

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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What's the biggest piece?

You know, I have large pieces, but they're made in sections. I worked in a ceramic factory that made industrial ceramic; bricks, sewer pipes. One of my student's family owned the factory, so he gave me the privilege. He gave me a studio in the back, and I could work on these large two-ton sewer pipes. You know, machines pick 'em all up. But I couldn't cross the bridges in Hā'ena and Hanalei, so ...

Two-ton?

I couldn't pick 'em up; right?

That's the weight of a car; right?

Yes.

Two tons.

Yeah; these are big pieces. So, they're big, like that.

He's known for creating larger-than-life sculptures. But what shaped the life of this Kaua'i-born artist? David Kuraoka, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. David Kuraoka grew up in Hanamā'ulu and Līhu'e, Kaua'i, far from the art scene in San Francisco, where he found his calling. He is a celebrated artist, known for both his large-scale abstract sculptures cast out of bronze that sometimes weigh more than a ton, handmade ceramic clay slabs, and glazed porcelain works created on a potter's wheel. For more than forty years, he's shaped works of art, and artists, as a professor and former head of the San Francisco State University Ceramics Department. You can find Kuraoka's sculptures in places like the Hawaii Convention Center, the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, and the White House art collection. David Kuraoka knows his way around posh city buildings and art

galleries, and he has remained comfortable in an environment without walls: the outdoors in his native Kaua'i.

My dad worked for the plantation. I think my grandparents worked for the plantation. This was my grandmother's house, and she had raised six daughters and my father in the camp. And as they got married, my aunts moved away, but my dad stayed there with my mom. And so, we were there until we bought our house in Līhu'e, in the city. It was primarily a Filipino labor camp. And it was like a Filipino camp with three or four Japanese families. They were primarily Filipino bachelors, so I was raised by all these bachelors who took care of me until I was about ten, maybe.

Never felt lonely, I bet.

No, no. They were really, really nice. I got used to their food, and they taught me some language. I was raised around cockfighting and chickens. It was very plantation. I was lucky; in Hanamā'ulu there was a beach, nice beach, Hanamā'ulu Beach. And there was a mountain, Kalepa Heights, right behind the camp. So, I got to run in the mountains a lot, and I got to swim a lot. So, it was kind of a great place for a young guy to grow up.

Your dad seems like he might have been kind of a larger-than-life personality. What was his column about?

Sidelines Kuraoka; it was a social column, three-dot journalism kinda. And him and my mom would type out. On Sundays, they would work in the yard, because that was kinda the thing they did. They had a really nice yard. But they would come in Sundays and type out the column with this old manual typewriter; whack out the column. Because it was published only every Wednesday, once a week.

When you're the three-dot columnist, the only three-dot columnist in the area, you're kind of a celeb yourself.

Kinda; yeah.

So, that was your dad; right?

Yeah; that was my dad. Yeah.

Very connected.

Connected; yeah. He met a lot of celebrities; right? Because he was like the reporter on Kauai. So, if Frank Sinatra, Mitzi Gaynor, you know, like they made movies there and

stuff, so he was right there with the stars and celebrities. The princess from Japan, you know.

M-hm.

So, he had an interesting life.

He was active politically. What did exactly did he do?

Yes, he was active politically. And he would support Republicans and Democrats. But he was at one point, Kauai's Republican chairman or representative, I believe. He was Hiram Fong's campaign manager and Hiram Fong's representative. I know that, because I was kinda high school by then. In fact, he had stacks of Hiram Fong tee-shirts that said: Fong, Man of the Pacific. And I ended up with ten of 'em, and that's all I wore at the community college, and people used to call me Fong.

Because I had this Fong on. And my dad was also campaign manager for Richard Nixon on Kauai. And he had passed away, my dad passed away right before Watergate, so he never experienced Watergate. So, lucky for him, because his hero, you know.

Now, to be a Republican on Kaua'i, that was swimming against the tide, wasn't it?

Yes; yes and no. Like he explained to me later, as I questioned him about, because I was kinda on the opposite side, he said that, you know, he worked in the plantation office, and all his bosses were Republicans. And he said: I don't want to work in the fields, you know.

I see.

It makes more sense for me to be Republican and work in the office. Which made sense, you know. And I'm like: Mm, okay.

Did you have to switch schools when you went to Lihue?

No; no, they were close enough. My mom taught school, so I would go to school with her. And fortunately, when I moved to Lihue, we lived on the edge of a valley, a very big valley, Kapaia Valley. And I had a whole valley to play with there, too. And there was a big river in the bottom of the valley. So, I ran around carefree, barefooted. Until I went to the ninth grade, I never wore shoes. I rebelled; I didn't want to wear shoes. And in the ninth grade, they sent me home for not wearing shoes. So then, I had to get shoes.

What kind of shoes did you get?

Oh really ugly, big bulldog shoes.

Not very fashion conscious.

With your mom a teacher, did that compel you to be a good student?

Actually, I was never a very good student.

Did you have art classes in school, in public school?

No; no. Actually, I wanted to take some classes, but it wasn't really emphasized much. They really forced me into chemistry, into physics, and you know, I really kinda wasn't interested. You know, I'm more interested now, because I understand it now, but while I was a local kid, I wasn't that interested. I was more interested in surfing and running around the jungles. I was more of an outdoor kid, and I almost resented having to be forced to take chemistry and stuff. Because it didn't make sense to me, or it didn't make sense to my life or how it was gonna help my life, you know.

David Kuraoka says he did not apply himself in high school, nor did he have the grades to go to a four-year university. So, at the urging of his parents, he enrolled in San Jose City College to study architecture. His first few semesters in a strange new place did not go so well.

Okay; so you arrive in San Jose at your new college. What are you wearing?

Um, pretty much Hawai'i clothes—uh, Kauai clothes. I graduated in 1964 from Kauai High School, and uh,

There's not much TV on Kauai in 1964. Uh, and what's there is very blurry. An—and our—our house didn't have TV. So, I go to San Jose, and I don't have a car, I don't have many friends. But who I—whoever I speak to in the cafeteria or any friends I make, they're cracking jokes or they're talking about things that I don't understand. And they're picking it up from television culture; I Love Lucy, um ... uh, you know, I don't know, Hogan Heroes, or The Fugitive, or—you know, an—and I—I don't know these things, because I don't have a TV. And it's common to everyone except me. So, I—I but a twenty-five-dollar TV, and I sit there for almost six weeks, day and night. And still watch TV, but six—day and night, to try to catch up on culture,

Oh, like the worst time in my life. You know, there was that adjustment. I used to wear slippers and bright shirts. I still wear bright shirts. But I used to wear bright shirts, and tee-shirts. Just culturally, I was not in tune to the rest of the world, I felt. I mean, I tried to be, because I didn't want to be lonesome. I had no car, and so I would look for other

Hawaii kids, you know. So, us Hawai'i kids would all just hang together, so it would make it more comfortable or make it more, you know, okay. But every time there was a summer break and kids went home, only half the kids would come back. And so, the next summer, then the other half. So pretty soon, I was pretty much alone again. And then, until I found art, I didn't really have much friends, or much social contact.

So, how did you find art? How did you find ceramics? I mean, did you pass by the room, or ...

Yeah, really by accident. I had to take a couple basic art classes to fulfill my architect degree, and so, took drawing. And in my drawing class, my friends were taking ceramics. So, I would go over during the break and watch them. And I thought: Gee, I want to make some cups for my friends, my classmates back in Hawai'i; I could do that, you know. And once I did it, it felt so ...something was very compelling and drew me to it. And the things were very ugly, the stuff I made in the beginning.

You know, it wasn't accomplished at all. And by the time I got good enough, or good enough to give away, I was kinda hooked. Somehow, ceramics made sense to me, and it was something I could do. You know, I wonder sometimes when I watch television and stuff about people with dyslexia and stuff. And I think: Oh, I think that looks like me. You know, like just one part of my brain or something, and another part wasn't working as well as another part. You know. I'm much more visual.

Now, when you started taking ceramics classes, and then all your art classes for your major, I mean, you were with a different subculture of students.

Yes.

Was that different, to be with all the art students?

Yes and no. Because I tried really hard. When they went out drinking beer, I wouldn't go out drinking beer; I was still working. When they went to lunch, I was still working. And I wanted it so badly that whenever the professor was gone—because I didn't take classes in the beginning, I didn't know about it—I would sneak in at lunchtime. Then I would wait for him to leave, and when he would leave for the evening, I would sneak in at night. I lived right next to the college, so I could stay there as late as possible. And any time he wasn't there, I would sneak in and work. And then one day, he called my name, so then I knew ... oh. I mean, I sweated, because like, oh, no, I'm busted. You know. But then, he accepted me, so then I was so glad. And you know, the next semester, I enrolled, so I was okay. It changed me a lot in the first couple years. I think eighteen to twenty, I really grew up there. I had one set of mind, one kind of cultured mind when I was in Hawai'i, which I'm really, really happy I grew up here. And then, suddenly out of loneliness, out lack of focus or focus, I'm not sure, but I went through a

metamorphosis kind of the first two years, for two or three years. And then I started a metamorphosis realizing that the rest of my life, I had to seek and look. And I was quite comfortable on Kauai; I wasn't really looking, because I was happy. You know. And then, it almost takes an unhappy to then try to find the rest of your way.

At San Jose City College, and later at San Jose State University, David Kuraoka reveled in his newfound passion for art. Although he was discouraged by family and college counselors from going into fine arts, he pursued ceramics and quickly became a rising star in the art world. In 1976, he became a professor at San Francisco State University, where he could practice his ceramic arts while helping to shape aspiring artists.

Yes; I was fortunate enough to be paid for what I like doing. And I learned a lot from my students. I mean, everybody's so different; right? They bring so much life into it. I mean, I was just fortunate to be in that position.

So, is it more than forty years as a professor at San Francisco State University?

Yes; just a little bit more than forty years. I started when I was young. I got my MA about twenty-four, twenty-five, and I won a number of awards, and I got recognized, so they hired me right away, which I was fortunate. And then, I was there until I retired. One thing I realized when I was teaching, that many students came from many small towns across America, like Lihue. You know, once realized that, I thought: Oh, I'm just like everybody else. You know, it's not like: Oh, I'm just this small town kid that forever, my whole life, I'm always gonna be small town, and everybody else knows everything, and I'm not going know. You know. Then I found out that they're not from San Francisco, they're from Missouri, and Oklahoma, and you know, Nebraska, and all these small towns. And you ask them, their towns are smaller than Līhu'e. And you're here, you know, and there's one or two of 'em that would leave the town. Most of them would stay in the small town, but these are the brave ones, and then they would come to college, and seeking their fortune, you know. Lot of the times, my life revolved around my work, and I would teach Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. But I had the other four days to do my own work. So, that was rather fortunate. Also, when I became head of the department, I could buy all the equipment I wanted, I could set up the whole studio, and do my work along with the students. That was very fortunate.

Did people on Kauai get surprised when they saw what happened to you? Like what you did on the mainland.

My mom laughs sometimes, you know.

She laughs?

Yeah; she didn't expect it, you know. Because she taught her whole life, and she goes: Oh, yeah, that person was a good student. She judges them, knowing them from teaching, you know. And she was always a good student. I could always tell she was gonna succeed, or he was gonna succeed. And I turned to her and go: You thought I would ever be a professor? And she laughed. She goes: No. So ... you know.

So, the hallmarks of your work are abstract?

Abstract, pretty much.

And I've heard the word bulbous described.

Bulbous; yeah.

Like, is that the art term for ...

No. But yes, it has life. I mean, I think it's round. I look at my more round full things as like feminine, more feminine. And the more cylindrical stiffer things as male. I mean, sometimes, when I look back, I'm not doing it on purpose, but I can see more female in some, and more male in—

That's interesting. And then very clean lines, too.

Yes. I called it California slick.

California slick.

I kinda made it up, but it's kinda true. When I went through my education at that particular time, it was minimalism, and abstract expressionism. And so, I'm kinda some place in there. And then, so my work is pretty slick. It's not rough. I don't do rough textures, I don't do ... it's organically vital, but it's clean.

You know, it sounds like when you sit down to throw, do you know what you're gonna make?

Many times, yes. Many times, I conceive it all the way to the end.

Oh, you do.

I do. When I'm sitting there to throw, I already know how I'm gonna finish it.

Okay. 'Cause I'm thinking of third grade, I'm making an ashtray. You know, that kind. So, you have an idea. But sometimes, it sounds like the pieces go organic on you.

Yes. Yeah; there's a range. There's a range in there that I have freedom to do. But I know I'm gonna finish it in a particular way. Because the clay body or how I'm beginning dictates the end, so I already figured it out.

In 1987, at the young age of thirty-five, David Kuraoka was recognized by the Honpa Hongwanji of Hawaii as a living treasure of Hawai'i for his art. Kuraoka remained connected to Kauai, and would return during his summer breaks to embrace his childhood love of nature and a slower pace of life. He would often spend months roughing it in the wilderness of Kalalau on Kauai's Nā Pali Coast.

I always lived on Kauai four months out of the year, sometimes more. You know, so I would do an academic year, then I'd move back to Kaua'i. Sometimes I thought I was commuting from Kauai to California, because that was my base on Kauai. But I would spend my summers on the Nā Pali Coast. And sometimes one month and up to three months. I would sometimes pack my bags in California, and then come in, say hello to my parents or my mom, and then off to Kalalau. And I'd buy all my food, everything would be packed, and I would just go off to Kalalau.

And were you doing art in Kalalau?

Lot of it. And some sketches, but also mostly to slow it all down, to understand humanity. You know, you want fire, you get wood. You want water, you go to the waterfall. I mean, it was like very basic, and it kind of brought reality, a different reality, made me feel like I understood the person living in a grass shack in Africa, or or taking me back in time a hundred years or two hundred, you know, like how humanity lived, you know, most of humankind lived, the way I lived, I felt.

How did you get to Kalalau? Did you paddle or get dropped off?

No, no. In the beginning, yes, I would take a helicopter, boat, walk. I mean, I did everything. I walked, I hiked a lot. Sometimes, some summers, I'd hike. I'd run out and go to the dentist, and he would take a mold, and run back in, run out, then next week put the false tooth in, and come back the next week put the permanent. You know, like I'd go back and forth; run back and forth.

So, I've spent time in Kalalau too, and I mean, it's just stupendously beautiful. And isn't it illegal to live in Kalalau?

You know, for a while it was in litigation between the State and the Robinsons. You know, so for about seven or eight years, nobody owned it. So, it was pretty free for all. So, that was a great time, was no law; right? It's kinda scary. But then I wasn't scared at all. Was just open. And so, at the end of that period, the State parks and the law

came. But I was the only local kid in there. So, they were anxious to be friends, and they knew my dad, they knew my family. And I knew all the trails, I knew all the fishing spots.

So, I can remember there used to be like young people living naked in the back, with a wood-burning pizza maker. I mean, were you there for all that stuff?

Yeah, yeah, kind of; yeah. They were all my friends; yeah.

During David Kuraoka's return trips to Kaua'i, he had a business relationship with a contemporary art dealer who made the Garden Isle her home. As time went on, that relationship grew into a romantic one.

Carol had owned the Contemporary Gallery, really one of the better ones in Hawai'i, and very successful. And she had been my dealer for fifteen years. But I never spent much time in Līhu'e; I would uh, go to Kalalau. So I knew her, and she helped me, and she had shows for me, but I wasn't around town. Then we met, and it was just right. After so many years, we got together. And just when we got together, Hurricane Iniki happened and destroyed all the buildings, pretty much destroyed all the buildings, destroyed the galleries. And it was okay, because we then got married and moved to San Francisco.

Because we couldn't rebuild the galleries, because there was no houses to put art in on Kauai anyway.

Oh, that's right. Yeah; it was just terrible.

Yeah, it was over; that area was over.

You sort of knew her and did business with her for many years. What was the difference when you got together?

I think it was just timing. I mean, on both of our parts. I mean, I wonder too, sometimes. But I'm just lucky I got together with her, because we've been together and happy ever since. So ...

That's wonderful. And that turned out to be the end of her art gallery era in Līhu'e.

Yes.

But off you went to San Francisco.

Yes; yes. And then, I'm her art interest now, so lucky for me. I mean, I was doing art, so she's very interested in art. So, she knows more artists than me. She's much more well-read than I am. She would do things by reading. I was trying to teach her ceramics, we were doing little craft projects together, and she would tell me what to do. And I said: How do you know? You know, I teach ceramics. She goes: I read it in a book. So, she would read all the books and had the answers, you know, and I do it through experience. But that was kinda funny.

After more than forty years at San Francisco State University, David Kuraoka retired and now spends the majority of his time in Hā'ena, Kaua'i, just down the road from the trailhead that leads to his beautiful beloved Kalalau. He's still active in ceramics, and has also turned his attention to designing houses.

Every artist should build a house. It's so sculptural, so you're conceiving so much, you know. And so visual, and it makes sense, you know. And then, you look at any building, you go: Hm. You know, it helps you visualize the whole process, and appreciate it from the inside out more

Are the houses you design like the art you do? Is it ... California Slick?

Kind of. All dark green. All the houses are the same color, including my mother's.

All dark green.

All dark green, and white inside. No white for the outside, because the mold. You know, and black roof, because the mold will turn it black anyway. Just all this practical stuff.

And then, what else besides white inside?

White inside; yeah. Hardwood floors, high ceilings, and nice windows and doors. I mean, I have little set things that I do. Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, Carol and I too. Carol likes building too, so we have those projects we could do together, you know.

Right. You go back and forth between San Francisco and Kaua'i. And I know Kaua'i is your home. But do you have a preference down deep?

I always preferred Kaua'i. And now that I'm on Kaua'i fulltime, I like go back San Francisco and eat and stuff. So, you know, I like both sides. But we'll spend a month

out of the year maybe, if we're lucky, in San Francisco. But that's it, that's about it. Yeah. Our life is pretty much on Kauai now. It's getting harder, you know. I had a two and a quarter acre farm, flower farm, fruit trees, and so I used to like working in the yard. But now, I'm just pretty much in the studio. I'm not so physical anymore. So, it's just different. As you get older, I just kinda adapt, you know.

You really did kinda make your own way. You were able to do what you wanted to do for so much of your life.

M-hm; kind of. You kinda gotta find the spot; right? I mean, I think starting with education. You gotta be educated. Stay in school and find something that you want.

Acclaimed artist David Kuraoka says he has plans to create a ceramics art center for the Kauai community, so that he can continue to teach and inspire others on his home island. And he continues to challenge himself by finding new ways to express himself through his art. Mahalo to David Kuraoka of Hā'ena, Kaua'i. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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The challenges for me is never ending. If I master a particular part of ceramics, then I look for another part of ceramics. In other words, I keep searching within the field. There's so much to do. My work chases my work. In other words, whatever I do, then I see and I learn from it, and then I move on.