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Debra Yepa-Pappan Interview

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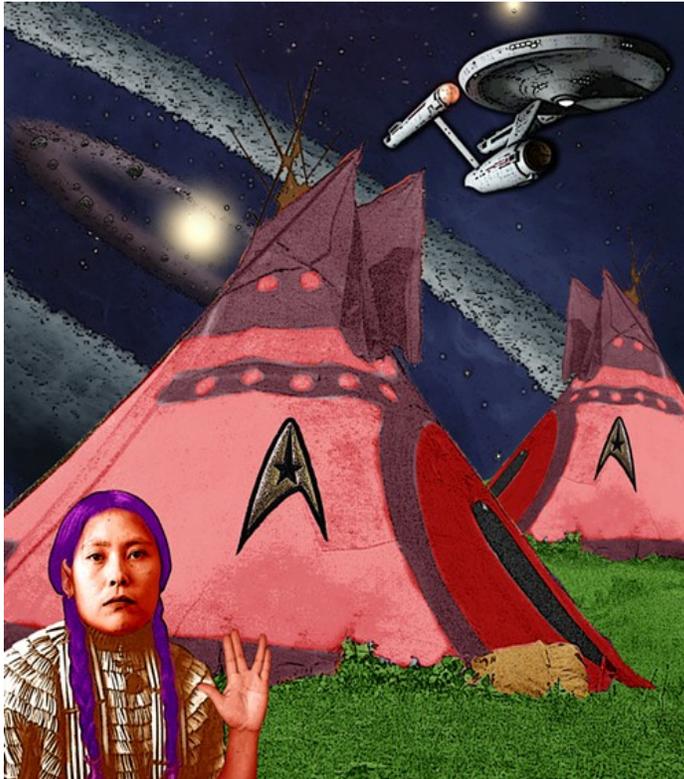
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2012 interview with Debra Yepa-Pappan by Alexandra Kelstrom

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Interviewer: Alexandra Kelstrom
Artist: Debra Yepa-Pappan
In-person interview: Kateri Center of Chicago
Date: May 16, 2012

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS203: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Debra Yepa-Pappan pictured in her piece
“Long Live and Prosper: Spock was a Half-breed”
Digital print, 20 x 18 in., 2008

Artist Bio- Debra Yepa-Pappan is a contemporary Native American/Korean artist. She started out in design and photography, and then decided to use photography as her medium to create digital art. Coming from a strong Jemez Pueblo background, Debra incorporates themes of stereotyping, othering, and collectivism into her artwork. She also implements some of her Asian identity into her work to embrace her mixed identity.

Artist bio written by Alexandra Kelstrom.

Interview Transcription:

Alexandra Kelstrom: Tell me a bit about yourself. Where were you born, where did you grow up? How did you become an artist?

Debra Yepa-Pappan: I was born in Korea. When I was about 5 months old my mother and I came to America to be with my dad. He was in the army and he was stationed in Korea so that's how he met my mother. He was brought back to the states and after I was born, that's when my mother decided she would bring me here to be with him. To be half Korean in Korea would have been very daunting. It would have been a dismal life for me, and that's not what she wanted. Also, she wanted me to know who my father was. So we came to America, we lived in Jemez Pueblo with my father's family (that's where he's from), while he was securing housing for us on the army base. So we lived in Jemez Pueblo for a while, and we came to Chicago when I was about one year old and I grew up in the Logan Square area. I went to Catholic School in Logan Square; I went to Lane Tech High School. I think it was in high school that I started thinking about becoming an artist- I was trying to head in the direction of design. But then I ended up going to school at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe for a couple reasons: 1. It was close to my father's family and our homeland in New Mexico; and because I am enrolled native, at the time tuition was free. And it's an art school so that's when I started to take that [art] more seriously. Photography was my first passion and that's how it grew from there.

AK: How would you describe your self-identity?

DYP: Nowadays I say I am mixed race. I think in the past it was just "I am Jemez-Pueblo and Korean." When people ask me what I am I would just say I am Native American and Korean. Jemez-Pueblo- it seemed when I was a little kid it was always so hard to explain what that meant because there are already all these preconceptions about what Indian or what Natives are, and Jemez-Pueblo being one of those tribes that people have never heard of. For a little kid it was always hard to say "Well... And then it goes into the story of how my parents met because my mother is Korean.. and my father is Pueblo..." For a little kid it's harder to deal with things like that, but now that I'm older, yes I am mixed race. I am Native American and Korean.

AK: What type of artist are you and how would you categorize your art?

DYP: I consider myself to be a contemporary Native American artist. I've never really thought of myself as an Asian artist. I think that's because- my work is based on identity- but I think a lot of it was dealing with my identity as a native person more so than an Asian person. So that's how I would categorize myself as a contemporary Native American artist.

AK: Who were some of your artistic influences?

DYP: I would have to say, because photography was my first passion, I love the kind of work that Cindy Sherman does, and Sandy Skoglund. I like the photographers that use

photography as their medium to create art--they don't *just* take pictures. Patrick Nagatani was a really good photographer, he passed away, but he would set up these crazy scenes, he'd have things hanging and dangling, he would just *create*. Just that within itself is such an art form- to just create the setting. And then he would take photographs of that. And that was his art. I like photography being used for art in that way. Those are the kind of photographers or artists that I am attracted to.---The Starn twins were always a favorite of mine. And of course, Andy Warhol and his pop art, the really vivid colors and the repetitiveness of the imagery.

AK: When and how did you get involved with working in the community arts movement, how did you get involved with mural designs.

DYP: Being a Native person it's just natural to want to do things with your people. The alderman of that ward wanted to have this mural to be Native American themed. She was working with artists from the Chicago Public Art Group- they're all non-native. Rather than trying to create their own imagery, or just saying this is what we think Indian art is, they approached the Native community. They're all these different organizations within the Native community that got together. It was open to anyone who was part of the Native community to be a part of this. You could be an artist, or you didn't have to be an artist, you didn't have to know anything about art. They just wanted to input from the Native people in this area. But I think what happened was- because there were so many Native artists-- it was the first time they had a group of people where a lot of them were artists. It was a great experience. I'm glad to say that we were a part of it from the very beginning. My husband and my daughter also had the opportunity to take part in it from the very beginning. We had a lot of input in what kind of images were going to go up there, what the mural should be about, what it should really say about us. And of course, we're all on the same wavelength of not wanting to perpetuate any stereotypes. We really tried to stay away from those kinds of things and really just puts us in a contemporary light because- here we are we are: still here.

AK: You and your husband, Chris Pappan, in August of 2009 finished a mural called ""Indian Land Dancing." Can you tell me about this mural, and the processes going into it and the themes?

DYP: We are not experienced muralists so the Chicago Public Art Group, the three lead artists from that group, they have the know-how. They've done these bricolage murals, its called bricolage mural because of the technique that's used...they have the know how, they are all art teachers also, so they just brought us together and helped to develop and formulate these ideas. I think from the start I think how did we start one of the first meetings was talking about the mural and what we were expecting from the mural. They asked us for our input on how we would individually like to see the mural. They had us sketching out how we thought both walls of the mural were going to look like. And then from there we drew ideas, there was a lot of discussion. We had my daughter, who was 7 at the time, all the way up to the elders that were taking part, so we had a lot of generations involved, and of course there were a lot of different ideas The space was so huge, so there was plenty of room for all these ideas to get put on there. It was very fun-It

started out from the planning, to some of the imagery that was going to go up there, to the design element, to the actual installation of the mural. My daughter was the first person to draw one of the first lines onto the wall. We went from that to actually outlining the entire mural, to installing and attaching the tile pieces on there. So we had a hand in every single step of the process, and it was a very good experience.

AK: Identity seems to be a large theme in your work. What specific themes and histories do you explore in your work?

DYP: My work started out with my digital series. When I first attended Columbia I took digital imaging. That first series was about negative stereotypes. So identity, yes, in how Natives are portrayed, and how people perceive Indians. In that series, I took Edward S. Curtis photographs and placed faces of friends and family onto those images. Because that's the most popular image of Indians, the Plains Indian with the headdresses, and Indians live in tee pees. People that I used on those Edward S. Curtis photographs were not all Plains Indians. These are images that were perpetuated and formed by Hollywood movies and Edward S Curtis. Unfortunately, those are the most prevalent images of Natives and that's not how we all look. From there I have really grown in the past several years meeting mixed race artists like Louie Gong. Louie Gong especially. It was very important for me to meet him because he really helped me go full force with identifying myself as mixed race. Not that I never did, I was always proud to be both Korean and Native. But as far as my art is concerned, I really moved my art into a different direction in trying to incorporate more of my Asian identity into it. Its really important as a Native person to- again, that's battling another stereotype that all Indians are full blood, that they're not mixed race. There are so many mixed race Indians. And that those of us who are mixed race, we are very proud to be a part of different cultures, and we don't have to always choose one over the other and I think I'm trying to do that more with my art now.

AK: Can you tell me about "Long Live and Prosper: Spock was a Half-breed"? This seems to be one of your best-known works. How did you come up with this idea and how was the work made?

DYP: That's a digital image, so it's all digitally manipulated. That grew out of the stereotype series. "Indians live in tipis," it's my face placed on an Edward S. Curtis photograph of a Plains Indian woman with tee pees- a setting of tee pees behind her. I was invited to do a piece for a sci-fi western show with contemporary Native artists. So, I was thinking along the lines of stereotypes, I have another piece called "Indians say how," where I have my father putting his hand up in the stereotypical "how" pose. And I took that a step further and did the Vulcan salute. So it just grew from that, I took that piece and turned it into "Spock was a half breed." It was perfect because 'Spock' is a half breed and I am a half breed. It bridges that gap because when people think about Indians they always put us in the past and in history. Here's this image that's very futuristic and there's the Starship Enterprise in the back, and its very contemporary. It brings that back that we are a part of today's society, that we do enjoy a series like Star Trek, and science fiction. And we are not just a part of this historical, romantic past.

AK: I know you are both Native and Asian. Can you talk about your experiences having your work shown in exhibits that are focused on just Asian or Native American identity?

DYP: So far, most of the exhibits I've been involved with have been with other contemporary Native American artists. I like to set myself apart a little by incorporating and acknowledging that I am mixed race. Hopefully I'm making more people aware and Native people aware that there are mixed races. And that we are proud of our other cultures and it's ok for us to be proud of that and still be a part of a culture and a people and still be proud of another. I haven't had many opportunities to exhibit with other Asian artists except for the show that Laura Kina curated, *War Baby/Love Child* [Mixed Race Asian American Art]. There is a catalog and a book coming out with that and I'm really excited [University of Washington Press, 2013; DePaul Art Museum April 26, 2013 - June 30, 2013; Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience August 9, 2013 - January 19, 2014].

AK: How have your exhibition opportunities changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

DYP: They've changed, like I've said, because I've been invited to the show that Laura is curating. I've had opportunities just recently to have my work shown in England and Russia. Fortunately, we have a great connection with a lot of other Native artists that are close friends of ours. This is part of our art community. Whenever someone sees an opportunity and sees that there are other artists can benefit from it, we extend that opportunity to others. We [my husband and I] have work in Bristol, England, and Russia in two shows that will open next month. I was also offered a solo exhibit, which will be opening in August in Santa Fe, at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum. That will be my first solo exhibit and I'm really grateful- its huge.

AK: What are you currently working on?

DYP: Because of the solo exhibit I'm going to show a lot of my older work. I realize now that I'm reaching into different markets and different areas. As much as my work seems redundant to me because I see it all the time, I know that it is new to a lot other people. But I also wanted to create some new pieces specifically for the show. So I have been working with images of my daughter in her traditional Pueblo manta. She danced at one of our feast days in Jemez for the first time two years ago. And that was a big deal, because once the kids start dancing they want to dance continually. That was such a proud moment for me, to have my own daughter be very proud of who she is and want to take part in her culture in that way. I have a picture of her in her manta, and I'm using that. I'm also incorporating some Asian imagery so I'm using origami paper, and Korean images like cranes and things associated with Korean folk art.

END.