

Hiroyuki Hamada – Full interview

What does being Japanese mean to you?

I live in the US so people look at me with how they see the Japanese--or simply an Asian-- which certainly affects my perception to a certain degree. Like in the movies, we would be the first to get shot or we'd be just making sushi. Not that making sushi is bad but there is a stereotypical, somewhat dehumanized cast to who we are. But in the field of art, being different sometimes gives us an edge or we might be associated to well known Japanese figures in arts: or not, again we might be just bunched up together in some stereotypical traditional art stuffs. Also, there is the stereotypical view of being geeky with technological gadgets or just simply being weird as the internet is filled with bits and pieces of exotic Japanese ads, music and various mainstream/underground cultural weirdness. And locally, where I live, people are very receptive and I don't really feel being a Japanese. Actually, it's quite amazing how tolerant and understanding people are considering the history and how people can be exclusive and narrow minded. Then there are those who think we are a smart, quiet and very civilized people with politeness but of course they've been told not to forget Pearl Harbor so the endorsement can be halfhearted. And so, you know what, to be honest, I am having a very hard time answering your question... I really haven't thought of it. I think I've been really struggling to go beyond being a Japanese or an American for that matter. This is actually a good opportunity for me to think about being Japanese.

What does being creative in Japan mean to you?

I stayed in Japan till I was 18. When I was a kid, I was fairly good in making things, drawing and etc. But I really didn't understand what it was to really make something till I got to the US. I was in a community college and I saw one of the teachers draw and it totally hit me like a magic. I just didn't know that when you put together parts in certain ways, you can come up with something far more powerful than its parts, with a whole new solid presence of its own. I think any meaningful creation requires this special process; it's like making a good story with its beginning and ending with our real life essence we draw from in and outside of ourselves. It must be the same in Japan. But I don't remember learning anything about that when I was in Japan. Nor had I gotten much encouragement in tapping into that magic mode. I think I was overwhelmed and very confused by the dehumanizing aspect of the economic machine--80s in Japan, you know-- and the social structure that was geared toward maximizing the abundance. I was just feeling very angry and self-destructive: a typical no good for nothing teenage delinquent, I guess. All this is sort of ironic, because that's also when (late 80s) we saw lots of creative stuffs emerging from Japan. For me, I needed to have a very distinct sense of self and total reorganization of perspectives by being removed from my own culture. Only then, I could allow myself to see the fertile ground in myself where new lives could emerge. So I have a huge respect and fascination for people who are creative in Japan: sort of like the respect I have for the minorities in the US for rising up from where they were.

How, if at all, are you influenced by traditional Japanese culture in your work?

Well, when I make my work, I don't start from specific stories, symbols, theories and so on. I sort of let my mind swim where everything merges and reconstitute without our everyday limitations, values, perspectives and so on . It's a blind process to slowly feel through the entire piece with myself sort of being a window to the open universe in and out of myself. And

although it's not intentional, more than a few people have mentioned that there is something Japanese about the work. So I'm sure that my upbringing in Japan has some relevance to the work but the detailed mechanism is buried in the mystery of the making process.

How do you feel the creative output of the nation is helping drive and develop the culture?

I think it's totally crucial to the Japanese culture. For example, I think a good part of its development has to do with its long history of urban life and the birth of the creative force within it. Big population centers like Tokyo (Edo) with its commercialism and frivolous chores--just as we face today--which can grind us down with its monotony and the repetitive routines have given opportunities for the people to create art to fill the void, to bring back the richness, depth, awe, and our humanity into the context. I think a city needs serenity and profound experiences just like the nature in the country can provide. We need the real, big perspective to ensure our minds are developing, enriched and fulfilled. So as the nation gets driven by various sorts of authorities of the time, there is always the creative force of art to keep us grounded in the mystery of the universe.