

## DEAN OSHIRO

*Born 1954 in Lihue, Kauai  
Lives in Lihue, Kauai*

Dean Oshiro recalls being interested in photography since childhood, and he particularly admired a friend's father who worked as a sports photographer. However, it wasn't until years later, as an 18-year old in 1972, that Oshiro became involved in a hands-on way with the medium. While serving in the U.S. Air Force in California, he took college courses in his free time, among them a couple of classes in photography. He purchased his first camera and began taking pictures as a hobbyist. Returning to Hawaii in 1976, Oshiro continued his studies at Kauai Community College, deciding to pursue a career in design and later transferring to the University of Hawaii—Manoa, from which he received a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1982. He returned to California for graduate study, enrolling at San Francisco State University and earning a master of fine arts degree from the university's School of Creative Arts in 1987.

During the period he lived in the Bay Area, from 1984 to 1991, it was a search for identity, both as a person and as an artist, which led Oshiro to find his particular mode of expression in photography. Oshiro's experiences on the mainland had sent him into culture shock; suddenly, as an Asian-American, he found that he was part of a minority, and he became insecure about who he was. He had grown up on Kauai in a multiethnic, multicultural society, in which elements of American culture, especially through television and advertising, were mixed together with Hawaiian luaus, Filipino weddings, and Japanese religious ceremonies and homogenized in a way that a boy could easily take for granted. Now as a young man away from his home environment, Oshiro became more aware of differences, and cultural distinctions began to assume new and greater significance. Oshiro began to question "What am I—American, Hawaiian, Japanese?" Even his family's Japanese background could be broken

down into Okinawan on his father's side and mainland Japanese on his mother's.

As an artist Oshiro also faced uncertainty. At San Francisco State he had been studying with photographers Don Worth and Jack Welpott and found his own work emulating too strongly that of his teachers. Oshiro began to lose interest in the formal design aspects of photography and looked for something else to grasp onto artistically in his work. He went out looking for images all around him, but it wasn't a comfortable way of working; he had to be able to create his images in front of himself in the studio. Spurred on by another of his instructors, David Kuraoka, who had also grown up on Kauai, Oshiro began seeking a more personal form of expression which would allow him to tap into his own background and emotions.

Oshiro's breakthrough came during a visit to Kauai when he rediscovered a box of family photographs and memorabilia which his grandmother had kept. He recalled having gone through the box's contents with her before her death and making notations on the photograph mounts of the identities of the family members and relatives depicted. Examining the contents of this box once again awakened in Oshiro a sense of family and the realization of how important the past is in knowing one's identity. Gradually, Oshiro began to reconstruct his own identity, the process giving him a sense of place in the world and a renewed confidence in his art. Combining family photographs and documents with images appropriated from magazines and newspapers, three-dimensional objects, as well as his own snapshots and elements borrowed from his earlier photographs, Oshiro started composing elaborate collages which he then photographed. Drawing upon an eclectic range of sources, the resulting images serve as an analogy to Oshiro's own cultural experiences. He titled the ongoing body of work the *Interface Series*, borrowing a word

from the computer and technology world and recognizing that just as the various components of technological systems need to interface or have common links in order to function together, so people have to learn to accommodate differences and communicate with each other in order to live together harmoniously.

The selected images from the *Interface Series* presented in this exhibition range from its beginnings in 1987 to the present and reveal the evolution of Oshiro's artistic sensibility and method of working during this period. The process of making a work is initiated by gathering source materials which begin to suggest associations to the artist. Oshiro lays his components out arbitrarily on a light table and starts arranging them in various ways until an overall image comes together. By transposing some of his photographic elements into Kodaliths (high-contrast images printed on transparent acetate) and using photogram techniques in which an object is placed on a photo-sensitive paper and exposed, leaving a white or colored silhouette image of the object, Oshiro is able to experiment with ambiguous layerings of space within a flat plane. With the light from below coming through parts of his collages and using strobe lights to illuminate the actual surface above, Oshiro photographs the collage and continues to manipulate the negative in the darkroom to achieve the final print, which is often unique.

The results are photographs rich in detail and mystery which invite the viewer to decipher their layers and secrets. Though on one level very personal, Oshiro's images evoke a sense of common memory in all of us. His photographs help us realize that there is no one thing that we are, that each of us is made up of many components, that we all share the past and have common edges or interfaces that bind us together.

**Dean Oshiro**

b.1954, Lihue, Kaua'i, lives in Aiea, O'ahu

exhibited in *Biennial I*

left to right

*Virtual Memory*, 1993

Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art, gift of The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, 2011, and gift of Sharon and Thurston Twigg-Smith, 2009 (2009.23.152)

*Twilight*, 1995

color coupler prints