Japanese or East Asian [background].

**A.S.:** Yeah.

**K.A.:** Philosophy and aesthetics - you know minimalism and a conceptual background and approach and things like that. But I don't make work about being Japanese or Japanese American in my visual work.

**A.S.:** Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized you as Asian or Asian American or have you been labeled as an Asian American Artist?

**K.A.:** I have. Yes to both of those questions. Yeah, we play our music a lot--we do many presentations in the month of May [Asian American Heritage month].

**A.S.:** Hmm.

**K.A.:** Taiko we've been playing a lot this month and the Asian American Jazz festival and you know, I think music just because I play it is kind of part of the...

**A.S.:** Yeah, part of the whole.

**K.A.:** Right. I often get labeled... I mean I am an Asian American artist.

**A.S.:** Yeah.

**K.A.:** ...but don't make work about that experience. I think that just kind of, you know, it kind of gets projected on to my work a lot I think.

**A.S.:** Yeah, I understand that.

**K.A.:** Yeah.

**A.S.:** Is identifying with Asian/ Asian American something that is also important to you personally?

**K.A.:** Yeah, it's important. I totally embrace I'm Asian and I'm second generation Asian American. My parents grew up in Japan and so I grew up in a Japanese household. I can speak the language, I can read, write, I watch T.V. I go to back to Japan all the time. I'm going twice this year. I'm going for a couple of weeks. It's part of me. I'm very proud and I think that I'm [lucky] to grow up in a cultural kind of..

**A.S.:** Yeah, cultural type of you know..

**K.A.:** Yeah, and it's important that I...

**A.S.:** Yeah, hold on to your roots. Which you already...

**K.A.:** Of course. I've never thought that as a hindrance really or anything like that but yeah, its important and I think lately that there's more of a push [to] include artist of Asian descent. And that has pros and cons.

**A.S.:** Yeah?

[both laugh]

**K.A.:** But I think for the most part, we're still at a point where people try to fill quotas by numbers including...and it's not really about quality of the work or etc. etc. etc. but we'll get there.

**A.S.:** Yeah. there's hope.

[both laugh]

**K.A.:** And to be aware of that I think and that trend.

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

**K.A.:** Well, let's see. I graduated...I finished grad school in summer of 2017 so it's been about a year. It's been pretty great. One of my shows just came down—a group show. I'm in two again this summer. I'm having my first solo show, an international solo show.

**A.S.:** Oh, that's nice.

**K.A.:** It'll be in Japan.

**A.S.:** OK!

**K.A.:** Yeah, visual practice is kind of good. I think the music we've been doing for a very long time and that's great, you know. It's something I grew up with and of course there's more opportunities etc. but the visual art...I feel like I'm in a good state.

**A.S.:** Alright, last question. What are you currently working on?

**K.A.:** I just made some light boxes for a show in July. I'm working on making more for a couple different shows. I have the group show in the summer--two group shows. I'm screening a film in Berlin [for a show] my friends are curating this summer as well. So, you know I'm continuing to make work and music. I'm teaching and performing in San Francisco where our sister group/organization is GenRyu Arts<sup>4</sup>, at the end of June. I'll be there soon and then our group will

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<sup>4</sup> GenRyu Arts. <http://www.genryuarts.org/Home.html>

very busy with our performances for spring and summer season that we've been doing through our organization-- a new kind of program that is funded by the new Field Foundation of Illinois and Discover Music. We're presenting this educational kind of program showcasing the collaboration between Asian and African-American musicians.

**A.S.:** Alright! When is that coming out?

**K.A.:** Yeah, so this is part of just the trajectory of history. As an artist of color, working together [has been] marginalized and the fact that our collaborations are often not acknowledged, these collaborations have been happening for decades.

**A.S.:** Yeah, it's just not as seen.

**K.A.:** Right. So, we're funded to go to schools on the South Side [of Chicago] to conduct this collaborative work and talk about it. We've been quite busy with that. Also, we're recording a new album and the beginning of August. I had an album release this Friday at Constellation. So yeah, lots of music projects or visual arts projects. [It's been] great.

**End.**