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Cheng-Yung Kuo Interview

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Interview: Matthew Pranica

Artist: Cheng-Yung Kuo

In person interview: 33 Contemporary Studio, Chicago, IL

Date: May 19th 2012

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & 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.



Photo courtesy of the artist, 2012

Bio: Cheng-Yung Kuo was born and raised in Taiwan. He immigrated to the United States 11 years ago to study art. Enrolling in a community college on the south side of Chicago he graduated with honors as a Phi Theta Kappa All-USA Academic Team Nominee in 2006. He transferred to the School of Art Institute of Chicago to receive his Bachelors of Fine Arts. In 2009 he received his Masters of Fine Arts degree from SAIC. Now three years out of college, Cheng-Yung Kuo works at a company called Primitive and works on his personal artwork on the side.

These are links to Cheng-Yung Kuo's artist profile and personal websites providing an online gallery and information on his up-coming shows.

<http://www.kcyarts.com/>

<http://www.chengyungkuo.com/>

MP: So can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Chung-Yung: My name is Cheng Yung Kuo and I was born and raised in Taiwan. I immigrated to the United States 11 years [2001] ago and with limited English I had to go through the ESL program. Then I enrolled in the community college in the south suburb of Chicago and also I graduated with honors as a Phi Theta Kappa All-USA Academic Teams Nominee in 2006. The same year I became the U.S. citizen. I then transferred to

the School of Art Institute of Chicago to finish my BFA Degree. In 2009, I received my MFA Degree from SAIC, the School of Art Institute of Chicago. So it's been 3 years since I graduated and I now work at a company called Primitive in the West Loop of Chicago as a creative director there. The company sells furniture and fine arts, fine art artifacts from around the world; the company represents 100 plus cultures from around the world. So that's a little background of me.

MP: Did you do artwork in your homeland and then bring that influence here?

CK: I was in the high school, taught in design and art, I needed to learn a little bit of everything from painting, watercolor, calligraphy, design, sculpture, photography.

MP: What was your favorite medium growing up?

CK: I think its photography, I graduated with first prize photography in 1997, and then I went to serve in a military band. I'm military. In Taiwan, every male needs to serve in the army, or military for two years before I could come here.

MP: How would you define or characterize your art or yourself?

CK: Define myself? You mean in an artistical way?

MP: Yeah, how would you define your artwork?

CK: I have worked with all different kind of medium, I do video, I do ceramic, I do photography. I think that, right now, contemporary artists [are] not only defined [by] one medium. I would say that I am a professional photographer, and I am interdisciplinary artist not only focused on one medium.

MP: Ok, then in your mediums, what kind of messages are you trying to convey through your artwork?

CK: For my artwork I have a series of photographs titled "Reflections in Reality." In that series I use reflective surface to portray what I've seen on the scene; as that reflective media as a translation. So this needs, I need to talk about my language learning experience. Since I am an immigrant, I poorly [spoke] English when I first came here. So English translation or back and forth Chinese and English has a lot of affect on me so I use that reflections or reflective medium as a translator to translate what I have seen. Through my camera, sometimes it's distorted. Like just like a language it cannot be translated perfectly, you cannot find an exact word for every word that you want to try to say. So sometimes will have a translation missing or, how should I say. You cannot perfectly convey that you trying to say each time and it will always have some meaning lost in the translation. So this is why I use the reflective surface to show what has been missing is not real or is it real in the image. Sometimes the upside down image, sometimes through the water reflection to show that image I've seen in the real scene. And sometimes the viewer cannot guess what I'm looking at, or like they have no Idea

what they're looking at.

MP: I really liked that you used water as a medium of reflection because of the way that it's fluid, the way that it is constantly moving. So were you thinking of that when you were using the reflective surface of water as being a fluid medium?

CK: Yes, the reflection of water I think is most people like would think about reflection besides the mirror. And in my work I use, I started using water at the very beginning. But in the, I think, after a couple of months that I have been doing this I slowly have been finding other options, not only focus on the water reflections because, the translation media is not only on one thing. It can be, the media can be different. That's why I want to switch or not only focus on water reflection. And I know water is very hard to control. Sometimes were in a windy city and winds blow, it's moving. Sometimes it creates effects on the image too. And when I go photographing I bring couple gallons of water in my trunk. Just to create a better reflection or a better water puddle on the ground. So I can create image.

MP: That's very cool. So with your other pieces outside of photography...with your ceramic pieces, what kind of messages are you trying to convey with those pieces?

CK: I can talk about one example. It's the piece I did for my BFA at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].

MP: Can you tell me the title of the piece?

CK: So the piece is called "Global Light." And I was originally planning to do a map of globe that has... It was mapped with ceramic cast light bulbs. So because the space that I get in the BFA show was limited so I scaled down my piece to be just focused on the US. So I cast about five hundred light bulbs. Size varied and different kinds of light bulbs. Some of them has holes in it and some did not and that metaphors like, like the energy lost, or energy waste in the United States. So I placed them on the map, oh I have a projection a of the United States map on the ground. And then light bulbs on the ground to make the shape of the United States. Also I stack the light bulb so it shows the usage of energy, of electricity in different regions of the united state.

MP: So you researched energy usage?

CK: Yes, so you can see if it's stacked like in the East Coast, in New York, Boston, in the East Coast its stacked up high and also in the West Coast, California. So you can see it and that's one piece I did. And also I did a piece it's related to the BFA piece. I made a porcelain slab and used light sensitive liquid material to paint on the porcelain so the porcelain became photographic paper. I then did a traditional darkroom process to print out a black and white photograph on the porcelain. And the porcelain is like 24 inch wide 12 inch, its very heavy. But I still need to go though developer, stop. And just like regular image.

MP: What was the image?

CK: The image was printed of large power plant around Chicago. I photograph a couple of nuclear power plant and also coal power plant that's related to the energy issue and that project also lead to later project that I will talk about. After my BFA I was accepted to the MFA degree so I was doing a project called Power Sale. And I continued photographing the power plant, the large factory plants and those facilities were public space but I was not able to photograph closely. I was asked by a police officer several times to leave. I cannot photograph because after 9/11 they have high security for those facilities and I wasn't able to get into. So compare that situation to the garage sale. At the same time I photograph garage sale, tons of garage sales around the cities. And then I was very welcome. Open armed by those people, those families to photograph their garage sale. And that is personal space, that I was being invited to photograph. So just those two contrasting situation combined together I put those. It will always be at a corner. That one side is power plant image and the other side is garage sale image and put right together like they are a photograph. And to compare my experience photographing them.

MP: Can you tell me about the power plant photographs?

CK: So for the power plant project when I photograph in this particular nuclear power plant in Sion Illinois. The first time I was there I was sitting very close to the gate of the power plant still maybe 400 yards away. I was sitting in my car, I was changing my film in the changing bag sitting on my driving seat and the police officer came, asked me what I was doing and I told him I was a student from the School of Art Institute. I was doing a photography project photographing this power plant. And then he asked me to pull out my hand from the changing bag and to give him my drivers license or any identification so I was changing the film in the middle, so I had no choice, so I pulled out my hand and the film got exposed. I think it got exposed. So I gave him my ID to check and he told me you cannot be here so I left the scene. So I went directly to Walgreens to get a quick develop for the film to check if the film got exposed. So during that half hour or hour I was driving around to see where I can get a better distant or get a better view of the power plant and I couldn't find any place to photograph. After I went back to Walgreens to find out the film got exposed I need to re-photograph the power plant so I went back to the power plant and this time I was parking outside of the driveway, outside of the entry park on the parking lot of the adjacent forest preserve sight and I brought out my camera and started photographing. Five minutes later police came again, different police though. And he asked why am I here, asked me if I was there an hour ago and I told him yes I was there and I told him I was doing photography and my film got exposed. He took my ID when to his car, fifteen minutes later he came back with my ID and told me that he already put the record on my file, that FBI would find me if the power plant, anything happened to it FBI would find me. So this is a little bit of story behind my photography experience. So after that situation I started to carry video recorder and voice recorder with me every time when I go out to photograph the power plant and I still don't have the video recording what I've been asked by the security officer but I have one recording from the security officer that I was photographing one of the power plants. So this is the project that I keep going, doing, to show the people what I have experienced. It also, it

would be an interesting project to show when I finish, for the final project that the final result the photograph and the process of that photograph in this project.

MP: Can you tell me a little bit about the garage sales?

CK: The garage sale photography project. Every weekend I was going through cities to find garage sales around the city. And then I brought a 4 by 5 large format camera with me to go to each families' house and photograph the garage sale. And I was very happy and welcomed by them and invited by them to photograph their garage sale. And some of them were just tons and tons of stuff on the street. Since its in the city its not really a garage sale garage sale. Sometimes it's on the street, on the driveway. And for the photography part I need to spend at least 30 minutes to set up the equipment, set up the camera. And during that time I was able to talk to the person or the family who put up the garage sale. And I was able to chat with them, to ask questions as to why they were doing the garage sale. And it was the year that the economy collapsed in 2007 so many, many families were affected by the economy and a lot of them were in need of extra cash so they put out the garage sale to sell some of the stuff. Or some of the things they don't need, they need extra space in their homes so they want to sell. And some of the stuff was memorable or valuable for them but they don't have any use at all and need to sell them. There are many, many stories behind each piece or each things they sell. I was also doing the other piece that I purchased a picture frame that this owner purchased a poster of Georgia O'Keefe from the Art Institute of Chicago and I purchased that piece at a garage sale. And also after I finished the photograph of this particular garage sale. I printed out a large print and put on top of this frame, on top of the Georgia O'Keefe poster and to be a one piece that I presented, that I showed in a gallery setting that these piece was purchased, the frame, poster frame was purchased at this garage sale and I also photograph these particular garage sale and this is the piece I was showing. I think this is also thinking about recycle, reusing the material.

MP: Is your artwork just for galleries or are you commercial artists as well? How does your work fit into or spread through your community?

CK: I have shown a lot of my work in the galleries and I also do professional photography service for artists, for architectural firms, and sometimes do portraits.

MP: Can you talk more about your work in the commercial fields as well for the companies?

CK: In Primitive? Right now I work for this company called Primitive. I was hired as a photographer, in the beginning, to photograph their inventory, their artifacts, antiques in their inventory, and they had 30,000 pieces in their inventory. So their project is on going. There never will be an end. Cause they keep acquiring new pieces, so after a couple of months I was able to train another photographer at the company, so she was doing most of the job that I was hired for and now I'm promoted to be a creative director just in charge of all the promotional material, for the store, for the company, and also manage their photography archive for all those inventory photographs.

MP: So are you involved in the advertising process then?

CK: Yes, I need to send out an e-blast every week featuring one artifact or one object from the company called new arrival of the week.

MP: Do you ever address Asian, or Asian American identity, themes, or histories in your artwork?

CK: Yes, just like the project I mentioned, that I photographed those power plant or those nuclear power plants and also photographed the garage sale. When I photographed those, I think, a large, very important reason that I was asked to leave by the police officer at the power plant is because I am a foreigner, even though I am a citizen now. But they are cautious to check me to see what I was doing. So I think that's probably the part of the piece that I experienced that I want to show to people and the other project, I think the Asian, Being an Asian American influenced many many ways, but it's very subtle. I probably won't be able to tell you which piece has influence on me but it has been.

MP: As for showing your work in galleries, have you been mainly showing your work in Asian American Community galleries or has your work been spread throughout?

CK: No. The gallery we are in right now is called 33 Contemporary Gallery, and this gallery; I have worked with them before, before I just transferred to SAIC. The gallery director knows my work and I was invited to be shown at a gallery in 2006 for a 3-person show here. And I would just keep working with them and then in 2009 they asked me to join to be in the Gallery as a member artist, so I've been showing with this gallery, 33 Contemporary Gallery, for quite a long time. And this is, there were two Asians in this gallery, we have at least 25 artists represented by this gallery.

MP: So now that your three years out of college how has your work changed or evolved and in what direction are you going with it?

CK: Right now, I am still taking the photo of the reflection series and this is an ongoing project. And the project that I am working on is more involving with video and also photography, more small collage based photography project.

MP: Can you tell me more about your video art?

CK: Right now I am very interested in the time-lapse photography that I want to focus on the time changing, or the time pass in photography. I'm interested in the idea of digital painting. It's a still image but it's a time lapsed video but with subtle change in the image, and I have shown one piece in 33 Contemporary Gallery a year ago. So I mount a monitor just like a painter mounts a painting on the wall, but it's a very subtle change in the image that has traffic going through or people walking by and if you just walk by and don't stop to look at a piece, you won't notice if it's a painting or a video. Even though,

you will know from a far and you can see it's a monitor mounted on a wall. But the idea is trying to mimic it's a painting; it's a moving image in there.

MP: Can you tell me a little bit about your current show that you're working on?

CK: Right now I have a show, it's a 3 person show at Gene Siskel Film Center in downtown Chicago. It's part of a celebration of hundred years, Chinatown, Chicago Chinatown centennial celebration. It's partnered with Chicago Asian American Showcase, it's a film festival that usually happens in April every year and they have a film festival at Gene Siskel Film Center in downtown Chicago. So this is a show called *100 YEARS* and its featuring work by faculty, a Chinese painter faculty from SAIC and also a recent graduate and faculty from SAIC who does video art and electrical 3D animation artists. And me, I am showing some photographs from the past few years at the Gene Siskel Film Center. And this show opened in April 6th and it will run to July 9th, and I have another show. It opens in June 2nd to July 5th at the Korean Cultural Center in the Northwest Side of Chicago in Wheeling, Illinois. And it's a group show called *Interaction*. And I also have the other show, it's a group show that's organized by 33 Contemporary Gallery, we are doing an exchange exhibition. We will be showing in Turin Italy. In the Regional Museum of Natural Science, MUSEO REGIONALE DI SCIENZE NATURALI DI TORINO, in Turin from July 5th to August 30th. And it's called ART-ENERGY-FUTURE. And it also talks about the energy use.

MP: Do you also curate shows as well?

CK: So during my study at SAIC I also curated or organized 3 shows for the Taiwanese student from SAIC and my idea is to share my experience as an artist showing work or being an artists in a foreign country that most foreigner do not get a lot of opportunity to show their work. So since I have been to the United States for many many years, I have more experience than most students. So I was trying to show and teach them how to put up a show, or how to organize a show. So every year I call for students to submit work to be shown. Cause I want them to know the school project or school assignment is not just finished in the classroom, you want to be able to finish the assignment and then improve the piece to be able to show in a commercial gallery space. A lot of the students were missing this part of the process. They think the assignments finished but if its is a good piece of artwork you want to prepare the piece to be able to show. To let people to know and to see the work not just put it away in storage. So I show them how to do that and how to organize shows and how to promote a show, how to install the show. So from this experience they are not only learning from this experience from school. Cause at school you only learn at the very end at your graduation BFA or MFA show. Most of the students were undergrad so they only learned at the last moment of their study and which is not enough cause after you learn, you graduate. I want them to know this type of experience. After graduation I also curate or co-curate shows. Last year I co-curate a show called *Sexier* at Zhou B. Art Center in Chicago with Larry Lee who is also a faculty from the School of the Art Institute and InJung Oh Zhoushi. And that show featured 55 artists and we have 500 people show up at opening reception and I think Laura Kina, one of the professors from DePaul was in the show too. We have many Asian artists in the

show too.

MP: Has your work changed since getting out of college, have you been trying new things?

CK: Yes, I will always try to do different things. You can not just keep doing what you have done. And keep thinking I need to keep thinking new prosperity to improve the idea I have thought. Right now, being professional artists is very hard. You need to have a steady income to support your art. And I was very lucky I found a job and I have a steady income and right now I'm starting doing my personal artwork. And before the first year I graduated I was a freelance photographer for a year and I did not have steady job. So I was running around being a freelance photographer, I need to do this photography for clients, I need to edit for them, so I don't have a set of time to do my personal work. And now I'm starting to settle down so I can organize my time better to do my personal work.

MP: What people have affected your artwork that have given insight or shown you different things to do in your artwork?

CK: There are a couple of faculty from the community college, also from SAIC that influence and were mentors to me. I was very lucky to have good faculty from South Suburban College art department. And they were very nice to me and encouraged to me other wise I wouldn't be attending SAIC, and they are the graduates from SAIC too so I was getting very good education from the community college and they always told me that I need to trust my ability and that's how I got so far to SAIC.

MP: Are there any artists either current or previous that have influenced your work that you've said I like what he's doing?

CK: I think on the top of my head. There's one photographer Gregory Crewdson, he does very big production, like film production for his photograph. It's like a film setting for his photography, and its very theatrical feeling.

MP: Are there any fields that you haven't tried in your artwork that you'd be willing to or want to go into to try and see what you could do there?

CK: Electrical art, or art with technology. Like I've started working with video, and video installation and I think that's very interesting. Sometimes it can involve people and to involve the viewer to interact with the piece. And I'm very interested in doing that kind of piece that you're not only standing from of the piece and watch or see. I want the view to interact, like maybe put your hands on the piece or do some action with the piece.

MP: Have you done any community projects that involve people around the community whether in your sculptures or in your photographs?

CK: I have done a lot of community projects with South Side Community Art Center. We did a dumpling making event a couple years ago and I also have done a photography

project that I archive their historical collection. The South Side Community Art Center is the oldest African American art center in the nation that have very valuable historical African artifacts and art collections.

MP: Have you done any collaborating with any other artists in the past few years with your artwork?

CK: Yes I have done collaboration with a Taiwanese artists who graduated last year from SAIC. Her name is Eijane Janet Lin. I did a video piece with her, you can see that piece on Vimeo. Her piece is very provocative, very interesting work. And I'm just one collaborator with her, she has done a lot of collaboration with different artists. And also for the community project I also did a project through the SAIC that we did a community housing project in Brazil that SAIC graduates, the architecture students went to Brazil. It's a small town called Igarai. I think it's northwest, I think 300 kilometer of San Paulo, and it's a very poor town. We were living in a coffee farm. Every day we go to the site to build children playground and also the bus stop for the children from the town. And I was the photographer to document the entire housing project for them, we were there for three weeks building children playgrounds for them.

MP: If you'd like to talk about anything else...any other things about yourself or projects that'd be great?

CK: I can talk about the other ceramic piece that I did. I cast Chinese style spoons and it's the same idea, the same concept like I did for the photography project *Reflections in Reality*. It also talks about the language learning experience for me. The spoon also has small large hole in it. And just like in translation, in learning English you cannot absorb everything you learn. This applies to learning in general. You cannot absorb everything you learn everyday. You always will forget something. So I call this piece *Vocabulary Soup*. So I made the ceramic bowl and cast this spoons with holes and in the soup the ingredients of the soup is the small piece of vocabulary papers translated from English to Chinese. So when you're eating it you have vocabulary. So this is one of the projects I did.

MP: Thank you for participating in the interview.

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