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PERSPECTIVES

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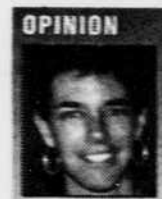
Nicole Krueger

Exploring the art
of the NorthwestUniversity Professor Frank Okada has connection that run
throughout the Northwest art community

There are those who quietly go about their business writing or painting or drawing or gardening. They create, solitarily. The fact of an audience is not why they do it — neither is money nor even the weather. Above all, it is simply what they do because they have to. This is the kind of human endeavor I most admire, which requires the persistent faith I most respect.

The Northwest has been blessed with such singular individuals, who are often known to one another but not always to the rest of us. I have to say that one of my primary motives for wanting to be an Emerald columnist was because it provided

a reason for me to talk with such individuals. And so for my last piece, I seized the opportunity to interview semi-retired University fine arts Professor Frank Okada,



Hannah
Dillon

whom I was aware of long before moving to Eugene. He was mentor to one of the rising stars of Northwest painters and my favorite, Sydni Sterling, as well as to other prominent local artists such as Allen Cox.

"Painting is what I do," Okada, who gets up around four in the morning and goes to his studio to paint seven days a week, says softly. He came to the University in 1969 at the age of 38 and was the only Asian American faculty member until about 15 years ago.

"What kind of an ego did you have to have to paint when there was no market for it?" Okada muses when remembering Seattle, the place where he grew up, and its only gallery space in the '40s and '50s. The gallery was a "Renaissance" cubbyhole next to a cashier selling Frango Mints in the venerable Frederick and Nelson's department store on Fifth Avenue. Frederick's was the cultural mecca of downtown Seattle then. Where else could one go to buy such a local delicacy and after counting out the change for it, shift slightly to see a Mark Tobey exhibit?

Okada has been to Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship and to Kyoto on a Fulbright. While on a Whitney grant in New York City, he attended "evening seminars" at the Cedar Bar. There, he was entertainingly educated by the leading abstract expressionists of the time — Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, the de Koonings and

Milton Resnick, to name a few. The Cedar Bar was to artists in New York City in the '50s what the Deux Magots was to expatriate writers in Paris in the '20s and '30s.

Okada returned to Seattle and created a studio, which he shared on and off with fellow abstract expressionist William Ivey and a grand piano. The studio became a locus of the art and literary scene in the city. Luminaries such as painters Carl Morris and Mark Tobey and poets Theodore Roethke, Richard Hugo and Carolyn Kizer were part of Okada's expansive circle.

Okada did not give me this juicy piece of history while we were having coffee. Instead, I talked with artist Allen Cox, who was glad to offer a few nuggets. Cox said that Okada's artistic lineage is in direct line with the original abstract painters of the Northwest — Tobey, Morris and Ivey. Okada came in under their wings. He also added that he has never heard anything less than accolades about Okada as a painter and as a person. After that, I went to my favorite library at Lawrence Hall and found books on Okada's old buddies, Ivey and Morris, but to my surprise there was not a monograph on Okada as of yet.

I wondered if it would enter our conversation, and it did. A little bit here and there, again and then again. The Okada family was interned in a camp in Idaho during the war. Okada was "tossed back out of prison" when he was 13. The family returned to "Japantown" in Seattle and lived in a hotel on skid row. African American families had moved into the neighborhood while the Japanese Americans were "away." Okada was exposed to jazz then and has been listening to it nonstop ever since: "I can listen to Count Basie's 1937 rendition of 'Taxi Dancing' all day, over and over. I love its clarity and lyrical quality. It's Mozartian. I have about 1,500 CDs and listen mostly to jazz, acoustic and classical solos while I paint."

Okada's older brother John, who died at 48, wrote a novel called "No-No Boy" in 1950, which has become a must-read for American Studies. A few years ago, the University of Washington Press received a sizable endowment for a new series that focuses on Asian American studies. It has been reprinting a number of "forgotten" books by Asian American writers. John Okada's "No-No Boy" was one of the first.

University Professor William Rossi is teaching "No-No Boy" in his American novel class. He says it is the most interesting Asian American novel of its time because not only does it provide students with a regional quality and historical information on the relocation and internment camps, but Okada had to negotiate between two audiences — the Asian American one and that of the dominant culture at a time when the latter was protesting the existence of the former.

Rossi goes on to say that John Okada acknowledges the outrageous act of the camps and the ruptured experience of the Japanese Americans as he attempts to reintegrate the no-no boys — those who resisted the draft while interned — and the yes-yes boys who didn't into an American life that holds out a promise of what it purports to be, could be and thinks itself is at the same time as the reality of specific incidents of racial hatred continued to transpire.

"Snow Falling on Cedars," by David Guterson, has recently received acclamation, awards and a burgeoning audience. He used the island on which I grew up as his context for "the memory of what happened to its [the island's] Japanese residents during World War II, when an entire community was sent into exile while its neighbors watched." My mother was in high school then and down at the dock confused and crying while watching her friends being taken away on boats. She doesn't remember it happening the way Guterson depicts it, "but then he wasn't there." Anyway, I am in the middle of reading "No-No Boy." It is still raw and real and extremely rich. In his short life, John Okada was able to give flesh, bone and blood to what his brother briefly alludes to half a century later while sitting across the table from an admiring stranger at The Hearsh.

Frank Okada says, "Painting is about being moved, not so much something to be understood. As a painter, I initiate the visual dialogue and that's enough." He does it every day in his studio as he has been doing it for years — creating a tête-à-tête with color, line, shape and texture while Count Basie plays — a quintessential American image.

Hannah Dillon is a columnist for the Emerald. Her work appears on alternate Fridays. Her views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Coffee choices

The great thing about living in the United States is that we can all choose what job to work, what cereal to eat and what coffee we want to drink. People living in the Northwest and students at the University enjoy one of the largest selections of coffee and beer in the world. Regardless of whether the EMU chooses to serve Seattle's Best or Yuban, students still have a choice to buy it. There are a dozen different vendors of coffee on 13th Avenue, a five-minute walk from the EMU. I work for Starbucks Coffee Co., and we have the same customers every day, as do the rest of the other coffee vendors, I assume. If I go into a bar and they don't serve the beer I like, I go to the one down the street. It's about brand loyalty.

So no matter what the EMU serves for coffee, our customers are still going to buy Starbucks, because that's what they like to drink. If students don't like the coffee that the EMU chooses to serve, they won't drink it, and it won't sell. It is not as if the EMU is isolated, and its food vendors are subject to the same business principles as any other business.

It is not fair to blame Seattle Coffee Co. for having a polished presentation and selling the board on its coffee. The point is that whatever the EMU chooses to serve, I will still drink Starbucks Coffee, and my friend will still drink Coffee People. We are creatures of habit and what makes the United States a great country is that we have the right to exercise that choice.

Business is about survival of the fittest, and if that means having a marketing exec with a Harvard degree to do your sales pitch, then the rest of the coffee companies better start saving their money.

Kit Blair
Business

HIV misinformation

Let's make this as short as possible. I am an HIV counselor at White Bird Clinic and am writing to correct egregious misinformation printed in a column by Jonas Allen (ODE, May 29).

My coworker, Gina Tormohlen, was badly misquoted as saying that "we're used to false positives" on HIV tests. This is wrong. Actually, false positives on HIV tests are virtually impossible through the testing process used by White Bird and the Oregon Health Division. There is at least a three-step confirmation of positives that occurs on the same blood sample before clients even receive their results. While we believe the paper printed a large error and grave misinformation, the Emerald does not

see fit to retract it. The editorial editor feels that the article does not detract from confidence in the testing. To the contrary. After seeing several clients today at HIV testing who were concerned about false positives as a result of the editorial, I can assure you that the misinformation did affect people.

Even if people reading this letter do not carry the frustration that I do concerning the Emerald's lack of commitment to correct information, please take away one simple message: HIV testing, as done in Oregon and at White Bird, is very reliable and sound. Feel free to come in for anonymous testing and ask us about reliability if you wish.

Heidi Schultz

HIV Counselor, White Bird
Medical Clinic

Editor's note: Columnist Allen insists that Tormohlen was quoted accurately after a review of his notes. While the Emerald sympathizes with the concerns of Schultz, we do not feel the story implied that HIV testing was unreliable, but rather that procedures exist for dealing with the possibility of false positives that occur in preliminary testing. The Emerald supports the HIV testing work done by White Bird and gladly concurs with Schultz that testing procedures are reliable and that anyone concerned about HIV and AIDS should contact a member or members of the medical community trained to perform both testing and counseling.

Support workers

All ASUO programs, such as the Student Insurgent, as well as state education facilities, are funded by taxpayers. This means that we all benefit from the sweat and labor of the working class. Opportunism runs rampant in a society whose economic system is based on a divide between the haves and the have-nots. However, the left, being the champion of the working class, has a special responsibility to focus all of its resources toward the goal of restructuring society so that there is an equitable distribution of resources to all people and thus allowing humans to labor creatively. Expropriation of working-class funding (which Tristan Masat is accused of doing) is not something that a person truly concerned with the plight of the working class would do. Instead, these recent events at the Student Insurgent show exactly the type of behavior that this unfettered, turbo-charged, capitalist society creates. It is now the responsibility of the Student Insurgent to begin again — to learn from its mistakes. After all, the workers have nothing to lose but their chains.

Ann Strahm
Student Insurgent