

# BIOGRAPHY

Robert Truszkowski earned a BFA in Printmaking from Queen's University and a MFA in Print Media from Concordia University. He has exhibited and lectured across Canada and internationally, winning awards and recognition as an important artist working in contemporary Printmaking media. Before joining the faculty at the University of Regina, Robert printed editions for several well-known Canadian artists including Betty Goodwin and Ed Pien at Stinger Editions (Concordia University) in Montréal. He is the founder of 版画島 Hangashima Press, and he has taught Printmaking, digital imaging and contemporary art theory at Queen's, Concordia and the Haliburton School of the Arts. In 2018, he was Visiting Professor at the Kyoto University of Art and Design, and Kyoto Seika University, in Kyoto, Japan.

As a contemporary artist working in Print-based media, Robert's practice straddles a treacherous conceptual and material divide. The history of printmaking is the history of humankind's enlightenment; printed matter revolutionized the way in which knowledge and information could, and would, be spread. Printing gave birth to the Renaissance. Printing gave birth to democratization of the idea of ideas. Printing gave birth to communication. Robert's work references this social history of information, power, and authority. Codification of personal-narrative semiotics and strong auto-biographical tendencies toy with his keen interest in the social, commercial, and technical history of Print itself, as well as religion, popular culture, science, language, and rap music.

This publication accompanies the exhibition, "WEEB", presented at the Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, from Nov 22nd, 2024 - Jan 23rd, 2025

**Cover Image:** "WEEB", 2024,  
Silkscreen on washi paper, cane, wood, brass, lights,  
Robert Truszkowski

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**WEEB**

Robert Truszkowski

Nov 22nd, 2024 - Jan 23rd, 2025



## AN INTERVIEW WITH *ROBERT TRUSZKOWSKI*

### Q) What is this exhibition about?

The concept for the exhibition as whole, and the pieces in it specifically, is partly about this celebration. But more importantly, it's about leaning into the often complex experiences and obsessions we have, that make us who we are. As any artist will tell you (unless they are fibbing), to be an artist is to be more of a window (or a lens), than a mirror. There is an old saying that artists reflect society, but I don't think any artist actually said that or thought that. Artists interpret, and they show... they tap into their own histories, in order to first, I think, make sense of their place in the world. Sometimes, yes, they are trying to make sense of the world itself, but it's always from a variety of situated perspectives.

### Q) What inspired you to create this exhibition?

I think there is a universality to the concept of obsession, despite the fact that we may not see (a lot of?) ourselves in this way. Because each of the works are different (though connected) it's tough to talk about inspiration as a singular thing or idea. I do know that I am very fortunate to have a job that demands that I make new things, think about new things, and engage in "research-creation". The generation of new knowledge sounds a bit lofty, possibly even a bit obtuse, but having the time and space and support to think and do really brings it back down to earth. It's a great privilege to be an artist, to be a professor, and to be with people who ask questions, and push themselves (and me) each day.

### Q) Do you see "weeb" culture as a form of escapism, or is it something more complex in your interpretation?

I am kinda poking fun at myself when I use this term. I am not a conventional weeb... I didn't grow up watching anime in the basement of my parents' suburban home, I didn't do cosplay in highschool, and I didn't dream of flying to Tokyo and hanging out in front of 7/11's in my dropped Toyota AE86. I came to the obsession with Japan, for instance, at the age of 39 when I first travelled to Kyoto for an exhibition. My obsession was sparked by food, by the deep appreciation for things like architecture, and knives, and paper. By printmaking! It wasn't until I was gushing about a recent Japan trip in front of my intro Printmaking class a few years ago when one of the students said, "Rob, you're a weeb!". I didn't even know that word meant! But once I looked into it, and started connected the broad concepts of weeb culture (and indeed, the more recent reclamation of the word from accusation to proud self-titled)

I saw parallels in my own approach to Japan, specifically, but to the video game culture of my youth, my interest in science fiction, to art and Printmaking, to rap music, and language and communication. I think I have borrowed, maybe even appropriated, the term weeb, expanding it to help fit and describe who I am.

### Q) A common criticism of 'weeb' culture is the tendency to appropriate or claim ownership of Japanese culture. In your view, how can someone approach their interest in a particular culture, like anime or Japan, in a respectful and thoughtful way?

This is a biggest question, I think. Appropriation is part of the language of art, post-modernism to be sure, and at the very heart of any conversation about Printmaking in the contemporary world. Culture appropriation is something else, though, and I can safely say that no artist wants to be accused of it. For my WEEB lanterns, and in fact for many other works I have created since 2018, I entered the conversation from what I hope has been a respectful and reverential position. I have avoided superficial nods to Japanese tropes, imagery, words or sentences. I have avoided ripping off stylistic elements. In the West, everything is pretty much up for grabs, but for me, Japan has been too important a part of my life for more than 8 years to be careless or glib about it in my work. At the heart of a lot (maybe most) of the work I have made since I was an undergraduate student, has been the concept of communication and language. And organically, my journey into Japanese culture began with, and has continued to be, the study of the language. I practice and study every single day. My Duolingo streak is off-the-charts! (Not really, but it is going on 7 years). In fact, I did a whole series of work in 2018-20 that centred on Duolingo phrases. The first work I made, while I was a visiting professor at the Kyoto School of the Arts in 2018 was based on the first fully-formed sentence I wrote myself, and could understand, in Japanese. (The phrase was "I like the Shinkansen", written in Hiragana and Kanji, and produced as a carborundum etching. The students and the faculty were delighted at this piece, by the way, telling me that they too loved the Shinkansen! ["bullet train"]). Making the lanterns for WEEB, was not easy, and it was not something accomplished in a weekend. It might be hard to believe, but videos for how to do this sort of thing are not simply available on Youtube.

Because I love paper, and wood, and glue, and light, I was ready, modestly so, but ready, to take on this project, but it was hard. I scoured the internet, eventually finding 3 short videos, in Japanese, aimed at Japanese school children – essentially videos to explain to them how and why their cultural traditions were important. I screenshotted dozens and dozens of grainy video stills, I translated the Japanese, I built the tools and jigs I needed to make the lanterns. I tested and tested and tested papers and glues, I found a non-bamboo replacement for the traditionally bamboo "ribs", I assembled more than 15 full size lanterns before I got to the point where I understand the basics of how to do this well. I tested all sorts of printing on washi paper, trying to understand how it would hold up to the rigours of assembly into a moving, almost living sculpture. I built a wood steamer, made wood-bending jigs, and figured out how to make round collars out of maple wood that did not want to be bent! My journey, whether into the language, or into making these lanterns has not been surface level cosplay. I believe that art must pose more questions than provide answers, and despite my earnest intentions, if the question of cultural appropriation comes up, I try to meet them head on, and with a combination of self-deprecating humour, and humility.

### Q) What materials, techniques, or mediums did you choose for this show, and how do they connect to the theme of obsession or fandom culture?

Printmaking connects all three concepts (or conceptual starting points) and it is the fourth, but most important obsession, in the exhibition. For WEEB and for Cloud Mountain, I use silkscreen printing, and in a mostly conventional way. Printmaking is about repetition and re-production, and you see elements in both works, repeated in more-or-less identical fashion. For The Horrors of War I use copper photoetching with chine collé, but the thing that sets this piece apart is the fact that each print is a discrete photographic frame from the original gif, so each print is totally different from the next. However similar it may appear, there are not 30 identical images (which is obvious, of course, when you get up close and look at them), but the obsession really becomes part of the material because I have sidestepped pretty much everything that Printmaking is supposed to do, in order to make this work. But Printmaking was 100% necessary for this work, because it references Goya's Disasters of War, arguably the most important suite of etchings ever made. Goya largely reinvented etching and engraving through his use of "aquatint" (a process used to imbue copper line drawings with tonality), and to make any work that even somewhat referenced the Disasters must, by definition, be produced in Print. As a important aside washi paper is found in all three works (the paper of the WEEB lanterns,

every single pasted sheet in Cloud Mountain, and the chine collé elements of The Horrors of War. Wood plays an important role in the frames as well as the lanterns, and looking closely, wood-grain texture is part of the "forest" elements of the pasted sheets.

### Q) How do you hope people engage with the idea of obsession? Do you want them to think about their own obsessions in a new way?

I don't think that obsession is particularly foreign to most people, but I do wonder how often we interrogate our relationship to it. "Interests" or "hobbies" seem to slip quite easily into subtle eye-raising behaviour, without much notice or fanfare. From gaming chairs, to man-caves, stadiums full of Roughrider fans or Swifties, obsession is very close to the surface. For the record, I don't think obsession is bad, or a negative trait, even though it seems to come as a judgement more than simple observation. I suppose to try to answer this question in as straight-forward a way that I can, I would say that I hope that someone looking at the work in this exhibition, raising their eyebrow, and musing out loud "this is kinda weird... why would he make this stuff?", pauses for a split second and considers their vinyl record collection, or the jumbo fluffy dog bed they have for their six chihuahuas, or their seasons-tickets to the Riders!

### Q) Do you expect fans of anime and "weeb" culture to have a different response to your work than those outside of that world? How do you anticipate those reactions might differ?

Honestly, I am not quite sure. This is the first body of work where I have started to face the concept of weeb culture, or obsession, directly. And like most of the conceptual approaches I take to any work I make, I complicate it, remix it, and re-imagine it. Drilling down, weeb culture is related to, or possibly adjacent to my own interest and obsession with Japanese culture, but I am not a weeb in the classic sense. (At least I don't think so!) So this question is a good one and a tough one. I hope that a true weeb ☐ will recognize elements of weebness, despite the lack of anime content or flashes of manga-esque text flashing across the walls.

### Q) Please describe the process for creating your works. Are they planned in advance or created intuitively?

At a certain point, every artist has to learn (or re-learn) to trust their instincts. When I make new work, I am balancing that approach, with the fact that I am a hard-core planner! To be honest, this is probably part of what initially attracted me to Printmaking; there certainly is room for inspiration and serendipity, but in order to actually do the thing, you need to plan out what and how you are going to do it.

### Q) Looking ahead, do you think this show will lead to further exploration of similar themes in your future work?

Yes, definitely. One of the things that I love about making art is that I am always thinking about what comes next. A student recently asked me which work is my favourite (thinking about my career), and I answered that the one I am currently making is my favourite. But as I think a little more deeply though – and maybe it's a bit strange to say – the next piece is probably the most exciting.