

Roger Shimomura: An American original

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The Asian Reporter

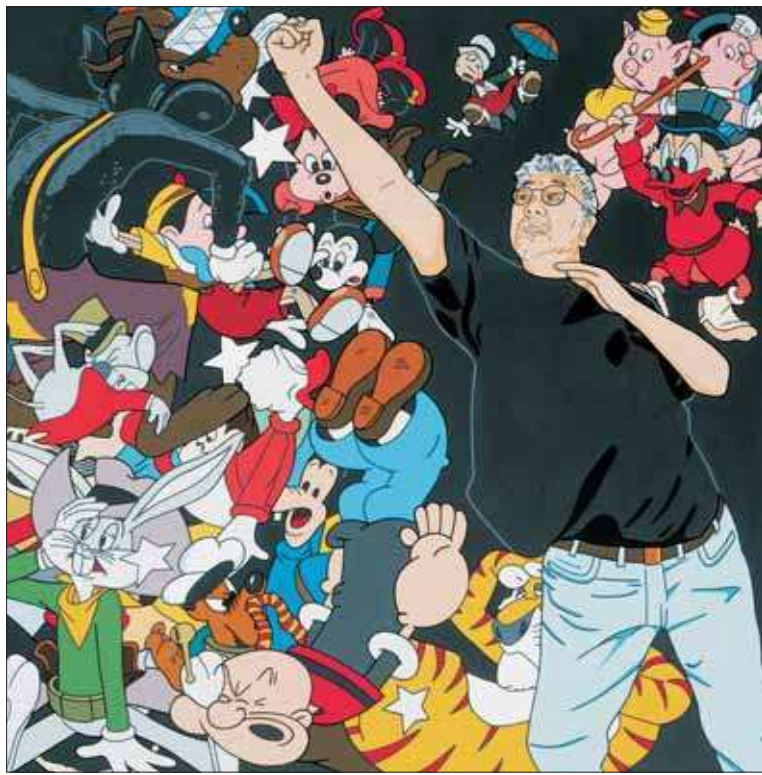
A collection of prints and paintings by Roger Shimomura is currently on display at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art on the Willamette University campus in Salem, Oregon. There's majestic power in Shimomura's work. He utilizes the bold color, simple lines, and classic superhero imagery of comic books and pop art in his pieces, then completely hijacks the styles for his own statements. And what statements they are.

Shimomura's history is bitter-sweet. He's a successful artist, writer, and retired university professor. He's also a Japanese American who was one of more than 120,000 people who were incarcerated during World War II. His time spent in the camps had a profound effect on his life and perspective, and it comes through vividly in his art.

The pieces on view range from the 1970s to current works — and they're intense. When reached last month for comment, Shimomura was emphatic in describing the art and the process of making it as not therapeutic.

The pieces are certainly not a collection of bucolic pastoral scenes. This is art that challenges and entertains while presenting a stunning, haunting visual that directly confronts racial inequality and the marginalization of Asian Americans.

Shimomura gets up close and personal with his experiences of racism, as it didn't end with



World War II. He has felt it as an Asian American in middle America and it's something he still experiences in a first-world country in the 21st century. As illustrated extraordinarily in his work, sometimes racism appears in the unthinking and cruel learned behavior of children, or the ignorance of adults, who have perhaps never thought about their actions.

The primary focus of the exhibit is an American man seeking equal access to the American Dream, and not just as "An American Knockoff." The paintings show Shimomura battling various aspects of the barriers he's faced: From the outright hatred and overt racism during

World War II — when the guns guarding the Minidoka War Relocation Center were all pointing inward — to the unfair status quo, microaggression, and racism still perpetuated in U.S. culture.

Using the dreamy glory style of comic books, Shimomura shows himself battling stereotypes, or, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, becoming those very stereotypes.

The images on display are powerful. Shimomura is fighting to be seen and valued for who he is as well as for the values and dreams he brings to the American melting pot.

For those who grew up with images of Disney characters, comic books, and classic cartoons, viewing the artwork is like seeing



ART FOR AWARENESS. A collection of prints and paintings by Roger Shimomura is currently on display at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art on the Willamette University campus in Salem, Oregon. "Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff" is on view through March 29. Pictured are "American vs. Disney" (left photo, 2010, 54" x 54", acrylic on canvas) and "American Infamy #5" (2010, 72" x 145", acrylic on canvas). (Images courtesy of the artist)

friends in an unfamiliar setting. There's battle and conflict with Shimomura as the protagonist. He is fighting Disney characters, Popeye (and winning), and even Bruce Lee. He often appears as a strong, powerful hero, which in mainstream American society is sadly an uncommon view of Asian-American men.

Minidoka also makes haunting appearances in Shimomura's paintings and prints, with raw and candid snapshots of life behind barbed wire. As beautiful as his works are, they are not always easy to look at.

What truly makes Shimomura's paintings spectacular is the pithy, biting social commentary. Really, how does one recover after being completely wronged — as so many Japanese Americans were during World War II? How can people move

past the anger, the bitterness, the frustration? And once a way to deal with it is found, must one speak out about it and try to raise awareness?

Shimomura's skills and experiences have been molded into a compelling body of work that presents race in a very different way. It says a lot about a person's strength of character when they have been wounded and battle-scarred, yet still have faith in the American Dream. Shimomura uses humor, irony, and cleverness to address the issues and affect social change.

"Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff" is on view through March 29 at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, located at 700 State Street in Salem, Oregon. To learn more, call (503) 370-6855 or visit <www.willamette.edu/arts/hfma>.

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2014 Most Honored Elder Award Recipient

Sivheng Pao

Sivheng Pao was born May 15, 1940 in Kompong Cham, Cambodia, one of 10 children in the family. She married her husband, Pea Ith, a former government



official with the Department of Justice, at a young age and they had six children — Sovy, Sochenda, Sokanchana, Somony, Sophal, and Sovimol. Under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979, she and her family endured extreme hardship through forced labor, starvation, and living under the threat of death. Remarkably, her husband and children all survived the ordeal. Pea passed away in 1993, and in 2002, Sivheng immigrated to Oregon to live with her daughter Sochenda and two of her 14 grandchildren. In 2008, Sovy later joined Sivheng and Sochenda in Oregon; the rest of the family still resides in Cambodia. Sivheng is a member of the Cambodian Buddhist temple in West Linn, Oregon and is a strong supporter of the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon. She often volunteers to cook for the community and offers financial support. She also gives back to her homeland by supporting the Golden Leaf Education Foundation (GLEF). In addition, she has two great-grandchildren.

The Asian Reporter Foundation is accepting nominations for its 2015 "Most Honored Elder" awards.

The recognition banquet will be held Thursday, April 23, 2015 at northeast Portland's TAO Event Center. Nomination forms and guidelines for eligibility are available for download at <www.ARFoundation.net>.

The nomination deadline is Wednesday, March 25, 2015 at 5:00pm.

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News page advertising deadlines for our next two issues are:

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