



Images courtesy of Daisuke Shirai

Stenciled Life

by Kristen Nemoto Jay

Like many boys in Japan, Ryo Ogawa grew up spending much of his time reading manga, playing video games and card games, and drawing. “I wasn’t too good at studying,” Ogawa admits. However, one day while in elementary school, Ogawa was looking at a textbook and a picture caught his eye. The image was of a famous pair of folding screens featuring the work of the influential 17th-century painter Tawaraya Sōtatsu. Known collectively as *Fūjin Raijin* (Wind God and Thunder God), this important work opened Ogawa’s eyes to the world of classical Japanese art and how it is still



relevant today. “When I saw it as a child, I thought, this looks like character from one of the games I played.... It was at that moment when I realized how it [past and present] was all connected...and from that point on I became more and more interested in classic artists.”

Today, Ogawa, who is better known by his artist name of RoamCouch, has been able to harness his appreciation for classical Japanese art forms like ukiyo-e woodblock prints and blend it with a modern sensibility in order to create a style all his own. The decision to become an artist, though, is one that Ogawa would only make after a serious health scare forced him to think about what he really wanted to do with his life.

Do What You Love

As a child in the rural town of Anpachi-cho in Gifu Prefecture, Ogawa wanted to become a manga artist or illustrator when he grew up. However, thanks to their status as rather unreliable jobs, Ogawa’s parents were not thrilled at this prospect. Ogawa listened to his parents’ concerns and reached a compromise, deciding to pursue a career as a graphic designer.

At age 18, Ogawa began working as a graphic designer at a company, but

Artist Ryo “RoamCouch” Ogawa discusses how following his passion for art got him over a health scare and has led him to success

eventually a combination of overexertion and an inability to create his own original work took its toll on Ogawa. “I was hyperventilating; my whole body would go numb and I didn’t know why—I became unable to physically move,” Ogawa recalls. “I started thinking, ‘I’m going to die from this.’” His feelings of helplessness and constant anxiety led his wife, Tomomi, to give him the best advice of his artistic career. “She said, ‘Well, if you’re going to die, then why don’t you do something you love?’”

Those words forced Ogawa to think about his situation and realize that what he really wanted to do was not churn out designs mindlessly like a robot for someone else, but rather use his creativity to produce artwork for himself. “I decided to dedicate myself completely to drawing, regardless of whether I could make a living from it or not.”

Perfecting the Process

As Ogawa began exploring his love for art, he began practicing and

(Top to bottom)

Ryo Ogawa in Kakaako in front of his mural *When You Wish Upon a Star—Hawaii*

The mural *Water Girl/Izanami* fuses traditional Japanese art with street art.



then perfecting his chosen medium of meticulously stenciled large wall murals. His style of artwork is known as neo-ukiyo-e. The process, especially at first, was painstakingly slow, monotonous, and nail-biting. One wrong-stenciled cut out could ruin the entire piece. By hand-cutting every single layer of new color and new design, Ogawa would oftentimes layer up to 50 stenciled pieces just to make a single mural. With each passing year Ogawa gained more experience, upping his stenciled pieces from one painting a year to five.

Now 42 years old, Ogawa—or, as he has come to be known, RoamCouch—has refined his skills, and his work has made it onto streets and art galleries throughout the world, including Europe, Japan, and even right here in Hawaii.

RoamCouch in Hawaii

Ogawa visited Oahu this past February to participate in POW! WOW! Hawaii 2019. After spending a month preparing an original hand-cut stencil design, Ogawa spent three days working on an outdoor mural that was a new version of a mural he had done earlier in Japan. The mural, located on Pohukaina and Keawe Streets in Kakaako, is called *When You Wish Upon a Star—Hawaii*, and it was inspired by his first visit to Oahu as a teenager. It depicts a young boy and girl holding hands at dusk along the shoreline of Waikiki Beach. The little girl is pointing up to a star in the sky while the young boy is holding a large yellow star in his other hand. The fanciful image of the little boy’s bright yellow star stands out against the realistic backdrop of the ocean’s waves curling in

at the children’s feet, with the twinkling lights of the tall buildings of Waikiki and the silhouette of Diamond Head in the background.

Bringing It Back Home

The original *When You Wish Upon a Star—Hawaii* mural is part of Ogawa’s Emotional Bridge Project, which is a collection of 13 murals throughout his hometown in Gifu, Japan. Ogawa hopes to attract art fans to this rural area of Japan where he grew up by publicly exhibiting his stenciled masterpieces at unassuming places within Gifu. Ogawa’s ultimate goal is to inspire the youth within his hometown and extend the message that they can reach for the stars if they work hard and follow their passions.

“I didn’t think I would be able to make a living drawing,” Ogawa said. “No one complimented my work. In the city you can get more of a reaction, but not in rural areas where I grew up. When the kids get told that the person who drew this artwork came from Gifu, then maybe they’ll think he or she can do it too.”

The Meaning of RoamCouch

Ogawa wants all people who view his art, from young children to adults, to feel happy. One way he tries to do this, he says, is by throwing in little details that don’t quite make sense, such as the young boy holding on to a falling star in his *Wish Upon a Star* mural. Not only do fantastical things like this quickly grab the viewers, they also help convey the wonder and joy many tend to lose as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood.

This approach to his art is also why he decided to adopt the name RoamCouch. “When I was sick and filled with anxiety, my wife and the people who supported me allowed me to calm down and actually sit up,” Ogawa said. “I want to give back by being a support system to people. I want to be like their couch. I want to be able to be their support through my artwork and roam about, helping to provide that couch that I was given when I needed it. That’s how I came up with the name RoamCouch.”

Without the freedom he has to create his artwork pieces, Ogawa claims he would not be alive. His ability to produce art has saved him. He hopes to help others improve upon their own lives if they are unhappy with the one that they are currently leading. “I get life from the people who look at my art,” Ogawa said. “I just want people to be happy. I want people to see it and feel happy about themselves.” 終

To see more of RoamCouch’s art, visit his website at www.roamcouch.com or follow him on Instagram & Twitter @RoamCouch.

(Clockwise from top left)

Take My Heart, a mural in Gifu Prefecture

Ogawa working on the stenciled mural *Midnight Recital* inside a local shrine in Japan

Ogawa working on a stenciled sheet

The collaborative mural *Yellow Magic Orchestra* was created in Gifu Prefecture by Ogawa and a Japanese artist called “PITS.”