

Greg Ramar

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INK PAD

How a San Jose tattoo parlor rose to international acclaim

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BODY OF WORK

Tucked within San Jose's Japantown is a tattoo legacy unlike anywhere else in the world

BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE

ON A FRIDAY morning, patrons at Roy's Coffee sit on the patio laughing and basking in the first solar waves of spring. Half a block away, folks anxiously wait outside Shuei-Do to order manju—a Japanese rice dessert—before it sells out.

Lining a single block of Jackson Street in San Jose's Japantown are sushi and ramen restaurants, Japanese grocery and souvenir shops, a ukulele store and two Hawaiian restaurants. With so much to observe in such a small area, it's easy to miss the simple glass door leading to one of

Japantown's hidden gems: State of Grace Tattoo, widely regarded as a parlor producing some of the highest quality tattoos in the world.

Above the shop's modest entrance hang campaign signs for Raul Perez and a wooden slab engraved with Japanese lettering reading "Monmon-ya," Japanese slang for tattoo shop. Inside one finds a tall, narrow stairway and the buzzing of tattoo machines. At the top of the stairs, the 3,000-square-foot artistic sanctuary opens.

Named after the scrappy 1990 Sean Penn crime film, State of Grace was founded by Takahiro "Taki" Kitamura in 2002 on Berryessa Road, about two miles northeast of its present

location. Taki was born in Tokyo but grew up in the quintessential American college town of Davis, speaking Japanese and experiencing the culture within the confines of his home. His father was a tenured UC Davis professor of civil engineering and, growing up, Taki felt pressure to do something similar.

"Nobody wanted their kids to be tattooers," he recalls. "Especially myself coming from this background of immigrant Asians, strong on education. [The expectation was] to get a normal job with benefits like a lawyer or a doctor."

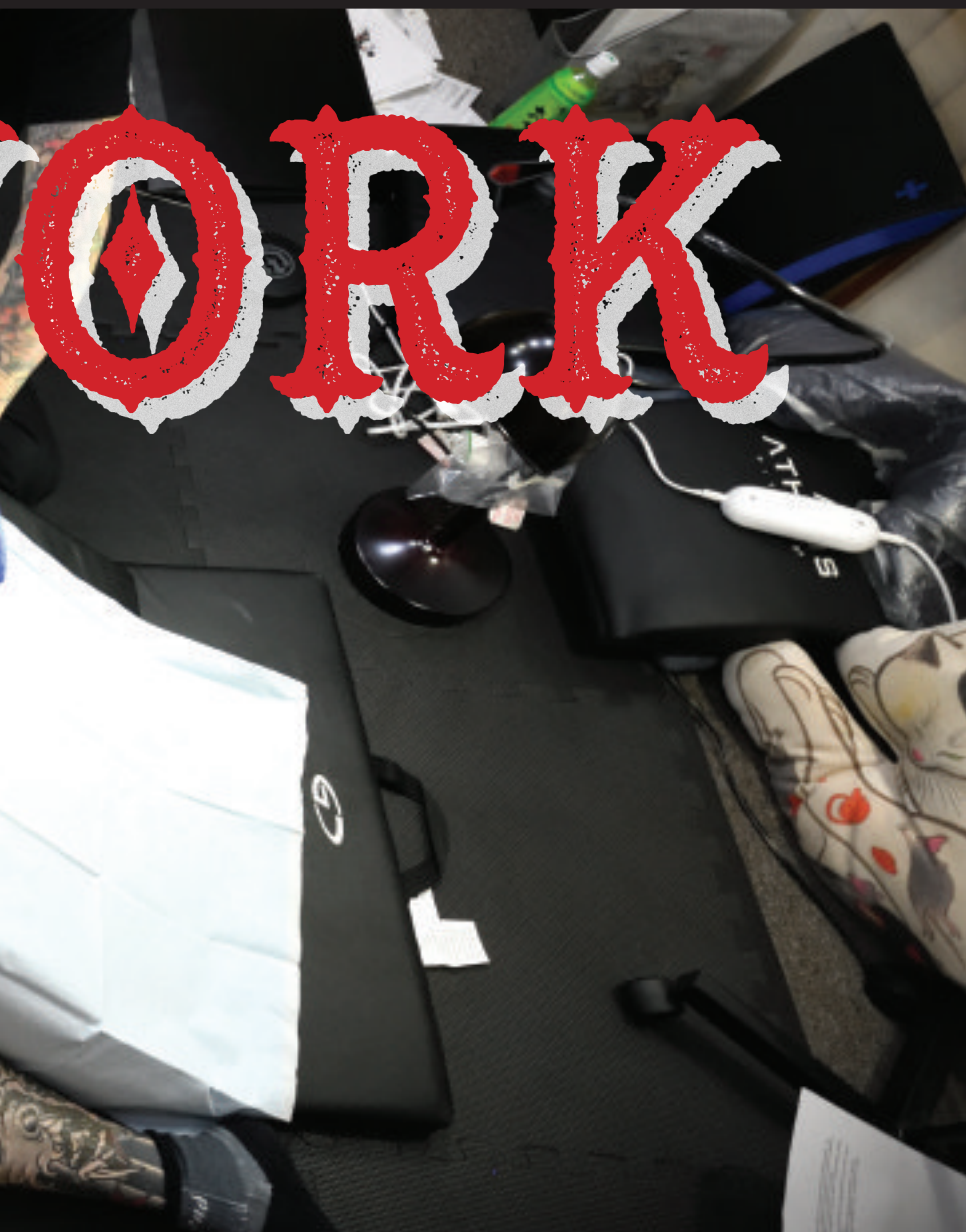
Instead, Taki left a different mark on the world.

MARK OF IDENTITY

As a kid, Taki often felt conflicted and rebellious while searching for his identity as a minority in America. Then he discovered traditional Japanese tattooing.

"Here was this art form that was uniquely Japanese, but it was also very counterculture, very underground," he says.

In Japan, the traditional style of tattooing has become associated with the culture of the Yakuza (organized crime groups) and largely condemned, forcing many artists to operate in secret and obtain clients solely by word of mouth. But for Taki in California, it became a "mark



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of identity” that he intended to embrace.

That intention led him to the studio of Horiyoshi III, a powerhouse in the Japanese tattoo community.

“I think Horiyoshi [III] will go down as the most prolific tattoo artist in Japan,” Taki predicts. “Easily, the most published. In a million years from now, he’ll be in the top five ever.”

In high school, Taki discovered Horiyoshi in Ed Hardy’s legendary *Tattootime* publication. Years later, in 1998, he returned to Japan to receive a back piece in traditional style from the artist. The piece was completed over the course of ten days in the blistering August humidity of

Yokohama. Excessive perspiration led to Taki’s lower back getting infected.

Taki says it never occurred to him to ask Horiyoshi for an apprenticeship, but Horiyoshi’s plans differed: he presented the idea to Taki. However, Horiyoshi didn’t want the training to happen in Japan; he wanted to spread his legacy to the US. The arrangement worked out through frequently faxed drawings sent back and forth between the two and regular trips to Japan for Taki.

Part of his mentorship involved learning the tebori method of tattooing, which dates back to the early 1600s. Rather than an electric tattoo machine, a wand-like tool called a “nomi” is used with a series

of needles at the end (the “hari”). The artist guides the nomi with their fingers in order to inject ink placed on the needles in the precise location on the skin. It’s repetitive and labor intensive and, today, State of Grace is one of only a handful of shops in the US practicing it.

Four years after his mentorship began, under Horiyoshi III’s direction, Taki opened State of Grace.

BROTHERHOOD

Kazuaki “Horitomo” Kitamura, known simply as “Tomo,” grew up reading manga comics and surfing in the coastal Mie prefecture south of Nagoya. Having not been allowed many toys as a kid, he was fascinated by his own ability to create whole worlds through drawing. When high school came around, he filled his electives with art classes. To appease his strict father, he hid paper inside his textbook, lending the appearance of studying when he was really drawing.

Tomo received his first tattoo from a street artist named Sabado and became hooked on the art form. Right away, he began learning to tattoo from Sabado and became part of a movement bringing American-style body art to Japan in the 1990s.

Despite Japan’s societal view on tattooing, many in the country from Gen X separated the hip American traditional style from Japan’s own taboo art form. As a result, Tomo helped open shops in Nagoya, Tokyo and Osaka. They were among the first public tattoo shops in all of Japan, consequently opening doors for Tomo to become a household name in the worldwide tattoo industry.

However, by 2001 Tomo grew tired of the American style.

“I started seeking a style based on Japanese culture because I was in Japan,” he recalls. “Learning about the traditions made me want to do it even more.”

Along the way, Tomo got his hands on Horiyoshi III’s book *100 Demons*, which depicted ancient Japanese mythological creatures. He was awestruck by the book’s art and,

like Taki, sought out Horiyoshi for a back piece. Just as with Taki, the conversation quickly turned into a master-apprentice relationship.

“Somehow he found out my wish to learn Japanese tattoo, and he offered saying, ‘Want to try?’” Tomo recalls.

By that time Taki, who had always admired Tomo’s work from afar, had been apprenticing under Horiyoshi for three years. He says he was thrilled when Tomo joined the same tattoo family.

Family is an apt word to describe the mentor-apprentice relationship in Japanese tattoo culture. Apprentices often refer to each other as “otouto,” for younger brother, or “aniki” for older brother, the term Taki still uses when referring to Tomo.

“He’s always been there for me,” Taki says. “State of Grace wouldn’t be the same if he hadn’t come here.”

When Tomo joined, Horiyoshi said goodbye to several other apprentices and brought on new ones. Having successfully mentored Taki from afar, more international tattoo sons joined the family, but Taki remained the only one in the US, then working on Berryessa in San Jose.

“Horiyoshi constantly aims for improvement and ends up inventing his own style. That’s how he gets respect from me and everybody,” Tomo says. He remembers Horiyoshi tattooing all day and reading all night, all in the name of improving his craft.

EXTRAORDINARY TALENT

After five and a half years of studying under Horiyoshi III, Tomo began to think about opening his own shop. However, he says, the situation in Japan “wasn’t great back then,” and it was hard to expect a better future there.

“Back in my Nagoya days, going to the conventions inspired me to work in America someday,” he says. “But because I had no education, I didn’t qualify for the working visa at the time.”

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BODY 49

Exploring his options, he asked Taki to help him and the two learned about the O-1 visa reserved for “individuals with extraordinary ability or talent.”

In 2007, Tomo’s application for an O-1 visa was accepted and he moved to San Jose. When asked if he enjoys San Jose, he answers, “Of course, it’s awesome! I feel comfortable living in San Jose, especially in Japantown.”

While Taki believes that Horiyoshi is “hands down” the greatest of all time, Tomo, he says, is next in line. It’s a belief not lost on many State of Grace clients.

“I was tattooing this guy the other day and Tomo walks over and my client had a meltdown saying, ‘Holy shit, that’s Horitomo!’” Taki says laughing.

Tomo isn’t the only State of Grace artist to obtain that visa. Horifuji also immigrated from Japan citing his extraordinary talent, joining the shop in 2016.

Tomo and Taki had both befriended Horifuji previously in Japan. “We wanted to add more authentic Japanese flavor to the shop,” Taki says. At the recommendation of Tomo, they invited Horifuji to join State of Grace.

Horifuji says he doesn’t regret it at all. His fellow artists give him “wonderful and positive vibes.” Taki says, while Horifuji was great at his craft when he arrived, “in the last few years he has become phenomenal.”

BEYOND ART

Sefa Samatua also joined State of Grace in 2016. Growing up on San Jose’s East Side, he remembers being mesmerized by his grandfather’s Pe’a, a Samoan tattoo of dark lines, dots, and arrows spanning from the mid-back to the knees and an ancient rite of passage and honor for Samoan men.

“As I grew, through elementary, junior high, and high school, I’m drawing it,” Samatua says. “I’m drawing it every day. The culture behind it and what it represents, it gave me an understanding of who I was as a person.” Whenever he

struggled with his own identity, “I always went back to my grandfather,” he says.

Ultimately, it was that same spirit that drove Samatua to begin a career as a Polynesian tattoo artist.

“It was the history behind what my grandfather instilled in me that made me want to carry it on,” he says.

However, it wasn’t just about his own experience: it was about making something accessible for his community locally.

“When I started my wife said, ‘If you’re going to do it, you’re going to be good.’ I told her I was going to be one of the best,” he says. “There are a lot of Polynesians here in San Jose and I want to put that art on the map.”

Taki believes Samatua has achieved exactly that.

“I see his position in San Jose and to me, it’s very redolent of these chiefs in Samoa doing a service for the village,” Taki claims. “San Jose is like this big small town, and everyone knows this fucking guy. To my knowledge, he was the first Samoan tattooer here.”

Around the South Bay, Samatua is joined by other notable artists producing Polynesian body art, like Orly Locquiao at Humble Beginnings (who illustrated *Metro*’s 2022 Best of Silicon Valley issue) and Roc Niko at Floating House Tattoo.

Samatua’s glowing reputation for Somoan tattoo art speaks to the shop’s reputation at large and the vision that Taki and the rest of the artists share. “It’s beyond just art. I think we’re all pushing a cultural agenda. I don’t mean agenda in a bad way, but the vocabulary of what we’re tattooing onto people represents cultures.”

PRESERVING CULTURE

For Taki, the body art is merely one avenue he leverages to honor his Japanese heritage and tattoo culture at large.

“A lot of tattoo art is preserved through oral history,” he states. “That’s why it’s important to put it into a book form, because a lot of this stuff gets lost.”



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TATTOO FAMILY “We all feed off each other,” says artist Colin Baker of his tattoo family at State of Grace.

By now, Taki has played an instrumental role in producing and publishing over 25 books portraying and documenting the work of various tattoo artists, including artists in his own shop. Notably, he’s archived the work of Tomo’s “Monmon Cats,” a series that has now become well-known across the tattoo community.

“It’s hilarious, but there are people who think Monmon cats have been around for hundreds of years,” Taki says. In reality, it’s just Tomo creating his own world with his art, as always.

Currently, Taki is working on a book displaying the work of Pinky Yun, a tattoo artist originally from Shanghai, China, who opened Dragon Tattoo in Alameda in 1972. According to Taki, Pinky “got San Jose ready for big tattoos,” paving the way for many of the Japanese body suits and tribal sleeves coming out of his own shop.

Taki has also produced two museum exhibits for the Japanese

American National Museum in Los Angeles. The first, titled *Perseverance: Japanese Tattoo Tradition in a Modern World*, debuted in 2014. It featured exquisite photographs of tattoos done by himself, Tomo, and a handful of other artists

After the success of that exhibit, many Polynesian artists asked Taki to do something similar for their culture’s tattoo style. *Tatau: Marks of Polynesia* launched in July of 2016 in similar fashion and is currently on display at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Following *Tatau*, several prominent Polynesian tattoo artists invited Taki to receive a Pe’a. Viewing it as an opportunity to respectfully experience a cultural ritual he otherwise wouldn’t have, he was honored to accept.

“When I got my [Pe’a], I already had a body suit. It isn’t so much about how it looks; it’s about going through this ritual,” he says.

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COMMUNITY & EXCELLENCE

Though its entrance is still discreet, State of Grace's legend has been quick to grow. In 2017, VICE News featured the shop in a short documentary. Taki was even invited to be a guest judge on the reality TV show *Ink Master* in 2014. Taki jokes that despite all the work he put into his two exhibits and dozens of books, "more people saw me when I was on TV for 30 seconds."

"The quality of tattooing coming out of State of Grace is awesome. Each artist is unique, the designs have so much integrity and also show a cohesive overall look," says Paul Dobleman, a tattoo artist of 17 years at Black Heart Tattoo in San Francisco.

Dobleman became familiar with the shop through the Bay Area Tattoo Convention, an event Taki has co-organized since 2004 and one that Dobleman describes as "world renowned." According to him, State of Grace is "a place of community and excellence."

Pam Yoshida, owner of Nikkei Traditions, the store directly below State of Grace, agrees, calling them "a great presence in the neighborhood." Specifically mentioning Taki's museum exhibits, she says "they've taken tattooing to another level by incorporating culture."

According to Yoshida, Taki has repeatedly volunteered his help with her several nonprofits.

"He's not up there just running a business, he's wanting to be involved and help the community, too," she says. "I think that's just so amazing."

Taki has also been involved with San Jose Greater Downtown Economic Recovery Taskforce, the only tattoo artist involved. District 3 Councilmember and San Jose mayoral candidate Raul Perez calls Taki "a tremendous role and participant" in the taskforce, saying Taki was able to "provide advocacy for the county, the state, and the federal government that incorporated their industry."

A tattoo enthusiast himself, Perez already knew a lot of the history and



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ARM CHAIR A returning customer getting work done by Taki.

prestige behind State of Grace: he's currently on the waitlist to get his own Taki tattoo.

PERMANENT INK

Artists at State of Grace often refer to the shop as a family, one that they all were striving to be a part of.

"In the back of my head, I always knew that I belonged here," says Matthew Shamah, a well-respected artist who learned the craft of Japanese traditional tattooing in Japan over 20 years ago. As his first anniversary at State of Grace quickly approaches, he says he can feel himself improving "faster than at any other time in my career."

Colin Baker, a Japanese American from Sacramento, started out as a

client of Taki's in the mid-2000s. During their third session, knowing Baker was a graphic designer, Taki asked him if he had a sketchbook. Sure enough, Baker had been bringing his sketchbook to every session, in the hope that Taki would ask. A mentorship began shortly afterward.

"I knew who Horiyoshi was, so I understood the gravity of the whole situation," Baker says. "And Horiyoshi had just moved here when I started apprenticing, so that was very exciting. I've always considered him to be one of the best Japanese tattooers in the world."

Horiyoshi III, Baker says, "was pretty much the definition of Japanese tattooing." It was one of Taki's early books about Horiyoshi's

art that led Baker to discover Taki and seek him out.

For Tyler Harrington, an American traditional artist who joined the shop six years ago, he says "there was a huge amount of pressure coming here." He remembers reading about Taki, Tomo, Shamah and Baker in various publications growing up. Now, he's honored to call them his peers.

"These are my friends, and I would do anything for anybody here. I live my dream every day."

It's a sentiment shared by all members of the shop.

"When we come to work, we all get along very well. We all feed off each other," Baker says.

Samatua reports missing the shop each time he goes on vacation.

"I can't wait to get back," he says.

Molly Kitamura, a State of Grace artist and Taki's wife, began at the shop by doing permanent eyebrow makeup and started accepting tattoo clients two years ago. Like Harrington, she feels the gravity that comes with the State of Grace mantle.

"There's a lot of pressure to be worthy of tattooing here. State of Grace has a certain reputation, and I would not want to lower that," she says.

One of the shop's newest members, Alberto Garcia, joined State of Grace in January 2021 as an apprentice. Just as Taki and Tomo had found Horiyoshi, he found their shop through tattoo publications. And just like them, he started as a client getting a back piece with the thought of apprenticeship far from his mind. But now, poetically, he hopes to be the first San Jose native to join the tattoo family tree of Horiyoshi III, through the only shop possible to do so in the US—mere miles from where he grew up.

"They could be anywhere, but they're right here," Garcia says. "Being part of something that means something to a lot of people that aren't even from here, it's kind of mind blowing."

Translation work provided by Keiko Komada.