


how to define nothing TWOONE

interview and pics
by Naima Morelli

When Twoone (Hiroyasu Tsuru) first arrived in Melbourne from Japan in early 2000, he didn't speak a word of English. Lucky enough for him, if you paint walls and skate around all day, your style speaks for you. A few years later he became a reference for the thriving Melbourne street art scene, earning him a Distinguished Talent Visa.




Twoone alternates between working in the street and exhibiting in art galleries. His last show, *Define Nothing* at Backwoods Gallery, was a great success. Animal-headed characters with human bodies are his trademark. For these mystical-looking figures he is inspired by western psychology and Zen philosophy.



Naima Morelli: *You moved to Melbourne when you were eighteen. Why this decision, and why Melbourne?*

Twoone: I came to Melbourne to explore the world. When I finished high school in Japan, I wasn't exactly sure about what I wanted to study next. That was bad for me because in Japan what you study in University pretty much sets what you will do as job for the rest of your life. I was stressed by that decision and I just wanted to get out of what I knew.

So I decided to go overseas but I didn't just want to go somewhere where anyone went to. At that time if you wanted to go overseas the popular options were US or UK. That's why I've chosen Australia basically, because it wasn't a very popular destination. For the same reason, everyone going Australia was choosing Sydney or the Gold Coast. I'd never heard of Melbourne before, so that's why I chose it.

A diagonal photograph showing a man with dark hair, wearing a dark jacket and a large green backpack, looking towards the left. He is standing in front of a white brick wall covered in colorful graffiti, including blue and yellow diamond shapes. The background behind him is slightly out of focus, showing some wooden structures and a red ladder.

“ ... Someone skates
and you skate together. I
got some spare paint so
we just started to paint!”

NM: *It turned out
to be a pretty good
decision. So at that time
were you already making art?*

T: I studied art but only at high school level, so very generic. I couldn't really say I was making art seriously or anything, but I was already painting shitty pieces in the streets in my spare time, and I was doing some paintings.

NM: *When you came to Melbourne you found out that art, and the street art scene in particular, was very lively in the city.*

T: Yeah, at that time I was doing a lot of skateboarding as well, which, along with street art, was very popular in Melbourne. At the time I couldn't speak English much, but with skateboarding and street art you don't need much language to communicate. Someone skates and you skate together. I got some spare paint so we just started to paint!





“ ... I want it to be understood by anyone.”

I painted all my skateboards when I was a kid, and that was my first approach to the style of graffiti. Before that I'd only seen artists in textbooks, which aren't appealing when you're young. Well, they weren't to me, so skateboard graphics were my introduction to art.

NM: *In Melbourne you quickly became a prominent part of the local street art scene. Was the scene different at the time?*

T: When I arrived in 2003 or 2004 stencilling was really popular. Everyone was doing it. I never really liked it so I didn't do much of it, and I know there is not much stencil going on anymore. I guess street art or graffiti are becoming really big now. There are a lot of websites just about street art and it seems like they can't contain all the art that people make every day. There is so much going on! I don't think it was like that back in the day.

NM: *What are the differences of approach when you paint a wall or a canvas, as opposed to sculpture?*

T: I think the fundamental attitude is the same. I like it, I enjoy it and that's why I do it. In the studio work I probably don't care too much about the imaginary. Sometimes dark and violent stuff comes out. When I paint on the walls or I do illegal stuff I feel I should put something a little bit more positive and not too specific. With specific I mean that I don't want to do just, say, a Japanese animation character. That's why I paint a lot of animals, things related to the human body and not constricted by any kind of culture or religion or anything like that. I try to keep it loose so that everyone can relate. I want it to be understood by anyone.


NM: *It's interesting because with this combination of human, animal, geometrical figures and skulls your subjects look a little bit mystical. At the same time you can't associate them to a specific religion or ...*

T: ...country or anything like that. I think my tension is to make it universal so that is not directed just to a specific type of people.

NM: *Do you think your Japanese background influences your way of making art?*

T: I think it's definitely influencing my work, for example in the way I balance the canvas. I feel like Western painting is about adding, adding, adding, to fill the whole space, especially traditional stuff. But if you look at Asian painting often it's about the balance between the negative spaces and the main subjects. There is a lot of space which is not painted. I think this way of painting strongly influenced my work.





NM: *I'm curious to know how you work with subjects. Do you concentrate on a particular series or subject for a period of time?*

T: Yeah, my subjects change all the time. Last year my concept was based on this idea of psychological portrait and physical landscape. It naturally developed from the characters with human bodies and animal heads. What I wanted to do was to show human emotions through characters, as a symbolic portrait of the characters' personalities. That was also the theme of my exhibition in 2013 at Backwoods Gallery in Collingwood, where I was inspired by the characters of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*.

NM: *In your work there are a lot of skulls and references to death. Are you fascinated by death, or are such representations your way to exorcise death?*

T: The skull is obviously a symbol of death generally, but to me it's more a symbol of the core of human beings. If you think about it, your face changes over time, you can change your expression when you talk with different people, you can even surgically alter your facial traits, but the skull is always the same. Your skull is what you really are.

NM: *This is a fascinating concept. How has your art changed over time?*

T: I guess my interests have matured a bit so the evolution is not just about the subjects. I have grown up technically as well. My work ethic is about not doing the same things over and over again, because when I'm working I want to feel excited. Making always the same things doesn't make me excited. I'm constantly pushing myself, using different mediums, and different inferences in the way I make my work. That's how I get over my limits and far away from what I know.

NM: *What about the title of your last show? Why try to Define Nothing?*

T: Define nothing ... that's actually a phrase that I heard in a BBC documentary. It was about a group of scientists somewhere in the US. Basically they gathered together to think and come up with the answer for what was happening before the

“ ... Western painting is about adding, adding, adding, to fill the whole space ...”

Big Bang. People usually say that before the Big Bang there was nothing, so what these scientists were doing was trying to define “nothing”.

NM: *That's quite the ultimate question ... where we come from, who we are ...*

T: I feel it's also a good metaphor for human interests, as in how far you can go. That's what I do every day by painting and sculpting. For me, to define nothing is to look for new ideas, to make more work, to go through a lot of crisis and to talk to a lot of people. That's how I expand my universe.



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.



