

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: HARRY TSUCHIDANA

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In all the years that I've been painting, I took some standing eight counts. Standing eight. It's a—it's a base—uh, it's a boxing term. When you get beaten up, you get a standing eight count. I took several of those. But I—

Because people didn't like your work? Is that what you're saying?

Yeah; yeah. Or me.

That must feel terrible when you feel it represents you, and they reject it.

Yeah. Well ... lot of actors are like that, too; right? They get rejected.

Yeah; yeah.

So, I just—uh, I just created it. Yeah. So ...

So, the confidence, you still have the confidence and the—

Yeah.

And the—well, tenacity is what you also mentioned.

Yeah. And I'm still in the ring. I'm still in the ring.

Yeah. You got up.

Yeah. I got up. Still in the ring.

As a boy growing up in the plantation town of Waipahu on the island of Oahu, all he wanted to do was draw. As a young man living a Bohemian life in New York City, all he wanted to do was create art. Today, he wakes up every day and still draws...still creates art. Harry Tsuchidana. Coming up, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. How many of us can truthfully say that we are doing what we set out do as a child? That we had a dream, followed through with it, stayed the course through thick and thin, and achieved the respect of our peers in doing what we love? Abstract artist Harry Tsuchidana, 84 years young at the time of our conversation in October of 2016, has spent his life doing what he loves. While Tsuchidana's "Stage Series..." a collection of abstract expressionist paintings, is celebrated for the use of straight lines that divide the canvas, Harry's journey as an artist was hardly a straight path.

I was born in Waipahu . . . May 28, 1932. And I was born with an asthma, so I couldn't play with rest of the other kids. So, I start to trace comics.

Tell me what your parents did for a living, how you were raised, what—

We had—

--were they like.

Yeah; we had a farm...we raised uh, eggplant and uh, bitter melon. That's what we raised. And ... my mother was a very strong—they were illiterate, they couldn't write or read their own language. But they were strong-willed, and uh, religious too. And she always stopped and pray. So, I said to her, Did you pray for me? She said, You're the first one. I remember that.

I understand for much of your life, your mother only raised you; single mom.

Yes.

Your dad had left.

Yeah.

What was that like? 'Cause a lot of kids at the time had both parents in the house.

Right. Well, uh, she wasn't uh ... 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. She said, As long as you like what you're doing, that's the most important thing.

And brother, sister?

I have a brother. And my sister left, you know, so just my brother and I, and my mother were there. So, uh, yeah, we worked on the farm. I always wanted to be an artist. Always. I told everybody I going be an artist. You know, so—

And what did they say to you?

I don't know. They did better grade than me. I didn't do too much grade in art, you know. Because I thought I was better than the instructor.

In art?

Yeah. That's not a good thing to do. Yeah.

So, you didn't get good grades in art?

In other works too. Yeah. But it didn't bother me.

M-hm.

Yeah. Grade didn't feel that I should ... grade didn't determine me, how good I am. You know. So ...

You just always felt that you had this talent, and you were going to use it.

Right; yeah. Well, it's really tenacity. You know, stick-to-it-ive. I was intrigued by uh, creating by adding and eliminating. You know. I did a—there was a landscape, and there were 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.

Just as Harry Tsuchidana saw more than the literal tree, his vision for the future went beyond the eggplant and bittermelon crops in Waipahu. So what's next for a young man who dreams of being an artist? How about the United States Marine Corps?

Now, tell me why you joined the Marines. That's tough guy land; right? I mean ... and tough women now, but ...

Yeah.

Why Marines?

I saw a movie called Halls of Montezuma, with John Payne and Maureen O'Hara. It wasn't like the movie at all. It was like Cool Hand Luke.

Really? So, you enjoyed the Marines?

I—I served only two 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.

Because you were made a GS?

Yeah. You know. And well, in the enlisted men club, there was a library there, and in that library they had a art in America. In the back of that art in America, they had all the list of art school, and I wrote to every one of 'em. Rhode—Rhode Island School, California there was one, Chicago Institute. I wrote to National Academy in D.C.

Harry Tsuchidana was accepted at the National Academy, which helped him get settled in Washington DC. A short time later, Tsuchidana enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art. But it was while Tsuchidana was at the National Academy that he met an unlikely tutor who directed him to study the work and creative techniques of some prominent French painters.

There was uh, uh, a gallery named uh ... Phillips Gallery. And there was a man, the doorman, you know, when you walk in, they click you. And he and I became good friends, and he taught me everything I know today. He said, When you look at—when you do artwork, measure the eye distance from here to here, from here to here, from here t—to here, and to study Pierre Bonnard. Because underneath all that color has the geometrical shape. And study Cezanne.

I think he was a dark Italian or Armenian. He knew everything, but he couldn't paint. But he knew ... what artist for me to study. He said, Study Seurat; he discovered the white light. If you—if you have the primary colors projected through a pinhole, it will create white. He taught me all those—uh, uh, as a ... just coming out from the Marine Corps an—and uh, uh ... all these things that they don't teach you in school.

The indirect line that Harry Tsuchidana was following was beginning to straighten. The doorman directed Tsuchidana to seek out abstract painter Karl Knaths, with whom Harry became close friends. By chance, Tsuchidana befriended another abstract artist, Hans Hofman. Tsuchidana's formal arts education was being supplemented with real-world advice and relationships with noted artists in the Washington D.C. area. Then one night, Harry Tsuchidana had a surreal moment...He believes that his late sister, who had died in an auto accident, spoke to him as he walked alone one evening.

I felt that the sister that died in 1945 is my guiding angel. I think she's the one that talked to me in D.C. when I'm crossing the street. Move.

Go to New York.

Yeah; I think she's the one that did it. I'm sure she's the one. I lived close to the White House, and I was crossing one night the Pennsylvania Avenue to go home at uh, was—at Lafayette Park. And a voice came to me, crossing the street. It said, You've gotta leave to New York. And I'm talking to the voice. I said, How I'm gonna do it? He said, Write it down, what you're gonna do. You know. And put—put a sign on the bulletin board in school that you're looking for a ride to go there. And someone wanted my apartment, so was everything he can—everything to take me to New York.

But you hadn't finished art school.

No. That was—yeah, that's right; I didn't finish art school. First day in New York ..., I see this guy. Hey, you're from Hawai'i. That was Jerry Okimoto. First day in New York. And uh, and h—he wrote his phone number into my—and that was also the key to go to the place that all the artists lived. And uh, and that's how I got to meet all the artists.

They were all living in the same—

Building.

--building.

Yeah. Isami Doi was on third floor, Tadashi Sato was in the next unit, uh, Satoru Abe was on the fourth floor. You know, so Bob Oshikuru was on the first floor.

At the time, did you know that there was this small movement of Japanese Americans from Hawai'i to New York? Did you know that?

I didn't know that.

And you ended there, too, with them.

Yeah.

As one of the youngest.

Yeah; I was the youngest. I didn't know; it just was there.

Artists following their muse, I guess.

Yeah. Uh, uh ... amazing, how it turned out to be. Being the youngest, I was more of a listener and observer than a contributor. You know. And I learned a lot from them.

What did you learn?

Well ... Isami Doi had an uncanny way of looking at art. He was very. And he had that view. Lot of the landscape had that view. And uh ... uh ... gotta say Sato was uh ... I liked the way he used uh ... uh, the form, and the space, and color. And uh, uh ... Satoru Abe did the sculpture, he did the form, the intricate moving form that that sometimes I apply in my work as well. And Jerry ... to me, he combined op—op art and ... uh, pop art together. You know. And that's—what a combination, he did that.

What about personality wise? How did you guys get along? What did you talk about?

Uh, well, we played cards a lot; Pinochle-uh, and there was the corner bar, John's bar, and we used to drink there often. You know. So, uh ...

Well, these were the 50s, the mid-50s.

Yeah.

**What was it like for a Japanese guy from Hawai'i to be living there with other Asians?
How did—**

You know, I never—

Was there prejudice?

Yeah; I never thought of that, you know. I never thought that I was Asian and they were—you know. Uh, we just were there.

LESLIE UPPER #4:

You may have heard the phrase, “nature versus nurture” in the debate over which has more of an influence on how we’re shaped...our genetic makeup or our environment. In the case of abstract artist Harry Tsuchidana, his environment was clearly nurturing him as an artist...from his formal and informal education all the way to the guys with whom he played pinochle. He began expressing himself through photography and printmaking. And to make ends meet, Harry, as most struggling artists do, took a night job.

It was perfect for me to be at Museum of Modern Art.

What did you do at the Museum of Modern Art?

I was a night watchman.

You were the night watchman? Did they know you were an artist as well?

Uh, yeah, I’m sure. Uh, the personnel director, Anita Baldwin was because a lot of Hawaii artists were there, working there. And they had a good reputation of being a good worker.

I see. And so, at night, as watchman, you roamed the museum—

Yeah.

--looking at art?

I’m looking at art. And there was one time when Pablo Picasso had a show there. Lot of times, the janitors are Black people or Spanish, and they were discussing Pablo Picasso’s work. Yeah.

And so, you discussed it with them?

No; I just let them, you know, go. But I can watch the curator setting up a show. Lot of work. They tear down the wall, paint the color for the paintings. Oh, lot of work.

And what was your plan at that time?

To get married. Well, no. I don’t know; I just uh, uh ... the excitement of being there, you know.

And you were working on art on the side?

Yeah, al—always painting.

Always?

Yeah.

Always.

It was after World War II that abstract art expressionism gained popularity in America, with artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and the aforementioned Hans Hofmann leading the movement. Loosely defined as a style in which the artist conveys emotion through non-traditional means, abstract expressionism had its center in New York City. Harry Tsuchidana's early abstract expressionist works had nature themes, with organic shapes. His later paintings, most notably his Stage Series, took on a whole different style.

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.

I think it be a good time to do it.

Stage series; so, non-nature.

Non-nature. And uh, it's uh ... uh ... uh, uh, I'm ... okay. Now, this is ... okay. This ... uh, let's see. 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.

So, you're actually drawing this, and people would look off the paper. I mean, 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 ... yeah, this. 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? 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. 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 angles. 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.

I have alienated lot of people by doing the stage series.

Why is that?

Because there's no handle. There's no representation. So, uh, so just look at the lines. They don't know what it is; right? So ... so, that's why it was important for me to demonstrate on that, to see the angle. So ...

I'm sorry. I don't understand when you say there's no handles.

Yeah. 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, the uh ... the uh ... uh, stage series, you know, there is no handle; it's just lines.

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

Yes.

Right?

Right.

And why is that?

I don't—

You figure, that's my business, not yours?

Right. And I can reach more people, I felt applies to more people, the stage series. You know. Uh, and ...

You can reach more people, even though they don't know what you're going for? Or were you trying to reach a different kind of person?

Yeah. Well, I don't know. I just did it, uh ... hoping that they will see what I'm doing. You know.

Harry Tsuchidana moved back to Hawai'i for a short time, then to Los Angeles, finally moving back to Hawai'i for good in 1972. By this time, the Bohemian artist, while still following his passion, had a family to support...his wife, Violet, and his son, Grant. And while Violet provided a steady paycheck by teaching, Tsuchidana worked a variety of jobs to help provide for his family.

Now, you became a father along the way.

Uh, uh, that's when we came back from New York, 19—

How did that change you, having a son?

Well, I did all kind of uh, jobs to support him. Because my wife, you know, was schoolteacher, but she didn't work, you know, for couple of years.

Well, tell me about your wife and how she felt about being married to an artist.

She was very supportive. In fact, she—you know, she was a schoolteacher, and she's the one that supported me. And that's the work that you see there. And she said, you know, Keep an eye on the ball, you know...so, she did ... big help to me.

Because you didn't go out promoting your work, and selling yourself. You—

Yeah.

You did art. That's what you did.

Yes.

You're more of a purist.

Well ... well, thank you for saying that. Yeah; I just created, you know.

And I didn't ask anybody for help. I did all—I did um, about seven job in one year. And my mother-in-law said to me, Gee, I didn't know you knew many things.

What kind of jobs did you do?

Kamaboko.

At a factory?

Yeah.

Kamaboko factory?

All the—all the kamaboko factory. Um, uh—

What did you do at the factory?

You know the kamaboko, you cut the end. You cut the end. And Tupperware; I was—you know, the warehouse, stack the thing. And uh, um, Waikiki, there was—oh, I work as a dishwasher. And uh, what else I did? I did all kinda things. Yeah.

Did you ... enjoy all of them?

I did. I had fun doing that.

Really?

I was exterminator at Sheraton Hotel.

Pest exterminator?

Yeah; exterminator.

Uh, you know, about one or two o'clock in the morning, the chef prepare for the next day. They put the salt, pepper. Ajinomoto, at the time, they used to put. Okay. And that gave me the idea that I put all the primary colors mixed together, and then take from there, and put a white ... and mix the white. And all the colors will mix with the white, has all the colors. And that's how I got the idea, from the chef.

But you know, when I was um, at the uh, Sheraton Hotel wor—working, two o'clock in the morning, I pushing the uh, fogger. And I'm thinking, One day, I'm gonna have a studio, and one day I'm gonna have a—you know, just paint. Walking three o'clock in the morning, and I still had that dream.

Still.

Yeah.

Harry Tsuchidana finally got that studio...he bought a condo unit for his family in Salt Lake on Oahu, and also bought a second unit to serve as his studio. Fittingly, a sale of his art to the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts helped to pay for the condo units. He also had some very handy real estate advice from land developer and art lover, the late Pundy Yokouchi.

You lived in New York, you lived in L.A. And when you came back to Hawaii, how did you decide to live?

Well, I was very lucky to get the condo. You know.

How did you get the condo?

Uh—

In Salt Lake; right?

Yeah; in Salt Lake. I knew that when I was in L.A. Uh, Pundy told me that they're gonna develop a condo in Salt Lake. And he said, Well, you gotta wait. When you come back, you have to rent a place, and then ... you know, to get that Salt Lake. That ... that architect of that building ... was my wife uh, classmate husband, Mike Suzuki.

And you do art every day?

Every day.

Do you have a regular schedule?

Not a schedule. It's uh ... uh, I have a coffee, I read the paper first, and then coffee, and then did that. And watch TV later on. Okay.

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

That's Hollywood. Hollywood wait for inspiration. I chase the buggah. I don't wait for the inspi—I come to them.

Do you think you're still getting better at art?

I—I ... uh, Bumpei Akaji once said to me, I'm over-productive, but I always believe that the more you do, the more you evolve. You know. And I feel I'm getting better, and better. Even though some people don't think about it, but that's okay. Just getting better, and better.

But you have the process, too.

Yeah; process.

So, is it more about the outcome, or the process.

It's the process. You know, the Eastern philosophy is not hitting the target; it's getting the bow and arrow, and let go.

M-hm.

You know. And then, the—uh, and the ... uh, the scientific perspective is this way. But the East is this way. As you get older, you get wiser. Bigger.

Famed artist Pablo Picasso once said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." Harry Tsuchidana, who, as a young boy, drew his tree, grew up and remained an artist...one who found happiness and the admiration and respect of his peers and the public in doing what he loves, and who still wakes up every morning and "chases the buggah." Mahalo to Harry Tsuchidana of Salt Lake on Oahu for sharing his story. And mahalo nui loa to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha a hui hou.

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You know, you said you developed an alligator hide when you were in the Marines 'cause of all the put-downs.

Yeah.

Have you developed that in art? When people don't care—

Oh, yeah.

--much about—

Yeah, yeah.

--this or that.

Yeah. I—yeah, I learned to cope with that. Yeah. In fact, when people insult me, say, you know, they don't like my work, I shake their hand, you know. I—

Do they actually say that to you? They don't like your work.

Yeah. At my home my home. And one, you know, at—uh, at the show. So, I shake their hand. I said, I'm sorry I caused you a problem.

[END]