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Gordon CC Liao Interview

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Interviewer: Elise Osenbaugh
Artist: Gordon CC Liao
Site: Telephone Interview
Date: May 19, 2009

*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.*

Q: Well, let's start off with a little bit of background information. Tell me where you grew up, when you were born, where you went to college etc?

A: I grew up in the south Chicago suburbs and went to the University of Illinois. I was born in 1975 in Taipei, Taiwan. My family is from southern Taiwan and my parents were both 8th generation Taiwanese. I identify myself as a Taiwanese because my family has been there for so many generations. My dad was with the Foreign Service and he moved us to the Rogers Park community of Chicago. We then moved to the far south suburbs of Park Forest when I was 3. It was very unique growing up as an Asian American in this area because it was a working class neighborhood, demographically about 50% African American and 50% Caucasian. It was not a very wealthy neighborhood and the family's incomes ranged from about \$15,000 to \$50,000 and you didn't really see a whole lot of nice cars in the area. There were no other Asian Americans my high school class, which gave me a very unique perspective growing up. I was captain of the baseball team, started on the basketball team, and had a lot of really great friends from different walks of life. I did theater and sang in choir. I loved high school. After I graduated, I went to Champaign Urbana and changed my major about four times. I took the core minimum of classes necessary to graduate with a finance degree, and put a lot of time into open mic poetry, and an acting troupe I started, which we called Motu Tsunami; Motu is gujarati and means large, and tsunami is Japanese, meaning wave. We performed comedic drama and toured round the Midwest.

Q: I know that you said earlier that you identify yourself as Taiwanese, but would you also identify as an Asian American? What does this identification mean to you?

A: I would say that I am Asian American and Taiwanese American. I have lots of friends from Asia and America and I try to truly embrace both sides of my heritage.

Q: Well, when did you become interested in the arts and when did you begin to think of it as a career path?

A: Well first off let me clarify and tell you that it is not really my career now. I almost went down that path senior year in high school but decided not to do it professionally. So I am not a professional artist, but throughout college I continued to write literature, poetry, and do singing. Then when I was in Boston earning my MBA I continued my involvement by joining an Asian American artist community.

Q: Well, when I was researching your work on the internet I came across a poem of yours titled “Typical”. I found this poem very interesting and striking. Could you tell me a little bit more about the meaning or the reason for writing this piece?

A: Oh, “Typical,” I remember that one. I wrote it about 7 years ago. The issue I am addressing in writing this piece is the depiction of Asian Americans in the media. Today, as well as 10 to 15 years ago, the media focused on Asians as the model minority. It is not quite as bad as it was when I was growing up, but you can still see the stereotypes of Asian Americans. This specific poem was a performance piece. I do not do poetry on a whim. I have two kinds of poetry; poetry for the page and poetry for the stage. When I do performance pieces I usually build a point and focus on rhymes and humor. My performance pieces are very deliberate. When I write poetry for the page, I want to be like an emotional camera capturing a specific emotional thought and reflection. Most of my performance poetry is very political compared to my poetry for the page.

Q: In my class we have discussed the pros and cons of being labeled as an Asian American Artist. Some people believe this label puts the artist in an inescapable box. How do you feel about this?

A: Every artist depending on where they grew up would answer this question differently. I choose to embrace the label of an Asian American artist. One of my inspirations is Langston Hughes. In the 1920’s he wrote a poem that basically said: “Pity the African American artist who doesn’t want his art to be categorized as African American, because he feels inferior by being labeled that way”. Asian American art cannot be separated from the person. People who feel like they get trapped in the box shouldn’t feel inferior. Spike Lee is a wonderful director and he would not be upset if someone were to label him as a black artist. I have many good friends who do not feel the same way so I do not mean to say this in attacking manner, but being an Asian American Artist is something to be proud of.

Q: I know that Typical dealt with political issues, but I was wondering if most of your pieces are centered on your Asian American identity.

A: A lot of my performance pieces deal with politics. The older I get the more I change but I will always be effected. There are a couple pieces that I will mention that I really enjoy. One piece is on Asian American identity. It is called “Open My Eyes”. It is based on the media depiction of Asian American males. I ask questions such as why you never see an Asian American male listed as most beautiful. Bruce Lee was the only Asian American depicted as an attractive man, but even that had its own set of ridicule, everyone thinking you can do karate because you are Asian. Growing up not knowing you’re actually attractive can change the way you think of yourself. People always said slit jokes to me like “why don’t you open your eyes”, so I used it in this piece and at the end of the performance ask the audience the same question. Another political piece that I have done deals with the injustices of women. I call it the “Uterus

Poem”. I won third place in the 2006 Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic contest for the City of Chicago. Its on Youtube as well. It goes through issues by starting sentences with “If I were a woman.” I hope someday the stereotypes will change and you will hear someone say “Why doesn’t he have any ovaries” instead of the usual, “Why doesn’t he have any balls?” The performance is comical, but I am also making a point. From my poetry for the page collection, I would have to say that my favorite one has to do with my parents. Growing up with two poor immigrant parents was interesting.

Q: I know you were involved in RE:911, what is it like to collaborate with other Asian American Artist?

A: Well, I enjoy collaborating with other artists but as I get older I find myself becoming much busier and it becomes harder to have spare time. I had a really fun time on that show though and I have been collaborating in Boston a little bit when I can. During the RE: 911 show there was one piece of art that four of us put together that was really fun. It was with a DJ music producer who created a beat while I created a poem to go around it.

The Asian American Artist community is great. There are a lot of extremely talented Asian American Artists, but they don’t understand their own talent because there are not enough artists. I have been trying to work within the system in order to change the system, but the truth is that more artists need to be nourished.

Q: Have you ever had identity problems?

A: No, I have never had an identity issue with either side. I really couldn’t see it any other way.

Q: What have you recently been working on?

A: I haven’t really been working on anything in particular. I won third place in the Gwendolyn Brooks open mic night and felt it was time to quit while I was on top. So, I haven’t been performing lately. I began singing in bands, but put it down and haven’t been doing it lately. I have been getting busier and busier, but I really want to start making time for it again.

Q: Do you have any specific goals or aspirations for the future?

A: I would really like to self publish a good piece of my work. I want to do a concept collection of performance work, page work, and lyrics and create a story. I also would like to take some of my plays to larger theaters. They have been successful at the smaller stage but I would really like to see them taken a step further. I also have a lot of ideas I need to start writing down. I really want to make an independent film as well. One of my large aspirations is to create a non-profit building to let underprivileged youth experience artists, meet people, and be safe. I know there are organizations for underprivileged youth, but mine would focus on allowing a space for artists to perform to these kids.

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