

POLITICS

NEWT HAMPSHIRE UNDERCOVER AT GINGRICH'S HQ

_by Dan McCarthy
p 9



ARTS

WORK IN PROGRESS BOSTON'S MOST CREATIVE CO-OPS

_by Eugenia Williamson
p 20



FILM

OUT OF EXILE ROMAN POLANSKI'S CARNAGE

_by Peter Keough
p 19



JANUARY 13-19, 2012 | BOSTON'S LARGEST WEEKLY | FREE

THE BOSTON PHOENIX

POLITICS

A wedding and four funerals

OCCUPYING THE GOP PRIMARY

_by Chris Faraone | p 10

ART AND CRAFT

Kenji Nakayama came to Boston to learn the vanishing craft of sign-painting, and became an art-world phenomenon.

_by Chris Faraone | p 12



MEDIA

BUS STOPPED

What happened to campaign coverage? | p 8



IDIOT PROOF

The guy behind Green Day's musical | p 42



ART AND CRAFT Kenji Nakayama came to Boston to learn the vanishing craft of sign-painting. He's become a Boston art-world phenomenon.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

KENJI NAKAYAMA TAKES AN AGE-OLD CRAFT TO NEW PLACES

BY CHRIS FARAONE

⌚ This winter, the Butera School of Art in Back Bay commences its last-ever sign-making classes, teaching students how to hand-letter everything from yachts to mom-and-pop shops. The closing of the program wraps a century-old legacy for the school, which was acquired by Fisher College two years ago, and soon after was slated for shuttering. A proudly practical career institute, Butera's longstanding mission was to "raise artists to make a living with their art talents, and their art talents alone." It was the last of its kind on the East Coast. Only LA Trade Tech in California offers comparable formal training.

For someone like Kenji Nakayama, whose art career began in the school's Beacon Street sign shop, the fate of Butera signals more than just a sad end for his alma mater, which he moved more than 7000 miles from Japan to attend eight years ago. It also caps an era that the soft-spoken, kind-hearted prodigy pines for, and that

he works daily to preserve in some form or another — a time in which commercial art had character, and city streets were outfitted with mundane masterpieces rather than generic molds and plastic placards.

"Hand-painted letters aren't perfect, but they have character," says Nakayama, whose lab is in the South Boston creative complex the Distillery. Though he speaks in short sentences and broken English, he clearly communicates his passion for throwback banners and rustic awnings. "I always wanted to create things by hand, and now I want to keep the craft going. One day, if what I'm doing inspires other, younger people to do things this way, I would be really happy. I like craft culture, and if people stop paying attention, it will die."

While at Butera in the mid-2000s, Nakayama was encouraged by a teacher there to pursue an interest in cityscapes, which the young artist began to illustrate

with spray paint and sophisticated stencils in a photo-realist fashion that's since become one of his hallmarks. His mixed-media technique evolved to include aerosol, enamel, acrylic and other materials on a variety of boards and canvas. After those epic scenes of sidewalks and fire escapes started selling in edgier Boston galleries, Nakayama seized the opportunity to expand his scope, but never lost focus of what lured him to the States.

A former precision-parts engineer, Nakayama is now riding a wildly different career trajectory than he imagined in his native Tomakomai, on the island of Hokkaido. Yet at 32 — less than a decade after switching careers — he's already widely revered for his determination to keep authentic sign culture kicking. This month he's exhibiting at the Guerrero Gallery in San Francisco (the show is called "An American Language"); new sign projects are in the works for a two-man

show with his studio-mate Dana Woulfe at Boston's Lot F Gallery in April; the following month, he has his first major Manhattan solo outing at the Woodward Gallery.

"It's not surprising that Butera's closing, since we never upgraded to all the modern equipment needed to stay relevant, but it's pretty funny that it's happening now," says Jimmy "Spike" Birmingham, Nakayama's mentor and a Butera teacher for 16 years. "With guys like Kenji and Josh Luke (of Best Dressed Signs in Jamaica Plain) out there, all of a sudden tons of people are really interested in what we do. The last big thing was motorcycle graphics around 2000, and then that died out. But now everyone wants to get into hand-lettering and pin stripe [the detailed, nearly calligraphic line ornamentation that's part of much of Kenji's work], and it's unbelievable because there's no place to go anymore."

TAKING A TURN AT TOYOTA

Most young middle-class men from Hokkaido don't have many career choices. Some work in the local car and paper industries, running machines or welding auto parts in factories. Others escape the northern island's punishing New England-like winters for Tokyo where, for those fortunate enough, educational opportunities open doors to more upwardly mobile options. No matter where they end up, though, Nakayama says it's customary to remain in your first job until retirement, rewarding or degrading as the duties may be.

Like most of his friends who grew up in a strong Japanese economy, Nakayama left for Tokyo early on. At 17 he enrolled in the Musashi Institute of Technology, where he spent four years studying engineering and learning to make mechanical parts for various products. Without much career vision, he landed full-time employment at the age of 21, designing units for a water filtration company in Tokyo. Everything was as expected — “It was going well,” he says — until the filter business was swallowed by a bigger corporation, and Nakayama, still fresh out of school, got the axe.

“After that I got another job at Toyota for a while — working basically in accounting — checking other competitors and trying to find out what could be done to make things cheaper,” he says. “I didn't really know what to do — my father worked for the same company as an engineer for more than 30 years. . . . It wasn't

overnight, but finally I just realized that kind of job was not what I needed.”

By this time Nakayama was 23, and certain that he didn't want to work for a behemoth company where engineers were disposable. He started thinking more like an artist, believing that his creations should bear his name and influence. While at Toyota he'd begun researching the demanding and precise artistic aspects of manufacturing that are becoming lower and lower priorities in the automated mass-production era. Nakayama says the precision-goods industry — everything from tools to dashboards — is increasingly reliant on machines, foregoing the detailed elements that have historically been left to trained artisans.

Spurred by a love of motorcycles, Nakayama began stenciling around 2003. His first rudimentary spray-can creation was a geometric logo splashed on his friend's white Triumph Scrambler. Nakayama's interest in craft went back at least as far as the day his father taught him to form a tin can into a makeshift lantern by knifing slits in the side. He was still thinking of art along utilitarian lines, but that was enough to motivate him to drop everything and leave for Boston.

COMING TO AMERICA

After weighing the difficult decision to leave his family and a girlfriend behind, in 2004 Nakayama arrived at Logan Airport with little in the way of savings. He didn't expect to see his own name in big letters;



TOOLS OF THE TRADE The front door of the Enormous Room bears the personalized lettering and calligraphic pin-stripping that are hallmarks of Nakayama's art.



instead he hoped to paint the names of others, and perhaps one day lend his own flavor to America's street-and-alley aesthetic. Unlike many Butera students, who Nakayama's mentor Birmingham says often lose interest in the intensive two-year program, the Japanese prodigy proved exceptional.

“He was full of piss and vinegar from day one,” says Birmingham. “In 16 years of teaching there, and going there before that, there have only been maybe three or four like Kenji. It was unbelievable what he gave up to come here — almost as incredible as what he's done since.”

While at Butera, Nakayama began producing pieces outside of class — mostly layered stencils that re-imagined still photos that he'd taken in the shadows of the grimy underside of Boston. Birmingham pushed him to keep at it, and before long the burgeoning artist was showing at Starbucks on Newbury Street, then at a number of shops and bars around town. There was a lot of rejection — “Many people told me ‘No,’” he says — still he grew determined to become a full-fledged artist.

At the same time, Nakayama was incorporating his sign hustle with new ideas, and landing adventurous commissioned work like the job he did with contemporary street artist Ryan Lombardi at the recently closed Enormous Room, where the pair decked the stairs, DJ booth, and window in 23-karat gold-leaf swag. “Kenji is probably the most passionate and creative artist who I've had the opportunity to work with,” says Lombardi, a force in his own right. Adds Lot F owner James Wormser: “All of the other artists look up to him. As long as I've been around, Kenji's been a legend in Boston.”

WORK ETHIC

Anecdotal evidence points to a sign-painting resurgence. Filmmakers Faythe Levine and Sam Macon spent the past two years surveying the nascent scene across the country, interviewing active sign painters, designers, and knowledgeable curators who are directly attached to the history and current movement. Dropping later this year along with a book of the same name, their film *Sign Painters* will look behind the signs that brighten bohemian enclaves like Boston and the Bay Area.

“There seems to be a resurgence across the board,” says Macon, who also collaborated on the 2009 DIY doc *Handmade Nation*

with Levine. Macon says the trade — not to mention its more stylized variants — has come far since the '90s, when teachers at LA Tech were scouting probation offices and Venice Beach graffiti hangouts for recruits. “From the beginning of our project we've been amazed at how much more there is than what we thought, by the variety of people who are doing it, and by how the new generation is approaching sign making.”

In his latest stretch of work, Nakayama, who was interviewed for *Sign Painters*, is experimenting with techniques that tweak the framework even more than his first variations on old posters and classic lettering. A recent exhibition at the Orchard skate shop in Allston (where Nakayama's mural near the half pipe is a permanent fixture) displayed a series of heavy-duty handsaws. Painted freehand using his go-to pinstripe brush, they're adorned with the sort of font work you'd see above saloon doors, or in the window of a 1950s barber shop.

Nakayama has achieved a level of success that others might be jealous of if everybody didn't simply adore him. Through the Woodward Gallery, where his Manhattan show is coming up, he recently hung a six-panel stencil piece at the Bank of America building in SoHo. Then there's the April sequel at Lot F to last year's hugely successful show with Woulfe. There, among other things, he'll premiere a series of signs that he designed for homeless acquaintances to panhandle with. Experimenting with guys who hang out in the alleyway behind Lot F, Nakayama has been taking messages from their cardboard jobs and transforming them with multi-colored crafted lettering so as to hopefully increase their take.

Through it all, Nakayama also works a full-time day job as a sneaker designer for Converse in North Andover. Since he's implementing other peoples' ideas there, he doesn't consider the gig to be part of his artistic repertoire, though in 2008 he did customize a pair of All-Stars for the company's centennial 1HUND(RED) series. That's his character: though finally comfortable with making art for art's sake, his work ethic still keeps Nakayama grinding out work for hire as he pursues his next paycheck. “All I could do when I got here was work hard in order to make things work for me,” he says. “I guess I'm still trying to do that.” ©



REFLECTION RETURNAL (2007) Nakayama's photo-realist street scenes are often created with multiple layers of hand-cut stencils, spray paint, and enamel.