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## Jienan Yuan (Chien Yuan) interview

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Interviewer: Lauren Smith  
Artist: Jienan Yuan (Chien Yuan)  
Site: John T. Richardson Library, DePaul University, Chicago, IL  
Date: 6/8/09

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies*

LS\* Tell me a little bit about your background. Where did you grow up? What was your educational experience like? How did your parents raise you? Etc...

JY\*I was born in Evanston grew up in Ann Arbor Michigan then moved to the west side of Cleveland at age of twelve. Ann Arbor is a Big Ten school so it's extremely diverse. It's like a microcosm in Michigan. Not realizing that that was where the Minute Men and all the crazies lived. So growing up my friends were white, black, Filipino, Pakistani. So we moved to the west side of Cleveland and it was 94 percent Caucasian population. If I didn't have a strong sense of identity already by my parents I probably would have had a meltdown. I remember the first day of six grade thinking mother fucker I can't fucking do this. So sixth to ninth grade I was pretty angry and mean. It was probably bad for people around me because they thought I was insufferable. Then around eighth grade I had to change that attitude because I wanted a girlfriend. But that definitely had a very interesting impact on me. Have you ever heard of The Heathers?

LS\* No I haven't. It sounds familiar!

JY\* It was based on my school, actually. I went to Ohio University. Not the Buckeyes, We're the Bobcats. We're like division three we're defeated by the homeless and like nine year olds. I started in '95 and their apex of athletics ended in like '91. Pee Wee football could defeat us; and the retards.

LS\* You mentioned that your parents instilled a sense of identity in you. How so?

My father was a huge part of it. He actually used to sing opera. When he was a strapping young man in Taiwan he sang opera and can play Chinese instruments. I grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese and can still speak it with a third grade proficiency. They exposed us to a lot of Asian culture. It was presented to me growing up especially in terms of Asian cinema. He (my dad) has great taste. My brother and I talk about in terms of showing us Japanese Samurai films and then exposing us to classic Chinese cinema. And Jackie Chan was a constant presence in our home. Growing up I always had a sense of Asian males being kind of bad ass. If you just combine these things like linguistics, and culture, and food this is something that my parents, and my dad being the military man, my brother and I call him Mussolini (laughs) because he demanded this presence growing up. So I never saw my identity being an other, ever. Even experiencing adolescence and my teen years in an all white environment, I thought everyone else was

off their rocket or different. One of my history teachers would read us his lectures and have fifteen minutes in class and on one level your enjoying it. On the other it's like, "Really?" I used to bring in Asian films and it blew their mind. Showing Chinese fighting movies to people who normally wouldn't watch it. This kind of went into my belief of how much better these things were. I think if you grow up in any environment categorized as the other, if you already have a sense of self, before you have a sense of yourself at all, you can get through anything. That's luck having two very strong parents. I speak to my mom in Chinese and with our kids they (my parents) only speak to them in Chinese. I'm not doing a very good job with them because I think in English, not in Chinese. I think if you have that growing up you turn out great. So much about Asian American art is about identity. I believe if you go into art already having figured that out, you make better art. Because you skip the part of artist therapy. In terms of the art I make, that has to do with what I do on the record label. Others dealt with it in a different way.

LS\* Have you ever had the chance to visit your country?

JY\* I've been to Taiwan when I was five. And I am an inherently lazy person, what are all of the excuses? (Laughs) In Taiwan, the television, the oppressive heat, and throwing up in the market because of the heat. You're dying of thirst and there's a wall of sewer and you can't process this. You're five and you don't know how to breathe in this heat. Watching a Chinese action show; it's this show called Transformation where basically the lead character switches actors throughout the show and he has to fight evil and he trains. I saw it when I was five about twenty five years ago and I can remember it clear as day.

LS\* When will you go back?

JY\* I would love to go back but now that we have kids, it's hard. But I can remember the heat; you are never comfortable.

LS\* In my current studies about Asian American artists, many seem to struggle with the topic of identification. Do you, as an Asian American, find yourself to be struggling with an identity?

JY\* How do I say this? So in terms of self reference, it's nothing beyond artist. It's narcissistic enough to identify yourself as an artist. "What are you?" "Oh, I'm an artist." Not only are you saying, "I'm creative," but you're saying "What I do as art is note worthy." Here, there is no love for art. In terms of art, it's difficult to say you're an artist, in the U.S., in general. The next question is how to figure Asian American into it. That maybe separates what I do and my immediate peers do; you cannot control how you label yourself. You, more or less, focus on the art and keep on keeping on because if someone comes at you labeling you Asian American, what do you do? I'm not...true, I am...also very true. But for me, I would call myself an open source artist. Art is always sorting something out. You're doing it for a reason. It's either expression, emotion; something is being conveyed something is being communicated. You cannot control how

that's interpreted, how your friends, how your parents read it. I'm not going to say I don't label myself but in art you have to be something. I do have people who subscribe to themselves as a certain identity. I think if you do it, it just kind of kills your art in the end. What if you transcend that art? Then in the end, you're fucked. Do you just re-do your whole artist history? Once you have that dialogue with them they do what they want with it. It could be excessively frustrating. And "the key of being a good artist is knowing when to let go". Any artist, you can talk to them about when do they let go of their art? IF you try to let go, what happens when you put it out there? If you try to control it, what do you do with it when it gets out there?  $1+1=2$ . At the end of the day art is subjective and you just have to make peace with that reality.

LS\* You mentioned a term and I really like how you put it. What was it about therapy?

JY\* Artist therapy. In terms of that artist therapy... On some level it will be real but mostly it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. But I'm not trying to negate what someone else is working through but it's depressing and I don't want to hear about it. I went to this poetry reading a while ago and this person just started crying about her past and it became this group therapy session. Like, are you up there because you're working your own shit out? It becomes all about them and their fucking problems. I was one of the people in the audience who were literally stunned. I was horrified of this show of therapy. As an audience member I'm suffering. (Sarcastically) "Good for the artist for working it out." But some people do need to work it out in their own specific way and if they need to do it like that. I do feel that creativity is somewhat of a gift. IF you can think, act, creatively it's a gift. And it's a total shame if you squander it. There's a natural knee jerk reaction to creative thinking. I'm also a very strong proponent for pushing things along and forward. I like what their doing therefore I'm going to do what their doing. Hopefully someone in the audience will have the same feeling. In cultural studies it goes into more cultural studies. You're very much in a microcosm and you will inherently do it towards yourself. And I'm not saying you have to go assimilate. DO NOT ASSIMILATE!!! But also don't go into a mini-click because it's a limiter.

LS\* So, let's talk about your career, specifically. When, how and why did you first get involved with Actually Records?

JY\* Well in terms of the why, there is a life changing event. I had a horrible car accident in '99. It's like I was do or die at that moment. I had come right out of college and I had this world is my oyster thing and ever since then I've just kind of been living against time. Sadly I went with the option that raised my blood pressure. I've always been a cultural geek I wear it as a badge; I can't hide it. In high school I was obsessed with all of these bad ass record labels and creating a community. I've always been a big music geek. You always wanna start one or run one. I moved to Chicago and I've been making music for about ten years and the other artists at the Asian American Artists Collective, where I met Laura. It was just one of those things where why don't we start a record label. It's a gateway, a way to present what you do to the world under a certain aesthetic label. It's just about presenting that through that label. If you can have that sort of

aesthetic concept into every release, people can see you're about something. In May, 2003 it came into the scene. As for the how: Aesthetic parameters: artwork has to be very strong and tie into the label, because we're an album label. All the classic albums are 45 to 50 minutes. Probably the worst idea is to start a label with mp3s. If we can create albums that work as complete works of art, we are doing good work. If you look at the new Eminem and Timbaland... I never wanna hear seventeen songs from anyone. The singles are all very much in the beginning, one I can clearly remember, but even Nelly Furtado, the first four singles, the middle (songs) were working out stuff and the end was the big finish. I would say the best pop album was Rhianna's last album because even the weakest songs sounded like a single. In terms of stuff we're releasing, experimental and electronic music. It's very experimental stuff. The process of creating an album is very, very difficult. "Pain is temporary, art is forever." The agony of figuring it out if you know what you're releasing is bad ass. You really wanna kill people (during the process). You literally wanna kill people. Sometimes, I think, "If they don't agree on this, I will stab them." And I will fight tooth and nail to tell them the bass needs to be turned up.

LS\* How do you believe your music is viewed or perceived by the public? The key of where to make your peace with it, it's almost better that they really fucking hate it because it means you really hit something. If they kind of just have a milky toast reaction to it, I haven't hit a nerve. If you only want people to love it, there will always be a backlash. If you put it out there, it should have some sort of polarizing effect because you're tapping into people's passions or making them think or analyze and if it doesn't do that... then there is the function of art like I'm releasing an EP at the end of the month and it's very meditative and pleasant. The next album is very extreme. People are either going to hate it or love it. But mine is very... Like I hate art with a function! The key for me to art with a function I like. I do a lot of just to fuck around with genre exercises, if I hear something that makes me want to puke, I try to create something with that put up or shut up mentality.

That's my process but who listens to it and what they get from it they could be bored to death! They could just be like, "Give me something with a beat and I can dance to!" You can't control it. That's the key to growing as an artist is knowing when to say you're done. Who can't tweak something until the end of time, you know?

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