

## WAYNE MORIOKA

*Born in 1951 in Pu'unēnē, Maui  
Lives in Honolulu on O'ahu*

The number of a full string of prayer beads, the number of sins, the number of steps leading to a temple, the times the New Year's bell is rung, or the repetition of a prayer: one hundred-eight is a significant and auspicious number in Buddhist practice. It is right then that there are also that number in Wayne Morioka's series of spirit masks, the culmination of an extended period of work that has served as a form of meditation, and has brought into play several facets of the artist's personal and professional life.

Morioka is a natural but unlikely artist, best known professionally as an appraiser of art. Yet the path he has traveled seems, in retrospect, to have been intended to bring him to this specific task of artmaking. Morioka was born on Maui, where his father worked at the plantation at Pu'unēnē. After attending Baldwin High School, he entered the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, earning a BA in Asian Studies in 1973 and an MA in East Asian art history in 1981, with a particular focus on Japanese Buddhist sculpture. During his years of graduate study, he also spent two years in Japan, working as an apprentice scroll mounter.

He subsequently began to learn the profession of appraisal, which he appreciated for requiring him to look carefully at things one might not otherwise notice or have an interest in. Through a series of

rigorous and periodic courses and examinations, he has since risen to the status of a senior member of his profession. This work is aided by the inherent pleasure of liking to look at art. He has seen much inauthentic work, but how does he know how to judge? As in other endeavors, some of it is intellectual, much of it is intuitive—having a sense of what is right, and not right.

Though his work as an appraiser requires him to maintain expertise in a variety of fields, he acknowledges that his first love is Japanese Buddhist sculpture, an affinity he recognized very young, and which he was able to pursue academically. Yet this connection goes far beyond the level of intellectual or art-historical interest. He recalls that as a young boy of eleven or twelve, he could sculpt a Buddhist figure, as if his hands had memory. These early and ephemeral works were done in sand or in mud, and later in clay. He had never been taught; it was simply something he could do.

Apart from foundation studios in drawing, design and color that were a required part of his undergraduate program, Morioka has had no formal training in the practical side of art-making. In the mid-1990s, he began working with clay, making small vessels and serving dishes such as one

might use for serving sweets during the tea ceremony. Then, in 1995, his sister gave him a small electric kiln, and he began soon thereafter to work on the spirit masks. Given the small size of the firing chamber (approximately 4 by 6 by 6 inches), the masks are smaller than life-size, but fully expressive of an astonishing array of feelings, personalities, identities, states of feeling, states of mind.

Morioka begins each mask with a small mass of low-fire raku industrial clay, manipulating the material with tools and hands to develop its unique contours and expression. The artist likes this particular clay for its quotient of grog (a clay-based grit), which produces a more robust surface. No preliminary sketches are done, though the artist may have an initial concept to work with. He likens this beginning stage to making a gesture with an ink-laden brush on a piece of paper, then considering what meaning might emerge from the spontaneous mark. In this, as in spiritual practice, cultivating a state of receptivity is the key to creative response.

Very near the end of the process of formation, the mask is hollowed out at the back to reduce the mass and allow for more uniform drying prior to firing. The mask may also be burnished to develop a smoother surface. After the bisque firing,

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each mask is stained with a combination of oil pigments and linseed oil that is absorbed into the porous clay body; the colors range from pale to deep ochre and umber, one unifying factor for an otherwise substantial range of individual forms.

Since 1995, Morioka has worked to produce the critical mass of 108 masks. Along the way, some have been put aside or given away; he will continue to work on the series until he has refined this pantheon of spirits to his own satisfaction.

While these are masks, they are not meant to be worn literally, but rather considered metaphysically. They are also not all meant to be taken seriously; otherwise, in Morioka's estimation, the world might be seen as very depressing. It is better to work with a light heart and light hand, aware of the many ironies of life. In that context, he also comments on the role of humor in Buddhism, noting that particularly in Zen sects, humor and laughter are seen as one pathway to enlightenment.

In a broader context, he notes that "You cannot use your brain, your intellect for enlightenment; there has to be a leap of faith. A lot of people who study still don't get it. These masks do not come from the intellect; I'm playing with the clay, working it until something comes out."

To create 108 different things, one has to be attuned to many different sources of inspiration; it would be all too easy to repeat oneself. Morioka readily acknowledges both the spiritual and the mundane sources of imagery: "On a certain level it's just life experience. For example, sometimes I watch television late at night after a long day at work, just winding down watching something mindless." From this relaxing diversion have come such masks as *Girl Wearing Head Scarf* (one of the few female masks) that was prompted by a report about women in the Middle East; here we become more aware of a common frame than an individual face. He may alternately respond to talk-show personalities, news events, people that he knows,

as well as historical characters (a Mongol General, or a high-level cadre member of the PRC), people from his personal past or personal life (a highschool chemistry teacher), members of the Buddhist pantheon (*Jizo Bosatsu, Protector of Women and Children*), creatures from other realms (*Fish Sucking Li Hing Mu*), or personifications of aspects of contemporary culture (*Cellulite Demon Lurking in Middle Aged Thighs*.)

In addition to the unifying characteristic of color, these masks share another visual characteristic: all have eyes that are closed or nearly closed, as if in meditation. Closed eyes are symbolic of the spiritual world. To enter the spirit world, one must also close one's eyes and step across.

One by one, these masks speak to the extraordinary diversity of existence, across the dimensions of history, culture and spiritual practice. Taken together, they remind us of the common fate of everything that is mortal.