

L.A. Artist Kaz Oshiro has the Last Word

by Warren Berkey



One look at the work of L.A. artist Kaz Oshiro might not be enough. But peek behind one of his microwaves, mini-refrigerators, or trash bins, and you'll realize these ordinary looking mass-produced objects are actually three-dimensional *paintings*, expertly crafted and finished with details like stains, scuff marks, even dead bugs.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down and speak with Kaz at his Downtown L.A. studio. What follows are excerpts from that interview:

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WB. I read that you studied at Cal State L.A. for both undergrad and grad, how was that?

KO. It wasn't really good, actually. I was just struggling. I don't mean to say that the school wasn't good, but I was having a hard time adjusting to a lot of things. And, well... it had a lot to do with my personal issues and problems. I was feeling a lot of isolation and alienation all the time. So, it wasn't really good.

WB. What started you on the path to be where you are now with your work? What was the beginning of that?

KO. I've been practicing painting since I was going to college. So it started around 1988. I tried so many different things, but nothing was really working for me. I was too self-conscious about what I was doing, and I really hated what I was doing. Even though my skill wasn't that bad, I couldn't satisfy myself really...

Then somehow I came up with this idea of making three-dimensional objects out of canvas. But it wasn't from an academic point of view, but it's more like an emotional one, because I always had a problem showing my work. It's like telling other people what I'm doing. And I really couldn't deal with that kind of feeling. And I really hated that. So to get away from that kind of strange feeling about showing art, I

had to find a way to make art that kind of relieved my feeling about showing art. Then I thought if it's functional objects sitting on the floor, then people don't see them as art. Then I thought I'd be able to get away from this idea of exhibiting or showing. That was the starting point.

WB. Before we were talking a little bit about you being from Okinawa. That it's not like being from [Japan]. What's the difference?

KO. When I was born in 1967, Okinawa was still occupied by the United States, so it wasn't really Japan. Nor America. Okinawan people have to have to passport to go to Japan, or to the United States, so it was more like half-America and half-Japan, in a sense. But Okinawa was an independent country, so Okinawa has their own culture also. And also I was using American currency until I was five, and there were American products everywhere. So I would say the environment was totally different. I would never consider myself as Japanese when I was growing up in Okinawa.

WB. What do you consider yourself? Being from Okinawa, and now L.A....

KO. Still don't know. Well, definitely, I'm Okinawan no matter what, because I was born there and still have my family there. And, I've thought about it a lot, whether I'm Japanese or Okinawan. But now I simply think that I'm just a guy who lives in Los Angeles.

WB. Do you think that sense of craft is linked into your Nikkei heritage? Or for lack of a better word, Eastern sensibility versus the Western?

KO. Actually, yeah. That was also another issue that I had, coming to the United States and studying at the university, learning about art. I kind of felt that all the artists have to justify themselves and what they are doing. So the artist are required to speak about what they are doing, and they have to convince people that what he or she is doing is right. So this idea of expression really didn't fit me. I never felt really that I need to speak out loud about what I am doing...

I always said that I'm not trying to be a lawyer here. Or it's not law school. Art is, well it's a visual art, then if visually I can't convince other people to look at my work, I thought it's meaningless. But in school, students learn how they justify themselves. And it was really difficult for me to agree on... so I try to make art that needs less explanation...

I don't know if it's an Eastern kind of idea. But it has a lot to do with my personality, I believe. I never really wanted to communicate with people an aggressive way. I always thought a whisper might be enough to communicate. So I try to make work that's kind of incidental or subtle. So it could be an Eastern type of idea, I don't know.

WB. I read in an article somewhere that I think one of your trash bins, somebody had actually mistaken it for an actual trash bin. What do you think about that? How do feel about somebody that maybe isn't familiar with the art world, somebody that isn't familiar with any of that, interacting with your work and not even getting the fact that it's an art object?

KO. I think it's a great thing. Because I'm not afraid if my work gets damaged or destroyed, really. If I can get a good story out of my work, I mean, that's the best thing. It's not my job to preserve the condition of the work, really.

One of the collectors bought the trash bin, and his housekeeper tried to clean it. I had replicated or put a barbeque sauce stain, a drip, with acrylic paint. Then his housekeeper tried to clean it off with Windex. So she wiped off the wood grain and other paint. So this collector kind of freaked out and called me and said, "I'm sorry... this is what happened. Can you fix it?" And I said, "Yeah." It's a great story... So what I did was painted another layer of painting, where I replicated duct tape strips over the spot, and covered the spot, and then I sent it back. So now that work was different from the original. But I prefer to see the story goes on like that, rather than keep it in its original condition.

WB. What are you working on now? What's next in you progression of work?

KO. Right now, I'm still making some cabinets and appliances. Right now, I'm trying to work on baggage, and suitcases. But my idea constantly changes. And I sometimes go in a different direction last minute...

But I've wanted to become an abstract expressionist, in a sense, so I always say this is my process to become an abstract painter. I consider myself as a still life painter, a still life painter trying to become an abstract painter, and that's a really common direction, I think. If you think about Picasso or all the other great painters, they were realist painters then became abstract painters. So since my issue is about the painting, I'd like to become an abstract expressionist painter in the future.

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There's a Zen Buddhist saying, "You can't avoid beauty, you can only avoid seeing it." Kaz Oshiro's work invites you look twice at things you might otherwise take for granted, to find the beauty, the uniqueness in the everyday.

After the interview was finished, I noticed a couple of guitar amplifiers sitting around his living area. "Do you play?" I asked, making small talk, and planning to share my own modest guitar abilities.

Kaz smiled. "Actually..." he walked over and spun the painted amplifiers around. I could only laugh.

So much for small talk.

Warren Berkey is an L.A.-based writer, artist, and filmmaker.