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## Amy Lee Segami Interview

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Interviewer: Bianca Rodriguez

Artist: Amy Lee Segami

In-Person Interview: Starbucks, Chicago, IL

Date: April 27, 2012, 4:00 PM

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

“Amy Lee Segami (See-gah-me) is an artist of transformation. As a former mechanical engineer, she applies her technical knowledge to revive the ancient art of Suminagashi (Sue-mee-nah-gah-shee). Inspired by the physics principles and the Eastern philosophy, Segami exercises her artistic license to share the possibilities of imagination.”



Artist Bio taken from <http://web.mac.com/amybasic/iWeb/Segami%20Studios/Segami.html>

**Interview Transcript:**

**Bianca Rodriguez:** Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (Biographical origins)

**Amy Lee Segami:** I was born in a city along the coastline, half way between Shanghai and Hong Kong. The name of the city is Swatow. I grew up in Hong Kong and came over to the United States after high school, to pursue my higher education and study mechanical engineering.

I am the big sister to four younger brothers. In a typical Asian family setting, the boys get to study overseas to further their education. The girls are the ones that stay behind. I was the “white sheep” of the family and wanted to do something to better myself. I came here for college and decided to stay. Then there’s a long story about finding a job and eventually I was very lucky to work for a Fortune 100 company as a mechanical engineer.

**BR:** At what age did you become interested in art? How did you discover it?

**ALS:** I was interested in art probably at the age of four or so. After my grandmother took me to watch an opera, I was very intrigued by the dance performers. When I got home, I had the sheets and towels all over me pretending to be a dance performer. At a gathering one evening, my parents’ friends encouraged me to get on the top of the dining table to perform for them.

**BR:** Did you ever encounter any resistance to your becoming an artist?

**ALS:** When my grandmother saw me dancing on the dining table, she started yelling, yanked me off the table and beat me. I was never allowed to perform or dance. I wasn't allowed to touch anything artistic. As a kid, I was told to learn my English and was later pushed to study math and science, which is what guided me towards physics and engineering. I remember being punished when I was caught doodling, drawing and writing poetry in grammar school. It was simply forbidden.

In terms of resistance as an up-and-coming artist, I was not encouraged at first. If anything I was very much suppressed, dismissed and discouraged. I was not offered guidance to any resources or available opportunities. In my later years, it's not so much resistance as it is skepticism from my friends. Some people don't understand my work and think it is a joke, fraud, or publicity stunt.

**BR:** You describe your work as "Suminagashi and Painting on Water." Can you explain what this means in terms of style and technique?

**ALS:** "Sumi" refers to the black ink that the Asians use for calligraphy, as well as the traditional brush painting, known as sumi-e. "Nagashi" means "flowing" in Japanese. "Suminagashi" literally means "the flowing of black ink." It has a Japanese name even though it started in China. The style is semi-representational.

**BR:** How do you come up with your titles?

**ALS:** It's like having a baby. You have an idea, you inspire and create it. When the baby is delivered - or in this case, when the piece is still wet - I keep thinking about the title. After they're dried, matted and framed, that's when I name them. I usually create a body of work that has a theme. The title would be related to the theme. I come up with the individual title after I complete the piece. However, I create the theme before I create the art work.

**BR:** In what type of shows has your work been exhibited?

**ALS:** Back in the early days, I did a lot of art fairs and competitions. Eventually, I was invited to show at different places. I have shown in both galleries and exhibitions. In the galleries, usually there were no particular themes. In the exhibitions, generally speaking, there were themes. If the show is about landscape, they would call for artists that do landscapes. I have shown in Asian American exhibitions, and also with non-Asian artists.

**BR:** Do you identify yourself as an Asian American artist or address your race and ethnicity in your work?

**ALS:** I think it depends on the context. I don't go around telling people that I'm Asian artist because it's already obvious. That's like telling people "Hey, I'm a woman." It's not necessary. In terms of my portfolio and my bio, I don't identify in that way neither. Like any professional,

you want to be judged by your work and not your background or gender. Having said that, women - specifically Asian women - might have less accessibility for exposure. As far as my artwork, I never intend to specialize with the Asian themes. People always say it has an “Asian feel” even when the subject matter is not based on Asian culture. I focused on the landscapes, nature and the relationship between humans and the universe.

**BR:** What is TED.com and how did you become involved with it?

**ALS:** TED stands for Technology Entertainment and Design, and is a global platform to showcase and spotlight people that have ‘Ideas Worth Spreading.’ Each “TED talk” is then featured on the website for millions of people worldwide to experience. The talks typically feature innovative ideas from various fields - medicine, biology, you name it. TED licenses the name TEDx for local communities to organize TED like events. It was a great honor to be invited as a TEDx speaker by the community.

**BR:** How does this relate to your art career or your ex-career as an engineer?

**ALS:** It is an honor to be a part of the program with hundreds of other professionals whom I respect. I also like to participate in things that are outside my field in order to better diversify my perspective.

**BR:** What are you currently working on?

**ALS:** After I developed the new process of Painting on Water™, I now apply it as an in-house facilitating tool to help people get amazing results by working together. Regarding my own art, I’m planning to celebrate my 25th anniversary, which will be in 2014. I’d like to do a retrospective show then.

**BR:** What advice would you give to up and coming Asian American/ general artists?

**ALS:** Well, in general, for any artist I’d say go with your gut feeling and do it. Create it, make it happen. We are here for a short time. If you have a song to write, an art piece to create, or a dance to perform - do it. If it’s original, chances are people may not pay attention to it right away, but it can gain momentum. If you stick around long enough the concept will stick. For Asian American artists, I would encourage them to do original and creative work. Don’t rely on the Asian stereotypes.

**End.**