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Cynthia Tom Interview

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Interviewer: Lauren Swift

Artist: Cynthia Tom, President of the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWA)

Phone interview Chicago, IL/San Francisco, CA

Date: 5/31/09 6:30pm CST

*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.*

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1. Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

Cynthia is 4th generation Chinese on her mother's side and 2nd generation Chinese on her father's side. She was born and raised in San Francisco. Being raised poor, like her parents she learned the art of making things out of found objects with her mother's help. She has a business degree from San Francisco State University; originally seeking a degree in Social Welfare, Cynthia has always wanted to help/support people. She now embraces this desire through her artwork. She does not hold an art degree. One of the benefits, Cynthia feels of getting an art degree is the networking into the art world.

Cynthia was recently laid off as a long term pharmaceutical sales rep. That was her paying job, which allowed her to travel outside of California. She loves to show her work and meet her customers to open up a dialogue about her work.

2. How did you become involved with the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA)?

Cynthia officially joined the organization in 1996. She discovered AAWAA because a friend suggested that she look into the organization to discover and explore what it means to be Asian American. She grew up in a multi-racial neighborhood and never felt like an outsider as an Asian. She is the current president of AAWAA's board of directors. She was president in 1998 as well, but stepped down when she got burnt out. She became president again in 2007; she was asked to come back to do marketing for AAWAA's new anthology. She had to step up to the plate or there was a possibility that they would dissolve as an organization. AAWAA is the non-profit organization. She seeks to instill a very effective communication style that frowns on the passive-aggressive communication, a spur for women's everyday lives. The organization's minimal programming is due to the fact that members are very busy and struggle to find time to donate to the organization. AAWAA's current long-term project, titled "A Place of Her Own," which she affectionately calls "her baby," aims to make art more than just a hanging on the wall. It has a social justice element.

3. How do you identify yourself? We have discussed artists during class that reject

being labeled as an “Asian American artist” because they feel that that label limits the way their art is received. What is your opinion?

She identifies herself in any way that people need to label her work. Labels do not mean that much to her, she does not worry about the way she is perceived by those who don't understand her work. She states that some artists are afraid to identify with AAWAA because they don't want to be labeled as an Asian American artist. That is a topic for discussion amongst artists and scholars. She is frustrated that some West Coast Asian American artists criticize AAWAA for not being political or activist enough. She questions, “Does art always have to have an activist perspective to be valid, is that what Asian American Art means?” For Cynthia, her work's point is relative to whomever is relating to it on some level. Part of showing her artwork is to uncover its meaning through dialogue between the artist and the audience.

4. How have your parents' artwork influenced your own work?

Neither of her parents identified as artists, her father, although he was always creating something and an amazing ceramicist later in life. Her father never acknowledged her art until he was dying. When he was in the hospital, he asked to see specific painting, so she hung copies on the ceiling, she also spent hours painting in front of him. Her father never showed his work. He was always just in the garage making stuff with his hands. It was normal for her parents to always be creating something. Cynthia believes she inherited the way she looks at the world, the way she takes in information and fills visual. Throughout Cynthia's life, her mother was always collecting found objects, neighbors still leave broken jewelry on her door knob. She collaborates with her mother to create artwork. She makes color copies of her paintings and gives them to her mother, who cuts them up and creates new pieces out of them.

5. Please explain the significance of the elaborate dresses that are depicted in many of your works.

Cynthia loves looking at and painting dresses, she often looks to British Vogue, especially the runway haute couture section, for inspiration. She loves the female form—mainly voluptuous. Cynthia tries not to consciously put any symbols into her artwork because it becomes too literal. She says adding icons can take away from the subtle soul of the piece. She tries not to have purposeful intent prior to finishing her pieces. She strives to have her work aesthetically pleasing to her eye. Her paintings develop like the telling of a story, but she truly discovers the story by talking about her art with other people. She paints until it looks right and then explains/finds the meaning after the work is complete. The lighting and color she uses in her paintings initially has more to do with visual pleasure as opposed to meaning. This same process is applied to choosing a title for each piece, the titles come later, she sometimes chooses a title based on what someone says about the piece, and it just sticks to that image. She is generally working on 20 to 30 pieces at once, when she gets stuck working on one piece, she moves on to another, so she is never blocked. She trusts that ideas will keep coming to her and that this is what she is supposed to be doing.

6. What caused the shift from painting on canvas to creating dioramas? Based upon the different galleries on your website, the first gallery is filled with paintings of dresses and female bodies, but the second gallery is filled with paintings of landscapes and dioramas made with recycled materials.

The landscapes are actually older than the paintings of the dresses. They were painted in response to her intense dotcom job. She would leave the house about 6am to avoid traffic

and would return home until around 8pm. She painted them so she had “a place to breathe” away from her busy lifestyle. The boxes were created for AAWAA’s latest project “A Place of Her Own.” She is actually considering taking those photos off her website. Painting is her main way of communications but she still likes to create the assemblages with found objects. If she continues to create the dioramas, she is considering creating paintings in the boxes and on the objects.

7. Is there any significance to using recycled materials in your dioramas?

Cynthia grew up with a mother who was constantly collecting found objects or discarded objects so it feels natural to use this same type of objects in her art as well. Also, this tradition was not just taught to her by her mother but it is also a passion. She loves making something out of something that someone threw away.

8. How does your Chinese heritage play into your work?

Cynthia has little desire to visit China, she does not speak Chinese. Growing up in the Mission in San Francisco, she speaks Spanish. She explores her heritage by painting portraits of the mug shots of her Great Grandmother, Grandmother and other women who were interned and interrogated on Angel Island, San Francisco. The Chinese were interrogated at Angel Island, San Francisco before they were allowed into or rejected from the USA. These paintings were based on the transcripts of their interrogations, 1923. Although she never spoke to her Grandmother in person, she was inspired and awakened by her story through these transcripts. She considers this event in history as her family’s cultural ground zero; it is where Her Chinese heritage got twisted. This series of paintings was also meant to educate her audience. This series of her art as a way of communicating and preserving history; the audience comes to view her artwork, but simultaneously gets a history lesson. Included in this series are paintings of old storefronts from San Francisco’s Chinatown, these are meditations on what she wished her Grandmother had when she was widowed mother of seven, living in San Francisco Chinatown. Her husband passed away after their 7th child was born, leaving her penniless to raise 7 children on her own.

9. What types of themes are prevalent throughout your work?

Cynthia’s paintings are generally about women or the feminine. She wants her artwork to prompt critical thinking. Inspiring critical thinking and prompting the audience to ask themselves questions about why they think the way they do and why they believe what they do. She wants to teach women how to take care of each and more importantly how to be taken care. The media, family and culture encourages competition between women. She believes women are capable of accomplishing so much if we could only support each other and let ourselves be supported by each other.

10. What are you currently working on now?

She is currently working on “A Place of Her Own,” a 5-year project in which “AAWAA will develop exhibitions, artist in residencies, literary forums, educational forums, workshops, panel discussions, online interactive web venue and so on. AAWAA asks, “What if you had a place of your own, what would it be?” As quoted from the project’s website (<http://www.aplaceofherown.org/index.html>). She also has an idea for this project that involves artists working on donated furniture for a show and after the show is complete, AAWAA would donate that furniture to a women’s shelter. She is also working on several paintings and more dioramas. She is also working on reorganizing her space and possibly renting part of it out to other people as a source of revenue. Cynthia is also working on finding new shows while trying to find a way to make money because

very few people are in the market to buy art in 2009. Also, she has started to sew again. A new ongoing installation is called *Meta IV Clothing and Curiosity Shoppe*. One dress is well tailored, but made of burlap, “The Atonement Dress, the perfect little dress for women who just can get enough guilt.” She has designed and made a few surreal dresses that she hopes to paint in the future. Cynthia blurs the lines of her mediums; she is not just a painter. She mentioned that she wants to paint on wedding dresses. She loves the sculpture of the dresses, she is not necessarily a big fan of weddings, but she loves wedding dresses. Let’s see what she is up to next.

END