



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Bruce Yonemoto,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bruce Yonemoto on August 19, 2020. The interview took place at Yonemoto's home in Crestline, California, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Bruce Yonemoto at his home in Crestline California. It is August 19th, 2020 and this is a Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Bruce, could you tell me a little bit about how your life and your work have changed since March of this year?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Well, you know, I do a lot of projects, uh, internationally. I travel and I actually do a production onsite in many of these other countries. And so I was working on two projects, um, one, uh, was in Mexico with, uh, Jaime Ashida. It was centered in, uh, Guadalajara and I was supposed to go down there and, uh, finish working on this project, uh, which focuses in on this, uh, black mirror that, uh, was, uh, actually first sort of owned by a, uh, Aztec priest, and, uh, supposedly he could see the future, um, in this mirror. And so somehow it made its way to England. And John Dee, who was, um, a consultant to Queen Elizabeth I, got ahold of the mirror and supposedly he was able to see the future in that mirror. And so, uh, he saw the, uh—the Spanish, uh, Armada being destroyed. So he alerted Queen Elizabeth, and so she knew that she would win the war even before it happened, I suppose.

So anyway, I'm working on a project where I will get this—this, uh, obsidian piece—[coughs] piece, which will be—the original, uh, black mirror was very tiny, but, uh, the ones I'm making are—are larger, sort of the size of a smaller flatscreen. And so I'll be making this sort of tap—tapestry, uh, video installation out of that. But I obviously cannot go down there now. So, that's been put on hold. Although I'm continuing to, with the fabrication.

And then my other project, which I'm supp—was supposed to go to Vietnam this coming fall in October for this, uh, residency in Hué, uh, which focuses in—and I was focusing in on, uh, lacquer and, uh, which, uh, which is sort of a follow up on this project that I started in Japan, which, uh, which last year in September, I traveled with, uh, my collaborator, Eder Santos from Brazil. And, uh, and so I was trying to find some linkage between my father's family and my mother's family. And so my father's family is from the south, uh, Kinsai. Which is near Osaka, Wakayama.

And, uh, so, you know, I went there first and I did some research and I was initially sort of going to bring back some kind of sand because I—I did my graduate studies in Japan, uh, in the early '70s, and so I, uh, learned how to do this Japanese form of painting, which uses, uh, Iwa-enogu, or sand, and so I thought maybe I'll get sand from the south and the north.

And so after I found—I went to Wakayama, I found that they initially got the red color, you know, of the gates and things like that, Miyajima you might have seen those large gates that they have that extend into the ocean. And it's a red color, so the red lacquer color or—originally came from that area that my father's from. So I thought, "well, maybe, this sounds interesting." So then I went up to the northern part of Japan where my mother's family is from, which is Sendai. And I found that they had a lacquer tradition there, too. So I decided to concentrate on this idea of, uh, making, uh, Western objects and covering them with lacquer.

So I found that, uh, that laqu—they're, sort of, re-assessing the history of lacquer. And initially they thought that it all came from China, but now they're thinking that it probably started simultaneously in China, Japan, and Vietnam. So, uh, I was gonna go to Vietnam since they still have this sort of manufacturing tradition there, that, uh, that I would, uh, do a residency there. And so—and then I was supposed to have a show with, uh, the Quynh Galerie in Saigon in, uh, November. So that's all been, you know, sort of put on hold. Who knows if it will happen. And, uh, so, uh, that's how it affected, you know, my projects immediately, so. Yeah.

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BEN GILLESPIE: And—and are you finding that given, you know, delays in fabrication or, um, the—just bringing these projects together during quarantine, is your conception of them changing? Are you, um, shifting ideas? Is there something that the pandemic has—has altered or evolved in your mind about them?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Well, you know, it—it's true, I've sort of—as we all do, I think we try to hold on to the possibility that things that will return to, quote, "normal." But, uh, of course, we don't know what normal will be and if the art world will continue to be as it is. I'm hoping that—that things will change after November and perhaps, you know, things will be jumpstarted from the past. Let's say things like the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] and things like that, which, of course I feel—which was—which was—I was very much a part of in terms of funding and also being on panels and things like this. And, uh, so I feel that that movement or that government sort of sponsored, uh, arts support system created a lot of art that we have today. And—and many of the artists that are—are doing well today be they Black, or performance artists, or whoever, uh, started their careers under these organizations. So I—I'm hoping that, uh, things may change that way.

But back to your question, uh, I'm still sort of holding onto the idea that perhaps we'll—I'll be able to travel, uh, maybe in a year, year and a half or so. And, uh, and maybe see through some of these, uh, projects, because I, you know, I've invested a lot of time and I—and I really think they're very strong. So I would like to. But if not, I mean, I'm already thinking about other projects. And—and, uh, and—and sort of, uh, fabricating them or putting them together here in my studio in Crestline, so, uh. Yeah, I mean, that's my situation now, you know.

I'm also working on putting my archives together because, you know, I'm at that time of my life where, uh, where I have to think about things like that, too. So I've been working on that. And so I've been busy. Yeah, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well—So thinking about your archives and, um, also the going to the places where your parents were from and your projects that are dealing with those ideas of origins, and prophecy, and the black obsidian, um, is your notion of home changing now that you're a little bit more confined in movement? Do you find a different sense of rootedness, um? And, um, the way that you negotiate that with the temporal bounds of thinking about those big questions of origins, as well as what it's possible to see coming down the road?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Well, to tell the truth [laughs], if the elections go badly, uh, I have been thinking about perhaps trying to go somewhere else. I mean, when Reagan was our president, I—I—that's when I did my graduate studies, you know, in Japan, because I just wanted to leave the country. So, in many ways, uh, I think that this could go from bad to worse. I mean, so I—I'm—I'm thinking about that escape route.

But—but you're right, I mean, uh, one of the things—I mean, I'm a native Californian, so it's very difficult for me to—to leave California. And, uh, so that's why I've always been centered here, uh. And of course, California, in terms of the art world, is Los Angeles. So that's why I'm here. But, uh, uh—I, you know, I—I am thinking about the future and—and, uh, uh, what could be. But, uh, you know, I also teach too, so that's another thing. I—I'm continue—continuing my, uh, teaching at UC Irvine. So, uh, that's another thing that sort of keeps me here.

But, uh—uh, I—I am thinking about, uh, perhaps relocating something or at least spending some time in other places and things like that. Just to see what that could be. I mean, I—I have lived abroad, of course, but not for any extended period of time. So, you know, I, uh. I don't know if that answers your question, but, yeah. Yeah.

[00:09:54]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, um, I guess also thinking about your archive and your video work in particular [cross talk], um, I was interested in what you—what you make of the way that video now absolutely dominates everything that's going on for us. Um, you know, thinking about the way in which mass media conditions our responses to trauma and, um—

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: —make sense of dissent in the world. How are you navigating that, um? A world on Zoom, teaching on Zoom? Um—It seems like those questions are even more urgent today

than they've ever been.

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Yes, I—I—I agree completely that, of course, everything is moving to the online formats and—and I—that's what I've been trying to implement that UCI for the last five years is to create this digital filmmaking program, which I think is—is very popular. We have a minor now, and—and it's, uh, it's very successful. And I just feel that there are those, I hate to say it but, straight white men who are—are just sort of closed, and—and they just cannot move forward. And so, uh, I'm having to struggle with that.

But, uh, I think that things are looking up. I mean, and that's another thing about my practice is that, uh, it's true, I—I think that video—that people want video, uh, material now. And so I have—I'm very busy with shows and things like that. I mean, I'm having a—a show in Manila right now. It's not video, but it's digital photography, which they printed there and— And they're excited about that. Of course, I can't go there, but, uh, they want, you know, some video material to show their collectors or—or things like this. I mean to show my everyday life or introduce me and things like this. And so, uh, that's happening.

And then I—this, uh, last July 4th, I was involved with In Plain Sight, which was this, uh, project, uh, I think it was the Creative Capital project. And—and, uh Cassils with—these two artists, Cassils and, uh, rafa esparza, uh, put this together. They're Los Angeles based, and, uh, they put this, uh, project with skywriting, um, of these—these, uh, terms in the sky for all to see. And it was very politicized. It was course around the time of Black Lives Matter and things like this. And so, uh, they asked me to put, uh, together a, uh, a phrase that they put up in the sky. And so that was a big project.

And you know, I mean, these things all have to be organized anyway through e-mail and things like this, so, uh, I guess that that's how that came a—you know, that came through. And actually—it—actually we were lucky because we were able to meet in person right before the lockdown. So, uh, we had that to start with and then we were able to follow through with, uh—uh, with the project. And then, uh—what are the projects?

I had a project in—in, uh, shown in—in, uh, with, uh, LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with the Yuz Museum in—in Shanghai. And so they wanted material too. They wanted some kind of interview material, things like that. And so I put that together and sent that. And, uh, and I'm in discussion—and then, of course, we had this Kappa screening, which, uh, the Mike Kelley Foundation sponsored. And, uh, so we—I had an interview with Andrea Lissoni, who was at the Tate, and we curated my retrospective there. And then he has moved to, uh, Munich now as the director—artistic director there. So that was—that was fun and interesting, but I—I—and then also now I'm in discussions about a, uh, probably it looks like it'll probably be an online retrospective anthology, uh, film for him.

So, I—in some ways, I guess because I make videos, you know, it is, uh—uh, a way, you know, to actually disseminate art works you see very easily. So, I mean, I think sculpture probably has the most difficult task ahead, because they need space in galleries and museums, and—and I'm not sure what's going to happen with that. So, uh, I think painting, digital material, uh, photography of course, uh, will all be able to persist, you know, online. But uh, you know, until we are able to meet in person.

And I'd also like to bring up, you know, this—I—I think I discussed maybe with the Yuz Museum, but Nam June Paik, uh, always looked at his work as viral or even as a virus. And so, he looked at his work as sort of infiltrating some system and then sort of breaking it down, changing it. And so I think that in some ways, you know, the virus perhaps could be a pop—you could look at it in a positive way, to change things, you know, and—and to—and to bring something new to—to fore. So, I think that, uh, I think we're going to have to change the way we look at things. And—and, uh, you know, I'm up for that, yeah.

[00:15:35]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I was wondering, um, what—would you mind sharing the phrase that you selected for In Plain Sight?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Uh—"It's not of skin or color." And it was a, uh, it was a phrase that was, uh, quoted, uh, from a speech that Daniel—Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii made at the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. And, of course, he was a senator from, uh, Hawaii, and he was part of the 442nd, which was the, uh, regiment, the most decorated regiment, in, uh, in American history and uh, for its size and, uh, number. And, uh, so, uh, but that—I found through research

that even though he said that in this speech, it was—it was sort of, uh, it was paraphrasing, uh, FDR and, uh, which he was giving this speech, you know, which, uh, when he formed the 442nd he actually had to—to make it a presidential decree or something. But, uh, but, because, you know, the Japanese Americans were put in camps, and so, uh, consequently, uh—but it seems somewhat disingenuous because, of course, he was the one who signed the, uh, the, uh, bill, or—or the order, to incarcerate all of the Japanese Americans, including all of my, uh, relatives and family, so, uh.

You know, it's—it's weird, but—but I think that the Japanese Americans at that time, you know, including Daniel Inouye, and my parents, for that matter, uh, believed in the United States and that we could, uh, continue, you know, to be a free nation and things like that. But, you know, with this Black Lives Matter and things like that coming forward it's—it's interesting to see how endemic, uh, you know, slavery and—and these sort of prejudices are ingrained. Are—are—are very basic to our Constitution even. So, uh, it's like an original sin and, uh, for us to get over that is going to be difficult, I think. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: And are there any phrases or works in your mind that really stand out for within this year? I mean, thinking of that phrase from Plain Sight, or is there something else, um, that you think would be important thinking about, you know, researchers or artists 50 years from now? Is there something that seems in your mind as, um, I don't want to say encapsulates, that sounds like too big of a word—

BRUCE YONEMOTO: [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: —but something that feels really poignant in 2020?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: In 2020, let's see. I have to think about that, uh. Yeah, that's sort of—of course I've been watching the Democratic Convention and I—I don't think I can watch the Republican, but, um, of course we want everybody to vote and to go on to the polls and to, uh, really defeat this—this, uh, sickness that has happened to our country. So, I mean, it's—it's—I think that that's probably, uh, what's on my mind right now is—is—is for everybody to, uh, cast their ballot. And—and to, uh, change to make—to help our society change and move forward. I hope, you know. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah—Well to, um, just to wrap up here, I guess, um, the other question I had in mind is, how are you caring for yourself at this time? How are you, um, taking care of your loved ones and, um, feeling safe, secure, and as healthy as you can?

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Well, I—I mean, I'm glad that our university has decided to stay remote. And, uh, I can't believe that so many universities are going back to school. I—I know that there are private universities that are having a very, very difficult time because their, uh, faculty's salaries are based on tuition. And so, it's—it's impossible for them to continue in many ways unless they have the students on campus. But, uh, I'm not sure somewhere like Vassar, which can create a bubble, you know, uh. I think it's impossible for a large university, such as University of California, or—or any of the, uh, large universities across the nation. So, it's—it's, uh—I think that that is good.

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And, um—and also, you know, of course I'm—that's one of the reasons why I moved out of Los Angeles. I had a studio there, that—that I was renting, but I, uh, let it go because I, of course, was never there. And I, uh, and anyway if even if I was there, there's nothing else to do but maybe take—get takeout food from my favorite restaurants or something like that. But, uh—uh, it's—it's just impossible. So that's one of the reasons why I'm up here in this—in this mountain community of Crestline, because there's very few people and, uh, and so you could socially distance very easily. I mean, I have a few friends up here that I see and, uh, but, you know, it's sort of solitary.

But I think that artists in many ways are—are ready for that, because of course we—we work—have to work on our own and—and, uh, and in isolation in many—in many cases. And that's a plus. And so, uh, I think that, uh, you know, just room to think and things like that. So, I think that, uh—but, of course, if we don't talk for years and years, who knows, you know, what will happen? I mean, we may all just go crazy or something.

BEN GILLESPIE: If we haven't already.

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thank you very much for speaking with me today. It was wonderful. I'm really looking forward to the realization of these projects you talked about and, um, hope you can say safe and well in Crestline.

BRUCE YONEMOTO: Okay, thank you very much.

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