Talk Story with Edwin Ushiro: Art, Memory and the

by April Elkjer

On first glance, the multimedia art of Edwin Ushiro evokes a native son's memories of a sun-drenched childhood spent on a Hawaiian island. Look a little longer and a tingling shiver just might run down your spine when you realize that all is not as it would seem. Ushiro plays with the ethereal whether it is with memory and longing for a bygone time or with stranger supernatural realms such as ghosts, myths and folklore, which are featured in much of his personal gallery work.



Image courtesy of Edwin Ushiro

Using a detailed layering of the digital and organic including paint, ink, graphite and iron-on transfers on vinyl sheets, Ushiro orchestrates with light. With this luminosity, he seems to set the stage for a nostalgic and mysterious mood. He captures a 1980s childhood set in the small town Wailuku in Maui. The last fun summer a bunch of kids spend together before moving on in life. A place where local talk story about ghosts and spooky tales were a common way to pass the time.

Ushiro grew up with native Hawaiian myths as well as with Japanese ghost stories that immigrants brought with them to their new island home. Born in 1977 to a Japanese Hawaiian father and a Japanese mother from Aomori, he left Hawaii to attend the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and graduated with a BFA in illustration with honors. Currently, he is an artist in Culver City, Los Angeles with industry credits that include art director, visual effects consultant, storyboard artist and concept designer with clients like Disney, Sony and Warner Brothers to name a few. And he is starting to gain recognition for his personal work. Ghost stories and an inclination for long, interesting titles are laced through Ushiro's gallery art – his pieces often depict Islands children encountering ghosts or mythical creatures, like the *kappa* in his piece titled "When Everything Really Mattered."

Other times he will draw directly from Hawaiian lore such as in "Gradiently Everything would Sparkle from the Sea to the Stars" about the "Huakai O Ka Po" ("Marchers of the Night") ghosts of gods and soldiers who rise from the spirit world to walk in the night. It is believed to be dangerous to look directly at them but to this day many Hawaiians have claimed to be witnesses of the march.

In creating the layers of his mixed media art, Ushiro's images pull at the subconscious, at layers just beneath the surface. He works with this tension between the ephemeral and the endurance of memory. Through this filter he brings to life a place that no longer even exists except in his mind's eye and can never be recaptured except through these gleaming images.

And in the recreation of this mythic endless summer of childhood, Ushiro has also created the perfect playground for ghosts and spirits, as evanescent as mist and fog yet solid in their place in the local, cultural fabric of Hawaiian life.

Supernatural stories often live by word of mouth, the talk story of the islands. Perhaps Ushiro is continuing this tradition in a modern way, infecting a new generation's collective consciousness.

Nikkei Heritage: You mine your childhood a lot for your personal work. Can you tell me more about your relationship with Hawaii, your childhood and your art?

Edwin Ushiro: Maui is tiny and it is very isolated from the mainland. We didn't have Disneyland for entertainment so basically we had to make up games or would have to use our imagination to keep ourselves entertained. A lot of my paintings refer to that world of imagination that children have and with that open mindedness.

NH: When you look back on it how do you feel about your childhood in Hawaii and where you are today?

EU: Oh, the innocence, you know? I also like the fact that all the characters that I draw are actually friends and peers that I know and a lot of them have gone through a lot of tough times so it's nice to do these paintings and have them as kids and not have to worry about all the problems of growing up. They don't have to think about taxes or what they are going to be when they grow up. They are just kids, they are having fun and I love that aspect that they are so free. It's almost like these characters are forever young and that they'll live like that forever.

NH: Ghost stories were also a part of your childhood. How did they become part of your current work?

EU: It's common that local people talk to other local people about strange things that happen. I remember my grandmother had a story that when they first built their house they could hear maybe a dozen people walking on the roof. My grandfather was like, 'What are people doing on the roof?' It's one of those metal roofs and when you step on it, it makes a loud noise. Maybe on the mainland you would think squirrels but Hawaii doesn't have squirrels and it was heavy footsteps that they heard. He went outside and looked at the roof and there was no one there.

He talked to a Hawaiian man later who said it's actually a good thing – that means Hawaiian people who are dead are just letting you know that they are there and that they respect that you are there. But they just want you to know that this is still their place. He said that after the occurrence you won't hear the footsteps again and that was the truth. They never heard anything again. It's so common. Locals talk about ghost stories a lot, it's kind of ingrained in the culture.

NH: Is it a scary feeling or just sort of the fabric of life?

EU: It's nonchalant, like, 'I went to the bathroom and a cold wind of air hit me,' 'Oh, it just happened.' Other people would be like, 'Oh, that happened to me too.'

And that's why people who live in Hawaii understand the island. It is known that Hawaiian mythology is run by spirits. That supernatural presence they can live with a little easier than if you lived in downtown Los Angeles or something.

NH: Do you ever find that when you talk about this stuff with people on the mainland that they get a little freaked out?

EU: Actually it doesn't happen very often but people come up to me and tell me their own ghost stories. For the Seattle shows that I just had I made these little prints and I told the guests that if you come up to me and tell me a ghost story I'll give you one of these. Over a dozen people came up to me and told me their ghost stories. I mean, it's first-hand witness type of ghost stories. So, I guess it is common out here [in Los Angeles]. It might be just the culture; people might think you are crazy if you talk about it.

NH: Were you influenced by the Japanese *obake* stories as well?

EU: Yes, one of my favorite storytellers was a man by the name of Dr. Glen Grant. He taught at the University of Hawaii. The way he explained it, because Hawaii is a melting pot of cultures, you not only bring your culture and your food but you also bring your mythologies and history to Hawaii as well. That's why there are a lot of stories of Japanese folklore creatures in Hawaii like the kappa... a lot of those stories that are only found in small villages in Japan. Even local people in Hawaii and Hawaiians have witnessed weird creatures that refer to Japanese mythologies.

NH: Do you believe in ghosts then?

EU: I haven't seen a ghost. Until I see a ghost I will believe it 100 percent. I like to think they exist just because it makes the world a little more interesting. ✺

For more information about Edwin Ushiro and his artwork, visit www.mrushiro.com.



Image courtesy of Edwin Ushiro