

Learning Through the Process: An Interview with Curtis Arima

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Curtis H. Arima's innovative techniques in metalsmithing combine his background in metal arts/jewelry, contemporary art, metal sculpture and ceramic sculpture. He is best known for his unique 3D surface treatment, acrylic wash and patinas on metal, which bring heightened surrealism to his work.

JW: Can you start by introducing yourself little bit and what inspired you to become an artist?

CA: My name is Curtis Arima. What inspired me? How should I start, let me back way out. Since I was a child, I was into making things. I did a lot of origami paper folding, and I liked to cook or make bread, I liked to do drawing. I think it was second grade, I was in regular school. We had a project to make a flower, some kind of flower. I loved flowers, I loved plants. Even at that young age, I still love them now. And I decided to make an origami flower. For most of the children, they cut out the pieces and make them flat. But I wanted the flower, to be real, three-dimensional. Because I did origami, I understood the flat cut out couldn't move into three dimensions. They allowed me to make this origami; my teacher thought it was amazing. It seemed very sophisticated for somebody in second grade. She talked to my mother and told her I have to be in the art classes: that we find some place inexpensive and not too much trouble, but I have to take some classes somewhere. My parents being supportive as they are, they enrolled me in classes at the Triton Museum. I grew up in Santa Clara. And that allowed me to learn more about art and drawing and painting and continued then on as a youngster. I continued doing painting and drawing throughout high school and started to get really involved making more things out of paper. So at 15, maybe a little younger, 13 or 14, I started making small little gift items that I gave to my family and friends of the family. I'd make them one and they pay me and give it to their friends. They were little paper dolls, really simple paper folding kind of things, that I lacquered and more and more people got interested and I was sharing a booth with Uncles, two uncles of mine, one's a printmaking and other ceramic artist. I shared a little table (at an art fair) and make 30 or 40 of these items and they sold. And that slowly turned into a very small business that my mother helped me with as a teenager and I did about 8 or 9 craft shows a year and in three different stores in California. That was between ages 15 to 20. Simultaneously I was also interested in ceramics. I took a painting class but didn't really love painting. The painting teacher told me that I would really love ceramics because it was 3-dimensional. I took her ceramic class and loved it. Loved throwing on the wheel, I loved making sculpture kinds of things out of clay, and particularly the wheel, I liked that process of making something from what seemed to be a lot of mud slowly transformed by just turning and using your hands and basic tools.

When I finished high school, I decided to go to art school and picked CCA particularly because they have a really fantastic ceramic program. And there I started to learn much more about the larger world of art. In high school you can only learn so much and I was very

focused on the making part of it. At CCA I had some fantastic instructors and that is where it really helped me understand the sculpture world and a little bit more about conceptual making. Quickly I realized that I did not necessarily want to be a production potter at all even though I enjoy throwing on the wheel. I decided that some of the ideas and other processes were more interesting to me. I took a metal class and was instantly inspired by the metal process of hammering a flat sheet and turning it into a form. It reminded me so much of the first time throwing on the wheel and same transformation of material was pretty spectacular and inspiring. It was like magic. So I continued with metal and ceramics and graduated with a BFA individualized major focusing on both, taking all the classes I could.

Part of a really valuable education that was not school was this place called Kids N' Clay that still exists; where children come, and teenagers, to learn ceramics. Kevin Nierman is the owner. He is an amazing teacher, who was very different than my teachers at school. And it was inspirational in the way that he allowed the children to do anything they wanted. And coming from my original high school ceramic background, tight original painting background from my first painting teacher who was tight, this was a little shocking to me as a college student. But also very freeing, he had children as young as 4 throwing on the wheel, which was totally unheard of. One thing that was very inspiring was a little boy, Matthew. He said he wanted to make a figure sculpture that was as tall as he was, he was 7 or 8. And I said "nah, that's too much, I don't even know how to do that, and it is going to take a really long time. Let's think of something else" Kevin had overheard the conversation and said "no, why not?" he explained "this is going to take time, you won't be able to finish it in class. It may not be until next month, you'll finish it, but we can learn together and figure this out." I had already started learning from people at CCA to build in sections so we built this piece and took quite a long time but it was as tall as he was. This little boy did a whole series of figurative work that was 3 feet or taller. It was amazing, the work that happens at Kids N Clay. It really opened my eyes to my love for teaching, not to have so much restriction on technique and developing things in linear way but in a more circular way, understanding that one can learn through the process. So I worked there throughout my time in college and then also afterwards. I met wonderful people there. Then I decided to go to graduate school at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. That was an amazingly concentrated time developing my personal work in different directions. I worked with Gary Griffin mostly, and also a few other instructors and a lot of important people passed through there who were inspiring to me. One of my first critiques was with Jenny Antony who opened my eyes to the research and development of my work, knowing the bigger picture and where my work fit into the world of sculpture and metal and ceramics and how that came all together and what my role was in that. After I graduated with a MFA, I came back to California and found this studio, starting teaching at several different schools in the bay area and slowly developed a real desire to teach more. I started slowly teaching more at CCA. This whole time, I've been developing my own work in a few different directions. Another place that was really important for me as a developing artist was called Gallery Flocks in San Francisco. It was an amazing jewelry gallery that was a cross between fine art, fine jewelry, and some conceptual work. There I really honed some of my jewelry skills and a lot of design. Learned a lot about business practices and the world of fine jewelry, which I didn't have an understanding of

before. I worked there for several years until it closed, which was several years ago. I have been developing my own work, showing and making custom work, like engagement rings and wedding rings.

JW: What are you trying to portray through your artwork, your artwork is based on nature and a lot of forest and bodies?

CA: I have few different bodies of work; one of the ones that are more widely visible is my more botanical inspired work. And that comes from several places. Let me backup to undergrad and artist inspiration in undergrad. I was fascinated by nature, fascinated by body, both inside and outside. Fascinated with the image and idea of technology so a lot of my undergrad works, and shortly after, in my graduate work is this collaboration and connection of the body, with something mechanical and something natural and they were kind of mashed together to develop new forms. It was made out of clay and metal. And I was looking particularly at disease. So I was looking disease and inside of the body and plants and plant disease. And I also wanted it to look like something that was erecting or growing but still had some kind of a beautiful form to it. In graduate school and in undergrad I was always fascinated with hyperrealism. So lot of the color and texture comes from the skin texture but also plant texture and I kind of mashed together this alien looking form. After thinking about it more and analyzing more, I decided that it was a little too movie prop, it looked too much like a movie, or a little bit cartoony so I decided it to push it more into realism. And that's where some of the new pieces began. The flower on the wall, and this piece, a little dusty now, but there's some hyper realistic, somebody not knowing plants might recognize it, almost as if its real, until they got up close. And something I enjoy is when somebody looks at something closely the more detailed it gets, the more inspirational it gets. These pieces came from studying plants and researching plants and trying to make them as metaphor for systems of society. So these are ideas about grafting and pruning, let's say you're pruning a tree and you prune it so it will grow and develop into this visually amazing plant, it will be really healthy; it will produce the proper fruit (if it is a fruit producing tree) or flower (if it is a flower producing tree). If you go and prune a tree uneducated, and just chop out whatever is in the way, then it's going to grow poorly, with problems. So in some of the work I was using that idea as a metaphor as a way to show how we function. The issues we deal with. I the way our country runs, the way lot of the world runs. We tend to deal with, what's immediately in front of us and cut off, or deal with it that immediate issue without understanding the long-term effects of growth. Lot of that plant inspired work was definitely related to those ideas.

JW: That explains several of my questions.

CA: Let me bring you up to date on what I'm working on right now. The realism developed into works that I am still doing, the mirror and the nightstand. These literally grew out of love of furniture and paintings from a different time and the metal work with plants grew right out of a piece that is part of the original organic concept. They are very inspired by an Acanthus which has a leaf form that's been used for used centuries and centuries. Something I like about Acanthus is that they are very hard to kill. They are beautiful and look like they might die but you cut it back and it still continues to grow so it talks a lot about rebirth for me and

these furniture pieces definitely have a new life through what I've done to them. They were things people didn't want had thrown away or in a junk shop or they were really in bad repair and I hope that my metal would elevate them in different directions. This work is something I developed in graduate school and it started with this container here that is a transplanting container something a gardener puts seedlings into and then squished them out but this is 13 times or 20 times larger than the original container. But it still looks useable. Initially the project I wanted to do was to make these pieces and put the entire tree seedling inside of it. When I finished it really felt like it talked about lot of the things I was researching and being inspired by genetic engineering and the idea of is bigger better, overconsumption, without anything in it. I started thinking about what went inside. If it's a seedling container what kind of seedling needs to be that big. If you don't know what the object is, you start thinking about what goes in there. It looks like it had some kind of utility. Kind of opposite, but related to Duchamp's idea of taking a ready-made and turning into art. These pieces are trying to take a ready-made looking object and provoke your curiosity as to what they are used for, even though they are totally not ready-made; they are well crafted and there's a lot of metal work in it and lots of craftsmanship. That developed into these four of eight pieces that I made and these were all inspired by vacuum formed packaging materials like batteries come in. I measured them all out 10 to 20 times larger and constructed a maquette out of cardboard. So taking this object that we normally throw away and disregard, and celebrating that through making it in metal and turning that into a modern sculpture.

I have 3 main bodies of work happening. More realistic plant pieces that are just about finished and these are very new furniture, and I have a whole production line.

JW: I have seen your sculpture called "water", and thought it was very interesting. What inspired you to make this piece and what is the purpose of the funnel?

CA: All those are a series of trees and the trees talk about futility. They all have some kind of problem and the tool is supposed to fix the problem but its really not helping. It is attached to the trees so the tree can't really use it. It's this desperate attempt to fix something, my imaginary gardener who made these pieces decided to stick the funnels into the tree to help it. And you can't quite tell if the funnels are trying to help or actually destroying the tree so that taught me the idea of helping or hurting either yourself or someone. And whatever is in the air gets funneled directly into the tree. Trees don't get the water from their trunks; it comes up from the roots. So it's improper thinking, a frantic mad attempt to fix something without having any real ability or knowledge to fix it. Looking back at it now, that's what I thought I was kind of doing at the time. I did that piece during graduate studies I was filtering and funneling so much information I feel those pieces are really much more of a self portrait. There are funnels directly into the body of the trees like I was trying to absorb and take in all the information and feeling almost detrimental, like information overload, like doing lot of different things, like drinking with my friends and staying up too late, too much. Putting a large section into a smaller section you slowly push something in and max out.

JW: In your webpage, <http://www.curtisharima.com>, there is a description of techniques you are using. How long and how much hardship did you go through to figure this out?

CA: It's a long process. I forget.... I was just talking to somebody and they said "to become an expert in a given field, you need minimum of 1000 hours to really understand what you're doing". I feel like maybe now, I've reached 1000 hours working on my technique and developing. Technique is something you never stop learning. You can be a master of something but you are always learning more and more and more about it. And I tend now to, I don't want to say not focus on technique, but for some pieces, I felt only technique and other pieces I try not to think of technique at all. So if I learn a new technique, like recently in the last year or so I've learned how to hand engrave. There are pieces in my jewelry case just about the hand engraving and soon I get used to that, and build more language to integrate the work. Throwing on the wheel was something I got good at. Throwing on the wheel really never developed into a language. It was just kind of throwing on the wheel. Same thing with figurative sculpture which I like doing in ceramic, some of the craftsmanship involved with it, and I really couldn't develop it to find my own language, my own particular language that resonated with what I felt as me. It was too aligned with too many famous sculptors and ceramic artists out there. I wasn't adding anything new to the conversation. With metal work, I felt I could slowly add new things to the conversation, different from what others were doing. The process is just a lot of practice as with any crafts which is why I like crafts. It's a conversation not only with your main concept but the materials you are using and the process. And they all have to have the conversation together in order to produce something. Amazing designers have fantastic ideas and they have the ideas. They want others to produce their work and they make fantastic work but I'm invested in that circular communication you have with your material as the process happens. This necessarily doesn't have to look exactly like it was going to when I started, even a piece of jewelry doesn't necessarily look like exactly how I thought it was going to look. I can do that, but the process and material somewhat guide your performance. A friend of mine, who is a ceramic artist, feels that different clay bodies really want to be different forms and when he throws on the wheel, the forms come out a certain way because of the clay. The same thing happens with metal. Silver wants to do certain things, gold wants to do other things, and you could try to reproduce and replicate what each do, but there's a natural tendency for materials to do something and you can either go with that or against it: just have a conversation with it.

JW: Can you tell me the reason that you decide to attend at CCA and why did you decide to teach at CCA?

CA: One, I was born and raised in California and I love California. So I wanted to stay here for undergrad. In my research it was one of the best art schools. Locally, as an undergraduate going to an art institute, art academy was pretty new and I looked into the Art Institute in Chicago and looked into RISD and I mostly looked at the work that was coming out. I probably could have gone to Chicago, I was brave, but I wasn't brave in terms of traveling. So I looked at the SF Art Institute and the Academy of Art and CCA. Academy of Art felt too cold for me, and at that time I wasn't really in love with the student work there. Art Institute... am I getting it mixed up? Yes, I am. The S.F. Art Institute was too cold of a building for me and I wasn't in love with some of the student work that was coming out. The Academy of Art just felt funny, partially because they were so advertised, they gave me this video that hyped them and I started to look at some of the work and it wasn't really great at all and the idea of

traveling to 5 different campuses across San Francisco seemed ridiculous to me. I would have loved to be in San Francisco it would have been exciting, but it just didn't feel right. Then I went to California College of Arts and Crafts and went on the campus and walked around and it just felt right. I felt right about the studios, like I should just be here, it felt like it.

After graduate school the opportunity came back. Extension classes in jewelry/metal arts needed an instructor and I did a few ceramic workshops and then slowly they needed someone in school for metals and 3D and 2D core so I started teaching a little bit there and then I just started getting embedded into jewelry/metal arts program.

JW: Can you give me, and other jewelry students, advice as to what to do after they graduate from CCA?

CA: I think it should start before you graduate. I think that making exceptional work, having a fantastic professional senior exhibition and documenting it. The other thing to remember too, that it's not your only show, it's not the only show you are going to have; it's a stepping stone and to do the best you can and to realize you can't do everything in a single show. But also start thinking about what you want to do before you finish with school. It's important to start thinking about long-term goals, even now as freshman start thinking and have some kind of idea what you want to do, and it will help guide you through your education. Do you want to go to grad school or start your own jewelry business? Do you want to be more in galleries and have more gallery representation or museum shows; what is your main goal and to be really deeply involved in your field, know different artists and look at different artists, both in and outside of the field. I think the problem with a lot jewelry/metal artists is they go to metal work for inspiration and that's a huge wealth of information but there is also a lot going on in different fields of art. Everybody needs to be connected: to know what's going on and understand a little bit of art history and understand contemporary art. Go to museums, go to exhibitions. Be knowledgeable.

When I first walked into Curtis Arima's studio, I was amazed to see his work in real life. They were bigger and more spectacular than I imagined. I didn't know what to do when I started the interview, however, he offered me a cup of water and made me comfortable. When we began to talk, I was amazed and really drawn to his story. Most importantly, this interview has taught me about living as an artist. Also, since I'm interested in majoring in jewelry /metal, this interview has answered many questions that I had.