



Keith Murakata

My biological father is an African-American man from New Orleans — otherwise, a mystery. My mother is African-American and Japanese. I grew up immersed in a primarily African American community. I was accepted by most but not by all. These origins continue to inform my development as a culturally and politically aware artist.

I began, like most, from pencil to paintbrush until meeting my true medium, sculpting. My first experience in sculpting was with wood, in Stuttgart, Germany, during my two-year Army tour as a surgical technician. Exploring local woodshops, I discovered a German master craftsman who taught me shop and hand tool techniques. I combined my education in anatomy and woodworking with a strong social awareness and an ever-developing political philosophy. This gave birth to my passionate cultural dissertations — my sculptures.

My first foray into politicized art was explicit. After serving in the Army and returning to college in the United States, I served as vice-president of a black student union and created tiny sculptures of Africa with my scroll saw. I burned slogans into them like *South Africa: Divest Now and Rwanda = Genocide*. Fast forward a few years, I moved to Seattle. Here I joined Nu Tribes, a group of young, hungry artists of color who leased a space at 23rd and Jackson in the Central District (Theaster Gates was chief among us). This era of my development was akin to a Fela Kuti concert — the air

was electric and the pulse of the community ignited our collective fire. In 1999, after witnessing racially motivated mistreatment of 2 fellow artists I felt a jolt, a fusion, through my consciousness that enabled me to “bend the spoon.” Out of this matrix came *Raw Deal*, a scholarship award winning sculpture that reinterprets the American flag and exposes the harsh layers of local First Nations history and the shame of the 1855 Point Elliott Treaty¹. *Raw Deal* was created from materials gleaned from a demolished house in the Boeing Field area, the very heart of the Duwamish territory. *Raw Deal* is a pivotal piece in my career and growth.

Raw Deal also signaled my leap from a straightforward message to the use of poetry, wit, and metaphor. This crystallized my commitment to the ethos of the material. Specifically, I feel it is essential that the medium I choose embody the themes and values I intend to express. **THE REBIRTH** was envisioned a few years later, would not be created until about 2010. The skill set and tools needed to create it would be gained over the next 5 years aided by the scholarship award funds from *Raw Deal*.

Through my work, I aim to shine light on the truths of continued injustice and the historic, pathological attacks launched against melanated peoples, their bodies and cultures. As a sculptor, I see my role as an amalgam of researcher, rabble rouser, certified salvage diver, healer, and pop culture critic.

¹The Point Elliott Treaty (1855) was one of thirteen treaties between United States government and First Nations peoples. This treaty ceded land, including the current area of Boeing Field (along the Duwamish River), from First Nations to white settlers in exchange for fishing rights and land promised in the form of a reservation. Chief Seattle (si'áb Si'ahl) was one of the signators. However, not all of the forty tribes — including the Duwamish, Lummi, Skagit, Snoqualmie, and Suquamish — signing received the legally guaranteed land, and within 35 years, the federal government began to revoke the fishing rights. In the 1970s, the Point Elliott Treaty became the focal point of furious political protests by First Nations activists such as Bob Satiacum, Janet McCloud, as well as Jack Tanner (African American lawyer), Marlon Brando and Dick Gregory as an unconscionable violation of the rights of indigenous people. After over 37 years of multiple fines and arrest for what amounted to poaching in their own waters for the agreed allotment of one-half of the state's harvest of salmon (stated in the 1854 Stevens treaty). The First Nations won the historic Boldt decision which in effect gave the seven tribes back the rights that were illegally and systematically taken away.