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Oral history interview with Shiro Ikegawa,
2003 Jan. 8

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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Shiro Ikegawa on 2003 January 8. The interview took place at the Keiro Nursing Home in Los Angeles, CA and was conducted by Jamisen Jenkins for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Shiro Ikegawa and Jamisen Jenkins have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MR. JENKINS: This is Jamisen Jenkins with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art doing an interview with Shiro Ikegawa and Norma Kato to help with translation at the Keiro Nursing Home at 2221 Lincoln Park Ave.

Well if you're ready, I'll ask the first question: What inspired you to pursue art in Japan when you were first starting at the University of Tokyo?

MR. IKEGAWA: I wanted to DeGurney, so I wanted to see him so I tried--

MS. KATO: He said at that time many people were coming out here to the United States from Japan, and he was really impressed with this country so he stayed.

MR. JENKINS: Were you planning on going somewhere else when you first came to America?

MR. IKEGAWA: No DeGurney and Franz Rein [inaudible] so I wanted to see them if I can that's why--

MS. KATO: You came to see who, Shiro? Who did you come to see?

MR. IKEGAWA: Degurney. Degurney.

MR. JENKINS: At the University at Otis do you mean?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, no, no. I am talking about the artist, Degurney.

MS. KATO: Degree?

MR. IKEGAWA: Degurney a name of an artist here at the time, and Franz Rein and Degurney [inaudible]

MS. KATO: Oh. Oh. Famous artists were here at that time.

MR. JENKINS: Oh I see.

MS. KATO: I guess an artist named Degurney.

MR. IKEGAWA: Degurney.

MR. JENKINS: Degurney? Do you know how to spell that?

MR. JENKINS: Is it D-E-G-U-R-N-E-Y?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea-Degurney.

MR. JENKINS: Okay.

MS. KATO: And who was the other artist you named?

MR. IKEGAWA: Franz Rein. Franz Rein.

MR. JENKINS: Okay, Franz Rein. Well when you came here to Los Angeles did you feel your ethnicity played a role in your art, or in your reception to the art world present in the community?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, when I came here to Los Angeles, the reason why I came [inaudible] Joan Mason and [inaudible] Maybe I wanted to see them or maybe I wanted to know them somehow -- know how they made it so Joan Mason, those are famous artists--

MR. JENKINS: Now there was a woman I spoke to named Barbara Smith, were you involved with her artistically ever?

MS. KATO: She was teaching at the same school that he taught at.

MR. IKEGAWA: UC Irvine.

MS. KATO: UC Irvine.

MR. JENKINS: What medium did she work in? Was she also a printmaker, or did she paint?

MR. IKEGAWA: She's a painter.

MR. JENKINS: Painter. Um, was she also a performance artist, too?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea, that's very important. She [inaudible] yea, performance artist--

MR. JENKINS: Well, now there was something that we came across when we were filing some of your papers, we found a book for what looks like a Sushi Show that you did in Irvine, and what it said on the paper and there was a bunch of black and white photographs about, your building the Sushi Bar, and then fishing for the fish, and making the plates as well. Was that meant to be a type of performance art, or what were you intending?

MR. IKEGAWA: Performance Art. It seemed so [inaudible] UC Irvine [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: What did he say?

MS. KATO: He said he did another show at UC Irvine before--

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes, at another time.

MS. KATO: At another time, and so when he--the one you're talking about,--performing art, is that what it was? You decided to use the Sushi.

MR. IKEGAWA: I used the Sushi, the performing art into the Sushi Show.

MS. KATO: Oh. He used the perform-the-into the Sushi Show at UC Irvine. So instead of the Sushi into the show, he put the show into the Sushi.

MR. JENKINS: Oh I see. Well that's pretty clever.

MS. KATO: For performance.

MR. JENKINS: Did you -- there was a guest book, and there were people like, Alan Kapro, and -- who was the-Vaughn Williams, or someone -- did you have a special criteria in selecting the guests for that show?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, no, no, I the people, they wanted to know me at the UC Irvine and those were the people that I wanted to know them too, so invited them.

MR. JENKINS: So these were all friends of yours?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: I see.

MS. KATO: Or people that he's heard of because he said that he just invited them because they wanted to know him, but he also wanted to get to know them, so he invited them.

MR. JENKINS: Oh okay. Well there was another group that Barbara Smith told me about called the Venice Guys, and I don't know anything about the Venice Guys. Who was involved in that group?

MR. IKEGAWA: Franz Rein, for one. Uh, what his name?

MR. JENKINS: What kind of work did you do? Did you do printmaking with that group, or was it painting?

MR. IKEGAWA: That one's easy--printmaking!

MR. JENKINS: Printmaking. Okay.

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes. So, I did and some people wanted to know how to do it, so I taught them what I'm doing.

So yes.

MR. JENKINS: So the Venice Guys as a group were more of an instructional art education type group?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: Okay.

MR. IKEGAWA: --wanted to know them, sometimes I want to help them.

MR. JENKINS: Now did you, since you taught at Otis and at Cal State LA, right, and at UC Irvine, and now at this, does that mean that you had more of an emphasis on art education than on art production, or was it pretty equal?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, no. I have to eat and that means I have to work, so what I do for teaching

MR. JENKINS: What did he say?

MS. KATO: He said not necessarily, when he taught he had to read, so when he taught, he also taught basics the simple way, right?, you're saying? [Shiro nods head in agreement] The simple way to art.

MR. IKEGAWA: No, basics.

MS. KATO: Basics?

MR. IKEGAWA: Basics. Yes. And so, UC Irvine

MS. KATO: UC Berkeley was something, too.

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea.

MR. JENKINS: On your resume it showed that you had quite a bit of experience not only with art production, but with art teaching too.

MR. IKEGAWA: So, the reason why I don't give so the reason why I was looking for a job [inaudible] that time teaching always the thing I can do.

MR. JENKINS: Do you want to clarify?

MS. KATO: He said at that time he felt that teaching was I guess his forte, he was able to--that's what he could do best, and that is why he taught at that time.

MR. JENKINS: Oh, okay. Now there was in one of the articles I read about you, from the early '70's, the writer claimed that you had developed a new technique in printmaking.

MR. IKEGAWA: Uh-huh.

MR. JENKINS: I was just wondering if you could tell a little more about that as well.

MR. IKEGAWA: Printmaking I can do, so I decided to

MS. KATO: Could you repeat that, Shiro?

MR. IKEGAWA: I said that [inaudible]

MS. KATO: Got involved, or what did you do to better printmaking?

MR. IKEGAWA: Printmaking. [inaudible] my easiest way to at that time.

MS. KATO: The easiest way to get into

MR. IKEGAWA: The art world.

MR. JENKINS: The art world?.

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea so, easier to get into printmaking-

MS. KATO: Uh-huh, it was easier to get into printmaking.

MR. IKEGAWA: --so I started doing that--so I started doing that more. So then, before I was 52.

MR. JENKINS: Well, , since printmaking was kind of a new technique at that time, how do you feel that that medium fit into modernism in the art world? Were you trying to fit into that sort of thing?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea, but, helped me more that way, then this one [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: Were you trying to, when you were doing your art, establish yourself in not only in the realm of the Los Angeles art world, so that people could see you as a modernist?

MR. IKEGAWA: As a modernist!?! I don't think so. There weren't too many people teaching printmaking not too many.

MR. JENKINS: Not so many did printmaking?

MR. IKEGAWA: No. So, I was [inaudible] for me at UC Irvine, and so I applied for a job! [inaudible] what I have to do--printmaking is easier.

MR. JENKINS: What was the last bit of that?

MS. KATO: It was easier to get into printmaking than other things to get into the art world.

MR. JENKINS: Oh I see. Well, at Eric Zammit's house on 323 Altadena Dr., there were a lot of paintings you had made as well, and a lot of them seemed to have Japanese type things with Buddhas and, mudras -- there was one, a really large one, with a Buddha and mudras kind of all around the edge.

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea. That is my painting...

MS. KATO: Right. He says you're talking about Eric Z?

MR. JENKINS: Zammit. He lives in the studio right behind the house that Shiro lived in. And there was a bunch of paintings there that we're going to try and put in a show and sell actually right now, so hopefully that will work out-- In your resume you had all of these awards as a printmaker, and for being in all these printmaking societies, and I thought here are some paintings that you've done too that had more of a Japanese theme to them. Does that, is that trying to maybe present yourself as an Asian-American artist, or was it to pay homage to your heritage.

MR. IKEGAWA: No, no. I want to be Japanese artist, and [inaudible] very hard being Japanese and now [inaudible] and art not easy.

MS. KATO: Being Japanese and an artist at that time was not easy.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. So that was why you chose those themes was to define yourself also as a Japanese artist?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: With the fish that you do, that seems to be the most predominant theme throughout all of your mediums: in the paintings and the printmaking, was that another way to also show your heritage?

MS. KATO: He liked fishing and he loves fishes--it was a personal theme.

MR. JENKINS: Okay--A personal theme. Were there any other themes that you liked to explore in art that may not be, um, as well known as the fish?

MR. IKEGAWA: [pause]

MR. JENKINS: Do you want me to repeat it?

MR. IKEGAWA: Uh-huh.

MR. JENKINS: Were there any other themes that you used in art production other than the fish. There were Buddhas. I saw, and fish. Are there any other art works that you know of that expressed other themes, other subject matter?

MR. IKEGAWA: Not necessarily. But, I wanted to do [inaudible] my daily life in the fishing, so I put the fishing into the art.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. So that was the main goal that you wanted to express in your art work?

MR. IKEGAWA: Uh-huh.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. Well when you were teaching there seemed to be a lot of outside activities -- trips, camping. Is that true too? Were you trying to get your students to

MR. IKEGAWA: [Inaudible] easiest way to teach, I teaching art into [inaudible] so that means every hour, everyday life I use it [inaudible] than the other thing.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. Themes of everyday life--

MS. KATO: Everyday--and then that's what he taught other people too. Whatever, whatever meant something to you in your everyday life was easier to put that into art.

MR. JENKINS: Is that something that was specific to you as an artist, or was that a trend in the art world at that time, in the 1970's?

MR. IKEGAWA: What I do today what I do two days ago, so I decide to put myself [inaudible].

MS. KATO: He tried to do paintings, or drawings, or anything that has to do with art in today's world meaning the future he says today. Here. So in the future rather than in the past. So, the reflection of all his art work is more like the future, toward the future.

MR. JENKINS: Now there's one question that we would like, well that I would like to ask you, if you feel comfortable. We heard about, read about, an accident that you had at the end of the 1970's, and that there's some pictures too--

MR. IKEGAWA: [inaudible] paralyzed this arm. [Holds left arm]

MR. JENKINS: It paralyzed your arm? Was it something that affected your art work in the 1980's?

MR. IKEGAWA: For three months I was, I was in [inaudible] for a long time.

MR. JENKINS: Three months was when you were in rehabilitation?

MR. IKEGAWA: Right.

MR. JENKINS: Well we have record that in the 1980's you re-entered the art world to some extent. Do you feel that you fully recovered your career, or was it still affected by your accident--the car accident?

MR. IKEGAWA: After I [inaudible] in the art there was only one.

MS. KATO: You did only one or two?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, I tried to use my accident in the art, and not too many art [inaudible].

MS. KATO: Slowly?

MR. IKEGAWA: Slow.

MS. KATO: You slowly tried to enter art again, the art field?

MR. IKEGAWA: Uh-huh.

MR. JENKINS: Well, as is the case with some artists when their health is affected their style will change, do you feel that your style changed in art after your accident, or was it pretty much the same?

MR. IKEGAWA: I don't know.

MS. KATO: Where are you going? [Shiro's wheelchair starts to go back away from the microphone] Come this way. [Norma pulls his chair back to the table and puts on the brake] There we go. Let's put the brake on. Okay.

MR. JENKINS: How do you feel that it changed, did you try to express different themes, or was it more of a darker perspective, or how, specifically, did your style change in the 1980's as compared to before your accident?

MR. IKEGAWA: [Pause] There was [inaudible] I was moving all the time [before], but after the accident [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: So just in terms of actually producing the art you couldn't have full mobility with your body so that meant that you were limited with what you could do.

MR. IKEGAWA: Right. Very hard.

MR. JENKINS: But stylistically speaking the themes and expressions in your printmaking and painting -- did any of that change as well, or you pretty much stuck with the same themes?

MR. IKEGAWA: In my work, always moving to today. So today [inaudible] always today, always today.

MS. KATO: Sounds like he's saying he's always done his art in what's today, what's happening today, today, so--

MR. IKEGAWA: [inaudible] right, yes, today. I'm moving today.

MS. KATO: Whatever he's involved with at that time. Yea, so he never goes back in time he just -- the theme is always today--

MR. JENKINS: Moving forward, and--

MS. KATO: Whatever is happening to him at that time.

MR. JENKINS: What made you stop producing art? Or was there a definitive moment that made you leave the art world or did you just decide to pursue other things?

MR. IKEGAWA: No, the time when I had the accident so [inaudible] I couldn't move my hand.

MR. JENKINS: This is after the car accident?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: And, you still were able to produce a little bit of art in the 1980's, right?

MR. IKEGAWA: Everyday I tried to draw or [inaudible] after the accident so very hard [inaudible] so then I trying to--

MR. JENKINS: Did you do any work in the 1990's, or everything pretty much was stopped at that point?

MR. IKEGAWA: Very little. In 1990 my art so I always I want to do art always moves towards today.

MR. JENKINS: I'm going to stop for a moment and switch sides.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

MR. JENKINS: This is an interview with Shiro Ikegawa conducted by Jamisen Jenkins for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. So when you came here to Keiro Nursing Home you taught art classes here?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: What kind of art was it? Was it sculpture or more printmaking?

MR. IKEGAWA: All kinds of art--more environmental work.

MS. KATO: Environmental.

MR. JENKINS: Environmental. What kind of resources did you have?

MR. IKEGAWA: [Inaudible] work outside, fishing--

MR. JENKINS: Fishing!

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea, I worked everyday [inaudible] stay indoors [inaudible].

MS. KATO: He taught them how to draw fishes to the other patients [at Keiro Nursing Home].

MR. JENKINS: In a pond, or a lake nearby?

MS. KATO: No, just the fish itself.

MR. JENKINS: Oh just to draw it. Oh, okay

MS. KATO: Yea, I think it was mainly prints.

MR. JENKINS: Prints?

MS. KATO: Uh-huh, fruits and whatever happened to be around here.

MR. JENKINS: Did you get to go fishing? Are there any places to fish around here?

MR. IKEGAWA: Bishop, Bishop.

MR. JENKINS: Bishop. Well that's four hours from here, geez.

MR. IKEGAWA: [Inaudible] yes, that's where I went for a long time

MR. JENKINS: Well, when you--when people look back over your art career, how do you want people to remember you as an artist?

MR. IKEGAWA: Remember me as an artist [inaudible]...they like me [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: What was that?

MR. IKEGAWA: If they like me, then they remember me that way.

MS. KATO: Oh. If they liked him they'll remember him that way. What way is that?

MR. IKEGAWA: Huh?

MS. KATO: What way?

MR. IKEGAWA: What way? I don't know. I want them to remember me how I was at that time.

MR. JENKINS: So as you met different people you want them to remember you by the relationships that you had?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yes.

MR. JENKINS: With each person individually?

MR. IKEGAWA: Today [inaudible] today [inaudible] today [inaudible].

MS. KATO: You want them to remember you the way you are today if they met you today?

MR. IKEGAWA: [inaudible] I don't want them to change me. I want them to remember me.

MS. KATO: He wants you to remember him the way you have met him. If you didn't know him in the past, he doesn't want you to change him to how he was in the past. It's like you were just saying -- remember him for the time that you're with him.

MR. JENKINS: Well as an artist, and with such a prolific art career that you've left so many paintings, and prints, and the Sushi Show--and there is documentation of that--how do you want people to remember your career and your art work?

MR. IKEGAWA: I was at that time--that's the way. I want them to remember me [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: You want people to remember you and your art work for how it was at that time, and the impact it made at that time.

MR. IKEGAWA: Today and now.

MR. JENKINS: For today and right now.

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea.

MR. JENKINS: So you want people to -- whatever you'd produce today you want people to remember, but what you--

MR. IKEGAWA: Well I don't know [inaudible] today [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: Are you saying then, too, that you would prefer all the work that you have done in the past to stay in the past, and as you keep producing art now for people to focus on what's happening today and not what is happening in the past?

MR. IKEGAWA: Today to remember me, but other than that I don't care. Today in my own life -- today-right now--

MR. JENKINS: Okay, so today you want people to remember you for today.

MS. KATO: That's how he feels, but he says for the other people they could remember him the way they want to remember him. You know, it is just up to them, he said, how they remember me.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. Well in terms of working with other people and artists, who would you say were your closest mentors, or the people from whom you derived the most influence and inspiration?

MR. IKEGAWA: Well

MR. JENKINS: Who, for your career as an artist, who made the most impact on you?

MR. IKEGAWA: Well, I am always thinking about today, right now. So that whoever he or she [inaudible].

MR. JENKINS: Would you mind repeating that for me, Shiro?

MR. IKEGAWA: Today is how I want to be remembered, so anyway, remember me [inaudible] two days ago.

MS. KATO: Shiro, who is the greatest influence in your career?

MR. IKEGAWA: Now?

MS. KATO: No, during your career--in the past. Who inspired you?

MR. IKEGAWA: Degurney, that's all.

MR. JENKINS: Degurney, and who was the other person? Who did you say?

MR. JENKINS: Degurney? What about Stanley Edmonson?

MR. IKEGAWA: Stanley is a kid!

MS. KATO: Stanley is a kid.

MR. JENKINS: Is a kid! Haha.

MS. KATO: It's probably his father. You're talking about, Leonard?

MR. JENKINS: Leonard! Yea, that's right. Leonard. Didn't you work with Leonard?

MR. IKEGAWA: He died.

MR. JENKINS: Oh he died already. Was he your mentor when you first came to America?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea, I met him and I took a class [inaudible] and I remember him very [inaudible] so I [inaudible] printmaking [inaudible] so I was influenced by him.

MR. JENKINS: Were there any other artists you were influenced by during that time in addition to Leonard?

MR. IKEGAWA: Yea, Joan Mason....

MS. KATO: Joan Mason?

MR. JENKINS: Joan Mason.

MS. KATO: Malcolm McClain?

MR. IKEGAWA: M-huh.

MR. JENKINS: Okay. Were they artists in the 1970's or the 1960's?

MR. IKEGAWA: 1970's.

MR. JENKINS: 1970's, Okay. Were they printmakers as well with you?

MR. IKEGAWA: Not all of them. Some were contemporary artists.

MS. KATO: Some were contemporary artists.

MR. JENKINS: Oh, currently?

MS. KATO: Those that he mentioned in the group.

MR. JENKINS: Okay Are there any pieces or works of art that you are particularly fond of, that were some of your favorites?

MR. IKEGAWA: Hmm?

MR. JENKINS: Are there any works of art, or pieces of art that you made that are some of your favorites?

MR. IKEGAWA: I don't have a favorite.

MR. JENKINS: You don't have a favorite? Well, my last question then for you is, and I think you already kind of answered it, is how do you want to be remembered ethnically speaking? Do you want to be remembered as a Japanese artist, an American artist, or as an Asian-American artist?

MR. IKEGAWA: American Artist. I am an American. .

MS. KATO: He wants to be remembered as an American artist. He's an American citizen now, and that's how he wants to be remembered.

MR. JENKINS: Okay, that sounds good. Well thank you for doing the interview today, and we will put this in the Archives for you.

MR. IKEGAWA: I hope it works out all right.

MR. JENKINS: Yes, I think it will.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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