

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Do you take a day off?

No. Every—

Every single day?

Every single day. I don't think there's such a thing as day off or not. In fact, I met this woman. She said, What are you?, she told me. I—I said, I'm an artist. She said, Artist is not a job. You're in therapy. [CHUCKLE] So, I tell people I'm in therapy.

I'm glad to have uh, a vent it comes out. So, I'm very fortunate I'm an artist. I'm honored to be an artist.

And you know, I feel very lucky. I mean ... to—to do something that means so much to somebody. And you know, I run across people all the time who say, Oh, you know, I bought a painting from you in 1975, and I still love it, and ... I mean, how lucky can a person be?

It brings it back to sort of how we were when we were drawing or doodling, and painting when we were little kids. None of us were thinking at that age that we were painting or drawing to sort of make a living or to sell this particular canvas. But then, we just did it 'cause we loved it and it was fun.

Every artist needs to make a living. That's not the only thing that drives us. It's also the power of creativity and collaboration.

Four creatives with different styles yet similar drives for expression through painting. Artists and painters, 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. On this episode of Long Story Short we revisit conversations with artists who share their imagination, discipline and techniques to

communicate their vision of the world. Waipahu-born artist Harry Tsuchidana is known for his abstract works of art that play on subtle color manipulation and a sense of linear and spatial design. Pegge Hopper's celebrated paintings of Hawaiian women are featured in many island homes, hotels and offices. And the vibrant murals through Honolulu's Kaka'ako neighborhood are created by the collective known as POW! WOW! Co-led by artists Jasper Wong and Kamea Hadar. We start with Harry Tsuchidana of Salt Lake, Honolulu. He was born in 1932, joined the U.S. Marines in 1952 and then attended prestigious art schools in Washington, D.C. and New York. At the time of our conversation in 2016 Harry Tsuchidana was still creating. He credits the support of his late wife Violet-- and the early encouragement of his mother for a career that spans six decades.

She saw me doing artwork, and she said to me, Do like—what you like to do best. And I—and she never said anything about the bottom line, how you're gonna make a living. As long as you like what you're doing, that's the most important thing. And I was born with an asthma, so I couldn't play with rest of the other, you know, kids. So, I start to trace comics. And after that, I ... uh, drew from a magazine, movie magazine, baseball, boxers. Well I was intrigued by uh, creating by adding and eliminating. You know. I did a—there was a landscape, and there were [INDISTINCT] and there were junk trees, and there were nothing on the land. So, I just turned around and looked, and there was a mango tree. So, I put the mango tree there. So, I could move things. And that's the thing that fascinated me. In fact, when I was seventh grade, I did a tree, Waipahu Elementary School. The tree is still there. I did a red and blue background. And the teacher said to me—her name was Mrs. Wong, she said, That's not a tree. But, I said, that's my tree. I always wanted to be an artist. Always. I told everybody I going be an artist. Well, it's really tenacity. You know, stick-to-it-ive. And when I joined the Marine Corps, it's the discipline that I learned. I—I served only three years, you know. But uh, well, yeah, I really liked Marines. I developed alligator skin, you know. And uh ...

Why did you develop alligator skin?

Because, you know, being the kid from Waipahu, you're sensitive, everybody says something, you get hurt by it. You know, in the—in the service, you know, they kid you around, and you know, you develop that. You know. When I was stationed in Japan, in the enlisted men club, this person in charge said, You should have a show. I did some artwork. An—and then, I got a note from a second lieutenant saying that, You shouldn't be in the infantry. You know, you should be in GS2. So, he transferred me. That changed my whole life, that second lieutenant.

And went to Corcoran—

Yeah, Corcoran.

--School of Art?

Yes; yeah. And—

All by yourself; right? This is out of the Marines, you're heading to art school. What kind of art had you been doing all this time? You started when you were a little kid, and going through the Marines—

Mm.

--I'm sure you didn't stop.

Yeah.

What kind of art had you been doing?

Nature motif, like weed it out uh, uh, sprouting. But in nineteen s—seventy-nine, I depart from that. I did uh, uh, uh, stage series. Maybe—can I demonstrate?

Sure.

Usually, I use T-square, but this will do. Okay. This ... this distance here ... took me a while to get that distance. The early ones, I made it higher. You see. This is eye level right here. So, my view is right here. This one is right there. And the vertical line ... randomly, I put this here.

You're directing eyes off the paper—

Yes.

Above.

Yeah, above; yeah. Yes. Okay. Constantly, I'm aware of the distance. Constantly. Okay. Now, there's two areas right there, and there's another area. I'm breaking the space.

Hm.

That's what it is. There's an area there. Now, this is where the—right here ... okay. I have a T-square at home—

M-hm.

--that my mother-in-law, when she passed away, was in that room.

Oh ...

I use that every day. Okay. Now, this is the angle, right here. This is the angle. And you put another vertical line here. I did this '79. To this day, I still do it. It fascinates me. And this angle right there. So, constantly moving. Dave Shoji do this every day; right? He looks this way, he shift things. Yeah. So ...

When he considers what to do in his volleyball games, you mean?

Yeah. You know, the way he look at things from an angle.

I see.

Same thing applies. It applies to—it applies to you; right?

Three-sixty looking at things, you mean?

Yes; yeah.

Except yours is on a linear plane.

Yes; yeah. Okay; this—this where it comes like- After a while, I don't think like that; I just do it. You know, so ...

So, you're trying to get people to look at, quote, all the angles.

Yeah; all the angle. And the color ... uh ... then that's—that's another level. You know, because you create a sensation when you put color next to each other. Now, let me show what I do today. Completely different. I did this, this morning. Form. Freeform, freeform; completely contradict that. Exciting. And I put a wash over.

So, you go from this to that.

Yeah.

And what is this telling you?

Trump.

Trump?

[CHUCKLE] Donald Trump.

[CHUCKLE]

.
Think of yourself, think about America. [CHUCKLE] I don't know. It's form.

When you draw, do you know what you're going to draw?

No, uh ... no, I don't. I'm intrigued, myself. Someone told me entertain myself [CHUCKLE]. So by doing this, total freedom.

So, you don't wait for inspiration; you're already working.

That's Hollywood. [CHUCKLE] Hollywood wait for inspiration. I chase the buga. [CHUCKLE] I don't wait for the inspi—I come to them. Okay. The nose like this, and nose the other way. It's fun to do this. The lips is this way, another lips this way. Uh ... change this way. Okay. You know, somebody told me, Don't you do realistic work? Once you learn how to play chess, you don't want to play checkers. [CHUCKLE]

And that's true, because you've done portraiture, you're done the landscape, and you've done a lot of that, very realistic stuff.

Yeah. And uh, it's more uh, rewarding to do more abstract, you know, because you can move more things. Yeah; I just created, you know. And I have alienated lot of people by doing the stage series.

Why is that?

Because there's no handle. Handle mean there's no representation that you can say, Oh, that's what uh, that—that's a tree, or you know, whatever.

So, you weren't trying to make your art friendlier to the user.

Yes.

Right?

Right.

I love your colors, too. So, you—you know, shapes, lines.

Mm.

And colors.

That's how I approach art. Not so much what it represent.

In the spring of 2020 Harry Tsuchidana was 88 years old and still expressing his artistic vision by drawing his creations primarily on paper. Honolulu artist and designer Pegge Hopper has been creating her celebrated paintings of island women since the 1970s. Born in 1935 in Southern California, she studied art in college and later did design work in New York, California and Italy before settling in Hawai'i in 1963. During our 2010 conversation, she explained how her unexpected departure as art director from a leading Honolulu ad firm opened the door to a new, successful career.

But it was perfect timing. Because I had taken one weekend off to start painting again. Because acrylic paints had just been invented, and we had just bought a house up in Nu'uauu, and I had no furniture. And I set up an easel, and I hadn't painted for, what ... ten years. And I started to paint. And I went to the archives and started looking at the old photographs. Now, this is still when I was working. And I was looking at these old photographs of the Hawaiian women lying on the beach, playing their 'ukuleles, and um, greeting the boats. And I started painting—doing these paintings of these Hawaiian women. And they sort of reminded me of El Greco, because I also painted people in ... tunics or mu'umu'us, you know, back in—in Art Center. And then when I was fired, and of course I was incensed—why should they fire me. I had won more awards for the agency, you know, than anybody. But it was a gift. My friend, Mary Philpotts, lived around the corner from us. And um, she came over one day, and she said, So what are you doing now that you're not working anymore? And I said, Well, you know, I'm staining some shutters for the windows, and I'm doing some experimenting with some acrylic paints. And um, she said, Oh, can I see those? And I said, Yeah. And you know, they were just like sketchy things, small, twenty-four by thirty. And um ... she said, Hm, could you do me like uh ... thirty or twenty of those for the Kona Village? She was re—renovating the Kona Village. Ho, can I do you twenty of those for the Kona Village? [CHUCKLE] You betchya. So that was my first big—thanks

to Mary, my first big um, commission. And you know, it's kind of like I've been kind of like so lucky. I mean, at the right place, at the right time, and in Honolulu. There was—there weren't a lot of people doing what I was doing.

Did Mary tell you later what exactly she liked about it?

I think they matched the bedspreads. [CHUCKLE] And uh ... and then, um, I had a show at The Foundry, which was—you remember the Foundry—

M-hm, in iron works.

--down in Kaka'ako?

Yes.

Yeah. And um ... and people started getting interested in my work, and you know, would commission me to do things or buy. I was kind of obsessive about my work. Well, because I had these images in my head, too. And it's not like I was a painter; it was more like I was an illustrator or designer, is what I was doing. I was designing these paintings. And um ... I just would work all the time. I often am looking at people's faces when I'm driving around, or you know, wherever I go, I will see something that—that I just etch in my mind. Well, first of all, I think of it as sort of an androgynous face. I don't think of it as a typically female face. I think of it as more of an iconic face. I don't think of it as a portraiture. You know, it's—

Are you painting the same face every time?

Maybe. Maybe.

And we never see teeth, and full smiles.

[CHUCKLE]

We might see a hint of a smile.

Yeah.

But we don't see teeth.

No.

We don't see—

You don't see teeth.

--happy smiley. Why is that?

No. Um, because I want you to take them seriously too, I guess. Uh, yeah. No, that's interesting. I never really thought about that.

Your distinctive women in mu'umu'u never wear floral mu'u's. They don't have prints; it's always a solid color.

[CHUCKLE] Well, some of them do. Some of them do.

Do they?

But I—I think—I don't know why I don't do florals. I don't know. You know. It—it's—it's funny; sometimes you don't know why you—you don't really question. I think this is why I'm not a good teacher, too; is because I'm not—when I'm working, I'm not consciously thinking, why don't do I do this, or why do I do that, or ... it just kind of—you start out with a—with a composition, which I do small, and then I transfer it with in—on charcoal onto a fe—onto a canvas. And then I start painting, and then something happens, and it starts to just become what it's going to become. And sometimes I'm very disappointed, and sometimes I'm moderately pleased, and sometimes—very seldom an—am I really pleased.

What are your women thinking about?

Oh, gosh, Leslie ... uh, they're thinking about whatever you want them to be thinking about. Some people say to me, Oh, they look so peaceful, I really like them being peaceful. That's fine. I don't think of them as peaceful. I—like I say, I just think of them as an image. It's design, it's ... it's um ... I hope it's good design, and I hope it's good drawing, and ... because that's how I was taught. I wasn't taught to have a lot of deep, you know, existential meaning behind this, and ... like they teach you in art school today.

How successful do you describe yourself as?

I—I'll tell you what. I describe myself as more successful than I ever, ever imagined I was going to be. I'm not all tied up in—in what I do. You know, Cole Porter said something really wonderful once. Someone said—asked him, Mr. Porter, you write all

these beautiful songs, it seems so effortless; how do you do it? You know, how do you make it seem so effortless? And he said, Because, he said—he said, my art is not my life; my life is my art. And I've thought about that. That really, your whole life, you know, your relationships with your family, your friends, yourself—your relationship with yourself, um ... what you do with your time on Earth, you're lucky if you can, you know, express yourself and be creative. It's all tied up together.

After 40 years, Pegge Hopper retired from her downtown Honolulu gallery. Honolulu artists Jasper Wong and Kamea Hadar are at the forefront of the international artist collective and non-profit, POW ! WOW! Hawai'i which was founded by Wong in 2010 and is now co-led by both of them. During our conversation in 2013, Wong and Hadar were building a thriving art community with their organization of gallery shows, educational opportunities, and most notably the production of large-scale mural projects that transformed the walls of buildings in the Kaka'ako district, in the heart of urban Honolulu.

WONG: And I just would just draw all day long. It was always something that I did growing up. In my composition books, there would always be just drawings of comic book characters, or on the side of the page, I would do a flipbook cartoon of like, Dragon Ball characters fighting each other and stuff. It was just always something that I wanted to do. And my mom was always very supportive. She wasn't that typical Asian mom who was like, I had to be a doctor or an accountant or a lawyer, or something. I was into art, and she found ways to sort of help me. She would buy me books, or she would try to enroll me in classes.

Oh, that's wonderful.

WONG: Or something like that. Yeah.

Kamea, were you always drawing and painting at a young age, too?

HADAR: Yeah; definitely. I mean, ever since I can remember. My parents are like us. They're talkers and dreamers, and they're doers.

And yeah, I think my parents definitely instilled the work ethic that I have and then, the reach for the stars kinda attitude that is necessary to be an artist and to do big things like this.

You know my parents were always traveling and always taking my brother and I all over the world. And I just grew up constantly experiencing new places and new people, and seeing new things. And I think that to me, you know, just gives you that kinda

open-mindedness that is really good for a creative person. Because the world is huge and the possibilities are endless.

WONG: I kind of enjoy those kind of experiences, sort of picking up and leaving, and then going to a city where you know nobody and trying to start over and meet people. It kinda opens up your horizons.

I moved to Hong Kong because I wanted to learn about manufacturing.

Manufacturing ...

WONG: Like, anything. I know that when I went to art college, they teach you concepts and ideas. But then, what is that process to get your idea to a physical form? A shoe, a chair, or anything for that matter. What is that, how do you get that to sort of become an actual product?

Was that related to your art career?

WONG: Yeah. And at that time, mainland Chinese art was sort of like the hot commodity. If you weren't mainland Chinese, then they wouldn't care. So, I took my art around, and they didn't want to show my work because it wasn't a good investment. There was no potential. So, my choice was to either just give up, or start my own gallery. So, I just ended up starting my own little gallery and just to push my own art, and then push friends' art. And so, we just did that. And the first show in that little gallery was the first Pow Wow.

You came up with the name, Pow Wow?

WONG: Yeah, yeah; Pow Wow. Yeah; 'cause the Pow was sort of the reaction that art has on the viewer; it's like a punch in the face. It came from comic books. And the Wow is sort of your reaction to that work. So, we have the exclamation marks behind each word as sort of like Pow, and then Wow, and then Pow Wow together, it's like a gathering to celebrate art, culture, music. It felt like it was the perfect term for what we were pushing and what we were doing. And so, it became that, and afterwards, it was like we want to keep doing it, and so, where could we do it. Either we could do it in Berlin, Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, wherever there was friends that had spaces. And then Hawaii was a choice too. But growing up in Hawaii, we were always like, was it the best spot to do it? Do you think people would really care about it? And we felt like we should try.

Well, what is it? I mean, what is the essence of Pow Wow?

WONG: If we got that many people together of just all these creative people into one place, then something amazing is gonna happen. Like, as an everyday person, sometimes you're kind of afraid to sort of pass that threshold and go into a gallery, because you feel like maybe it's not for you, or maybe it's for like high society or something. So then, if we paint on walls in public, you have no choice. It's right in front of you. The artwork that you draw, it's right there.

HADAR: And also, the murals bring other positive things. Not only does it bring attention to their businesses and to their land and buildings. But I think a common misconception is that this is gonna attract vandalism, but it actually does quite the opposite. Once the walls are painted, it becomes not completely untouchable, but let's say people don't mess with the artwork. I mean, it's a big deal to vandalize somebody's artwork. So, the caretakers of the land have actually told us that they buff out probably a quarter the amount of graffiti that they used to, or illegal vandalism that they used to.

Is that respect paid by graffiti artists to other artists?

WONG: We're also very inclusive of the whole graffiti community. Like, we try to include them into the project as well, and we try to give them a voice through those walls. And I think by doing that, to a lot of them, it make the place to them more sacred.

HADAR: I think that's the beauty of it, is that we have all these different artists, and everyone gets along so well.

They respect each other?

HADAR: Yeah. The process of creation and collaboration are two of the biggest things that we stress at Pow Wow. So, collaboration not only makes for better, more interesting art many times, but also, it's a beautiful thing to see artists share their cultures through art. One of my favorite things that we've been doing the last couple years is blacking out and destroying the pieces. Some of them. And people are always shocked when we do that, and that's one of my favorite things in the world to do.

Why is that? 'Cause you love creativity, and now you're destroying.

HADAR: Because it just proves that it's really not about the finished product, that's something that you're gonna sell. I mean, every artist needs to make a living, and we have gallery shows and the pieces are for sale. But that's not the only thing that drives

us. It's also the power of creativity and collaboration. All the artists working together and the process of all of us working together, and to see that happen and to be a part of it as an artist, it's a beautiful thing. And whatever we create it's not that important.

WONG: It brings it back to sort of how we were when we were drawing or doodling, and painting when we were little kids. None of us were thinking at that age that we were painting or drawing to sort of make a living or to sell this particular canvas. But then, we just did it 'cause we loved it and it was fun. And I think when you do it that way, when you sort of create it just for the fun of creation, and then destroy it afterwards, it kind of reminds us that it's really just about having fun and painting, and creating.

They continue to engage the community in art creation, artistic collaboration and an appreciation for art. Mahalo to Jasper Wong and Kamea Hadar of East Honolulu, Pegge Hopper of Pacific Heights, Honolulu, and Harry Tsuchidana of Salt Lake, Honolulu, for having shared your art and stories with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

This is the influence of Jackson Pollock.

How did you do this? Do you throw the paint at the canvas?

Not like that.

All of it?

[CHUCKLE]

How do you do it? Like this?

Like that.

Oh, like this.

Like that.

Okay.

Like that.

So, it's ...

It's horizontal.

I paint flat. Yeah. And then, you know, you cannot put too much water, or you cannot put not water, because it doesn't splatter. There's little control. And there's an order to that. Because you have to put a lighter color, then you put—you know, and then you put the medium color, like the orange and the red.

Right.

And the one that you put kicker to that is the dark color, which is black or the blue. That's the thing that—

Oh.

That's why.

And actually, I would have thought that the dark was the foundation color.

Yeah. Well—

But that's the last.

Yeah. That was the one that I started with. This one.

Oh, okay; I see.

But then, on top of that dark color, I put that—on that color. But it's fascinating. Put the black, and boom, all the color come right out at you. There's an order to that. Yeah.

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