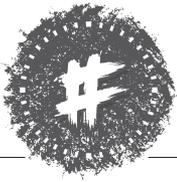


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## Paragon

Let it be said that Jon Nakamura is always reluctant to talk about himself and will deflect any compliments about his character or his work and turn the attention on anyone else in the room. Modest and humble to the core, Jon is nowhere near “emerging” or new to the art world, so this is a particularly special interview. Jon has been my studio neighbor at Angels Gate Cultural Center for more than two years now, and I am continually fascinated by the things he does, says and creates. One knows when they’ve met a special human, in particular, a special artist, and I knew instantly. He is a paragon of virtue and creativity.

Jon attended Otis Parsons where he earned a BFA in photography in 1993. He then worked as a color separator for a high-end silkscreen studio for two years. After being awarded an artist’s grant from Philip Morris, Jon earned an MFA in studio arts from CalArts in 1997. After years of schooling, he decided to travel around the western United States on a bicycle for a while.

Secret fact: When Jon’s dog, Mochi, wants to go for a walk he lets him know by pulling his shoe and then sometimes even his sock off. Then, they go frolic together. I’ve witnessed this, and it’s possibly the epitome of precious.

do when I get older. Right now I want to do and make things I won’t be able to when I’m 80 and 90 years old.

### **Speaking of, how old are you?**

Well, I was born in 1960, so I’m in my 50s. I don’t feel like I’m that old.

### **I’ve noticed that artists tend to stay young at heart.**

Yeah, I’ve noticed that too. I’ll notice a lot of childlike qualities from other artists.

### **Why do you think that is?**

Umm, I think it takes a certain childlike quality to be an artist. You know, if you solidify into adulthood, you become rigid and you can’t think as openly, whereas with kids, you know, there’s no rules. You can make anything. If you have rules, it’s hard to make anything.

### **Brilliantly put. How long have you been making things?**

I started, I think, in like 1965, my father’s brother, my uncle, gave me a chalkboard and that’s the earliest memory I have. I drew like crazy with that chalkboard. Then my uncle died a year later. My mother told me I would draw things that were popular at the time. I guess I drew The Beatles quite a bit.

### **Family and pets seem to play an important role in a lot of your work.**

#### **Why is that?**

Uh, well, as far as the pets, I love animals; they just become a part of you and when they’re gone you really notice it; they’re like an appendage. As far as my family, it’s mostly, I guess, my parents that I think about because they’re both passed away now, so they come up in my dreams so... more so with my father...

### **Would you say death has played a significant role in your art?**

Um, I only have like really two examples, until my dog, Mary, passed away in 1993, that had a really strong effect on me because I didn’t expect her death. Even though she was 14 years old, she was healthy at the time, and then she got a twisted stomach and the operation didn’t work and she passed.

# Interview with Artist Jon Nakamura

By Sarah Elise Abramson



1

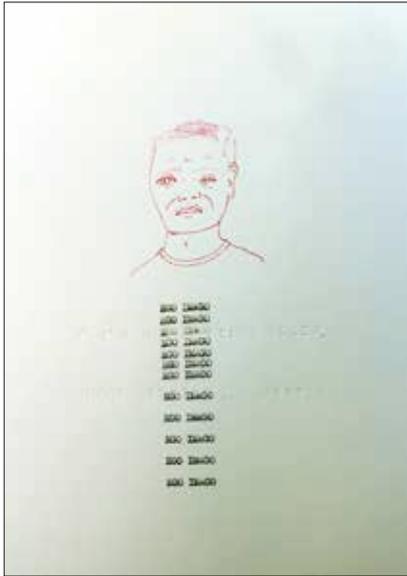
**You ready?**  
Alright.

**Can you please introduce yourself?**  
I’m Jon Nakamura and I’m an artist. I was born in Los Angeles and I’ve lived all over L.A. I moved to San Pedro about 12 years ago.

**How long have you had a studio space at Angels Gate Cultural Center?**  
Oh, umm, about the same length, 12 years.

I never thought about getting a studio here until I visited and saw how pretty it was.

**What kind of artist do you refer to yourself as?**  
Well, I have to call myself a multimedia artist because I use [laughs] multi-medias, you know, video, ceramics, photography. The only thing I haven’t done much of is painting. I’ll probably do that one of these days. I feel like painting is something I can



2



3



4

1  
*Cough Series*, 1991,  
gelatin silver print, 8 x 10"

2  
*Ego Imago*, 2010,  
ballpoint pen and  
typewriter ink, 11 x 8½"

3  
*Mary Howling at Night*,  
1990, gelatin silver print,  
10 x 8"

4  
*Mother's Dresses*, 2004,  
ceramic and acrylic  
paint, approximately  
4 x 2½ x 6" each

understand fragments.

**Do you have a favorite Nietzsche quote you can recall?**

"One must give value to their existence as if by behaving as if ones very existence were a work of art." —Nietzsche

**It seems like whenever I come to your studio you're cooking rather more often than making art.**

Well, it helps me think and I really enjoy it. At first it was this thing where we'd have artist gatherings in my studio almost every day, and I'd have friends that would bring interesting food, you know, like duck embryo or durian. Then we all got into this groove of eating, watching a movie, and then playing badminton over by building H (gestures toward building H). I think the latest we stayed was like 4 in the morning this one time.

**What did your parents do when you were growing up?**

My mother was a Buddhist church minister and my father was retired. He never really talked about what he did for work in Japan. He came here in 1958, and like a lot of Japanese Americans, the only job you could get if you weren't educated was as a gardener. Actually I kind of miss—at the time I didn't enjoy it, but I kind of miss—going to work with him during the summers. I always wanted to mow the lawn but I was too little so I always just had to rake the leaves.

**And, the hallow ceramic renditions of dresses your mother would wear, what inspired you to make those?**

I just wanted to have a little bit of a sculptural archive of my mother like I did for my father.

**Oh, what did you make in your father's memory?**

Yeah, I made a sculpture of my father playing Go. I have this memory of him, he would always play Go kind of half-naked; his kimono would sort of drape down.

**Nice!**

So that's the way I kind of sculpted him.

**Yes, I understand completely. It's like pets ARE family. They are your babies. Where do you draw inspiration from?**

Sometimes it's other people's artwork. Sometimes it's just me thinking about various things. Yeah, my best work happens when I'm not thinking too hard about it. I think it's just that in graduate school, everyone is geared toward making work with the critique in mind. They want to make a good impression in order to be ranked higher and garner support later on. The art usually ends up having a "graduate school look." In many ways, I like my undergraduate work better because there was more freedom.

**But your art is still very conceptual.**

Yeah, yeah, I can't get rid of that part.

I just feel like there has to be a little bit of a linguistic reason for me to make it, you know? Maybe there's a segment of a movie I'll watch that will inspire me, something in nature might inspire me.

**Reading?**

Yeah, reading, I do a lot of reading.

**What are some of the most influential things you've read?**

I like reading Borges, Jorge Luis Borges, especially his book *Ficciones*. The way he wrote it was unique. There are also some Japanese authors I really like. In school we read a lot of philosophers but the only one I really understood was Nietzsche because the others are so dense I could only truly

Sarah Elise Abramson is a contemporary fine art photographer based in San Pedro, California—a mysterious post-industrial enclave whose offbeat countercultural history and proliferation of unusual sights, sounds and citizens is tailor-made for Abramson's obsession with everyday surrealism. In both her own photography and in her curatorial and editorial approach to exhibition projects and independent publications, her emphasis is on discovering the eccentric beauty in the things most people overlook. Found objects, hidden messages, secrets of the universe that hide in plain sight—throughout her studies at Parsons The New School for Design and Brooks Institute of Photography, and later at LaChapelle Studios, her work has evolved from finding to intuitively creating original daydreams and shared cosmologies.

