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## Liat Smestad

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Interviewer: Amy Dosen  
Artist: Liat Smestad  
In-Person Interview: School of the Art Institute, Chicago, IL  
Date: April 29, 2011, 3:40 PM

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

"Coming from a family of architects, I saw how closely related the functions of fashion and architecture are. I wanted to explore the function of fashion further and began my coursework in fashion design, focusing on the protective aspect of clothing. My focus on the protective function of clothing led me to a 25+ years career in fur design. My artistic explorations have led me in some interesting directions. I continually reshape my idea as an artist and the boundaries of my art. I've recently branched out into photography and also returned to my childhood passion: painting. I am increasingly interested in the ability of art to evoke emotion and speak to the human situation."



Artist Bio taken from [saic.edu](http://saic.edu)

**Interview Transcript:**

**Amy:** Tell me a little about yourself so I get a better background on who you are.

**Liat:** Okay, what do you want to know?

**Amy:** Your interests, your personal history, anything that you think is relevant to knowing who you are as a person.

**Liat:** Okay, I have been living in Chicago for 50 years. I went to the Art Institute as an undergraduate, and DePaul as a graduate [student]. I travel a lot. I document the culture and the people, and I'm very interested in the minority groups—we shouldn't call them minority groups, but ethnic groups—especially in the northeast of Vietnam and that region. The Hmong, the Flower Hmong, the Black Hmong, the Red Yao. So all of that interests me because I am interested in clothes and anthropology. Teaching fashion design, it's not only looking at today and the future, but I want to look into the past. If you know the past, then you can position [yourself within] the present, and we are looking for the future. So that's what my interests are. And I also work in painting, drawing, and photography. And fashion design can relate, because somehow being a painter, you could make money to live comfortably. But being a fashion designer, I made more money in a way that I could travel and do other things. And I like designing anyway.

**Amy:** So I saw your show “The Allure of Vietnam”, and in your artist statement, you mention that this was the first time you've been back to Vietnam in 50 years. Why did you first leave Vietnam to come to the United States?

**Liat:** I had a scholarship to come here as a student fifty years ago. Then I married, and I stayed here.

**Amy:** And how did you first become involved with fashion design?

**Liat:** When I came to the Art Institute, which is a fine arts school, they had a fashion department in the school. After three years studying drawing, painting, and photography, I went into fashion design because I love clothing and designing. It's another form of art that I related to. It happened like that, and I got a job as a designer, and I have been in design for 25 years.

**Amy:** When I researched you online I read all about your work in fashion design, so I was really surprised that your current exhibition is all about photography. Now I know about your interest in photography. What was your inspiration for your current show?

**Liat:** I have traveled a lot to many parts of the world. I've witnessed the [many] wonder[s] of the world. I photograph the places and the moments that touch my heart and my soul. So photography to me is to hold on to the people and the places where I travel. I want to bring it back. Photography is a window to see true things, and I use it as a tool to capture the images that touch me and that I want to share with the community and other people.

**Amy:** So for you it's more personal, and not so much a statement about something.

**Liat:** Yeah, it's personal. There are such beautiful things in the world, and if you can capture that and bring it back to your friends, and to communities, then that's what it's really about.

**Amy:** I see. Has your work ever addressed Asian or Asian American themes?

**Liat:** No. I think it naturally came—I don't think I have to search for what I am and where I come from. My roots are still there.

**Amy:** Have you ever been included in an exhibition that has been contextualized as Asian or Asian American?

**Liat:** I had one exhibition in Vietnam, in Ho Chi Minh City. And I also had another in the National Vietnam Veteran Art Museum. Somehow I always show my work from Asia, because I have a love for that. My subject and my title of my show always involved Asia.

**Amy:** So it's something that's very important to you.

**Liat:** Yeah. It's important to me because it's where I come from and my roots. So it doesn't matter where I live—I still see those roots. It's very important to look back to where you come from.

**Amy:** I definitely agree. Although I'm not from anywhere as exciting, I'm from Indiana.

**Liat:** It doesn't matter.

**Amy:** I know. It's a part of who you are. You carry that with you.

**Liat:** You cannot forget where you come from, because where you come from is not only your love and your life and your culture, but you are who you are today because of where you were born, the way you were raised, and how you were brought up. And in my case, I was very fortunate that I was brought up in French culture in Vietnam and Vietnamese culture, and now American culture. So I feel very fortunate to have that culture within me. No one culture is the right culture, but if we can mix different cultures, then we can enrich ourselves.

**Amy:** Definitely. And I know you briefly mentioned this to me before our interview, but what are you currently working on?

**Liat:** Right now I am writing a book called "The Women of Sapa." These women from a small ethnic group in Northeast Vietnam still wear the traditional clothing. They are beautiful people, and they still have authentic lives with tradition and family. It truly touched me. I wanted to capture that because I'm afraid that someday, maybe 5 or 10 years from now, their culture will be diluted. So I have gone back there so many times to interview and write about their lives, and that's what my book will be about. Maybe in 3 years I'll be finished.

**Amy:** That's fascinating. It's interesting that you get to preserve something.

**Liat:** It's incredible. When I went back to DePaul to study for my graduate program, I was interested in these ethnic groups, and I was looking and researching in books, but not too many books were on this topic. So I decided that I am going to write a book about tradition and culture and the textile fibers and the patterns of the garments. So if someday somebody researches about the Hmong, the Red Yao, and other minority or ethnic groups in Vietnam, they can find that in my book.

**Amy:** That's really great, especially since my class now at DePaul is exposing me to things that I've never been exposed to before. Those things are sort of left out of education most of the time. I'm excited to hear that you are working in this field where not enough work has been written.

**End.**