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Gabriel Bizen Akigawa Interview

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Interviewer: Joe Ondrey

Artist: Gabriel Akagawa

In-Person Interview: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Date: May 11, 2011

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art and Artists in Contemporary 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, and Design.

Artist Bio: Gabriel Bizen Akagawa is the Assistant Director of Academic Advising and recently former Academic Advisor in the Office of Student Affairs and Assistant Adjunct Professor in the Sculpture department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He exhibits regularly as a Chicago-based artist. He has been awarded Artist-in-Residencies at the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art in Kelowna, British Columbia, at Crabtree Farm in Lake Bluff, Illinois, and at Ox-Bow in Saugatuck, Michigan. His curatorial projects include an ongoing and changing series he initiated in 2005 called “Fakature” (fake nature), which led to founding *the Fakature Consortium of Artists*. He situates his art and curatorial practices as medicinal activities to investigate humanity's complex relationship with nature.

Artist Bio taken from <http://www.gabrielakagawa.com/home/biography>

Interview Transcript:

Joe: I was wondering if you could start by telling me a little bit about yourself. Where you were born, where you grew up, what high school you went to – basic background information.

Gabriel: I'm originally from St. Paul Minnesota; I was born and raised there and went to preschool through college there, actually. I went to an inner city high school and then I went to a liberal arts school and the art department was right across the street from the preschool that I went to. So I didn't really venture very far from preschool to college. My wife and I met in college and after that we came down to Chicago. She got into grad school at the University of Chicago, and I got into the grad program at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago]. I finished up my degree and I taught in the sculpture department for five years and now I'm finishing my second year as a full time academic adviser. I was an academic adviser while I was a teacher but I gave up teaching and had a daughter. So that's the academic pathway at least. I have been affiliated with academic institutions for my entire life - I am really invested in education. In undergrad I was a studio art major and I started off going into education and decided that I didn't really want to formally work in public schools. So I pursued my bachelor of arts in sculpture and then came to do my post baccalaureate and masters at SAIC to be able to teach. My mother is Minnesotan and my father is from Japan. My family is originally from Akita.

Joe: Is that the name of one of the islands?

Gabriel: No, it's a town, a prefecture. The rest of my family is also from Tokyo. So I've been going to Japan for most of my life. I think the earliest point was when I was 12 years old. I've gone maybe seven times or something like that. It's kind of always been influential growing up. My parents got divorced when I was 8 years old, so I grew up in a multicultural household before that. My parents owned a Japanese restaurant before I was born. My father was a professor at the Minneapolis College of Design. My cousin from Japan went to high school in Minnesota so I grew up around him and my dad who are

both Japanese. My other cousin came to live in the States to go to school, so I've always had this somewhat hybrid identity. It was pretty interesting because in America I very much identified as Asian American and when I went to Japan, I was starkly American. So there was a very interesting dynamic that didn't really fit in either way. When my parents had this Japanese restaurant before I was born, my mother learned how to cook Japanese food. So she was the one who taught me how to cook Japanese cuisine.

Joe: How would you define and categorize yourself in your art, and do you think that has any effect on how you see yourself, in your background?

Gabriel: Everything influences me. I don't know if you've looked at my website or not, but my work is very porous and influenced by so many sight and situation-specific things. There's so much that is relational to spaces, materials and utilities that are responses from how things are done in Japan and the United States. I think I see my work as always changing and evolving, but it is very influenced by all of those things.

Joe: So you influenced your art, and your art influences you so to speak?

Gabriel: Yeah, I think so. I think that my artwork is very much influenced by my experiences, so how I was raised and the things I was around and the experiences that I have had. I talk about artists as connectives. A connective is something that connects things, a conduit. There's a whole infinite amount of experiences, including this interview here, which is forever going to change who I am moving toward. So all those things influence me and leave some fingerprint of how I am going to change and evolve as an artist.

Joe: Yes, for me I am specifically interested in photography. My dad's a photographer so growing up that was the medium that was I most exposed to. What really got you interested in photography?

Gabriel: I went to an inner city high school and we had a photo lab and a dark room. Everything was fully manual; doing everything yourself and I did that quite a bit and painting. We also had screen-printing, it was all very much 2D things, and I think that there were a lot of things of artists that I was looking at growing up such as Ansel Adams, MC Escher. Photography being accessible then and being a very interesting process. I consider myself a very big process person, and photography is very much a process. Japan is also a very graphic culture you know magazines, anime, advertisements. The 2D picture plane is really part of the heritage of that as well as of the United States. We are a very visually bombarding culture; you can't go to work without seeing hundreds of or tens of hundreds of visual images that are going to influence you. I think it is hard not to, and especially now since everything including your phone has a camera. As an artist I think that you have to learn to document things, I consider myself foremost a trained sculptor. Doing performance work and creating events, you have to be able to document those things and it comes through photography.

Joe: On that note, do you have a specific medium that you usually choose? Is it sculpture?

Gabriel: Yeah I suppose so, but I'm interested in events, and performance. I give lectures about my artwork and I consider those to be performative events, storytelling. A lot of times I'll create a sculpture and see how it engages the public and the storytelling of how that happened is as much a part of the process of the artwork as it is about creating it. So I don't really limit myself to media, but I am more trained as a sculptor.

Joe: So that doesn't mean that when you have an idea that you would go to sculpture right away then?

Gabriel: Right, I'm reacting to a situation. I'm not seeing how can I use bronze in this situation, and holding myself to that media and whatever the project I'm doing has to be in bronze.

Joe: Do you ever think that you specifically address Asian American identity or themes in your art?

Gabriel: Yeah I have in exhibits.

Joe: Could they be any Asian American themes?

Gabriel: I have been curated in shows that have been specifically about Asian American artists, and also I have created things that have very much delved into my bi-culturality. You know, thinking of how aesthetics change across cultures. Interpreting how things get altered or changed in translations and things get interesting and relevant universally. I've spent my life looking at artwork in the United States and Japan so those things have gravitated me towards aesthetics in both areas. I have done work that has addressed my identity in Japan and the United States. I don't think that I exclusively address that all the time though; most of my work is about that connective experience. How I am engaging a situation and how I am reacting to a number of different opportunities that I am being given. If I get invited to a show, I am going to create something specifically for that show, and if that show happens to be dealing with the theme of Asian American identity then I will likely gravitate towards that. I've been at an exhibition at the Korean Culture Center of Chicago and that was dealing with creating a scenario that invites people to sit and experience a space regardless of identity.

Joe: Do you find it common that you are labeled as an Asian American artist?

Gabriel: I think I get labeled as much that as I do someone who deals with environmental issues. Both things relate to each other on other levels, but I don't think it's more one than the other.

Joe: For you, do you think it's more important to identify yourself as Japanese American or Asian American?

Gabriel: I don't know, I haven't thought about it that much. I suppose thinking about it, identify myself as a Japanese American makes more sense because that is kind of one of my pet peeves - that people encompass all of Asia under one label, you know we don't say European American. We say French, or German. It's kind of a difficult thing to encompass all of Asia, there's a huge difference between countries in that part of the world. So yeah, at this point I would identify Japanese American.

Joe: Yeah, but despite the fact that it's a giant label encompassing lots of ethnic groups, do you think it is even appropriate, or does it have a use?

Gabriel: Yes I suppose so on some academic level, there are divisions in so many different ways. There's a division between sculpture and painting but we have people who work in both departments. It's for an ease of communication; you know any kind of valuable discussion is going to assume there's difficulty using that kind of vernacular.

Joe: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

Gabriel: I think that I've been trying to work more locally recently. I've done residences in the

Midwest, Canada, and have traveled to conferences in the US and Europe. I'm more interested in working through friends; once again we come back to connectivity. I feel that I can have more of an intimate relationship with an experience if I am able to feel and understand the space. I'd rather work with friends than someone who is horrible to work with socially even if it is an amazing opportunity. Also, to have a kind of intimacy with the space as well, without having to speculate on whether or not the situation will change, I think that I do a lot of work about environmental impact. There's something good about having a smaller carbon footprint. When I do go and do things, I like to stay there for a while and do as much as I can. You know, do as many lectures, see as many galleries, instead of just spending a week in Japan, I'll spend a month there. I also think that I have had a lot of relationships within the Chicagoland area that I have maintained. For example I have worked as an artist in residence at an elementary school in Evanston for four years in a row and that was really meaningful. You see the same kids growing up over for years, and I've worked with different grad students to teach there. It is a sustained relationship, instead of just dropping and running.

Joe: Yeah just one more question, what are you currently working on?

Gabriel: I have an exhibition at Harold Washington College just down the street. I'm at a group show there that I was invited to; it's actually about environmental sustainability in art. A lot of the things I have been doing over the last few years have had to do with a relationship between my home. My wife and I own a home that was built in 1893, and we've been renovating. It's a complete fixer upper, and there's all kind of materials that go into a renovation. All the places that I use for materials are material exchanges, things that come out of other places and are destined for the dumpster. So this recent exhibition, I have a small garden in my backyard that yields about a hundred pounds of tomatoes each year. So I'm really dedicated to my garden practice and all of the dirt from it came from busted bags from Home Depot and Menard's. I used that to build our garden, and in that process I use a lot of five gallon buckets. The exhibition at Harold Washington's Presidents' Gallery is the buckets that I use in my garden from everything to catching rainwater to mixing up compost, all of these things that I use in my daily activities. I have exhibited these buckets, and within them I have created these sculptural installations out of these two materials. One of them is compostable and one is not, including the matchstick heads and rubber bands I've collected for the last six years.

Joe: Showing the difference between compostable and non-compostable materials?

Gabriel: No, I don't think it is necessarily that, I'm creating microenvironments. I call the project the Bucket Ecosystem. I'm just creating some engaging micro space, which is a reversal from where I was using them in a macro space of the backyard. Creating spaces within the buckets and just using materials that I would throw into compost. I'm using these buckets to create a scenario, and I think the contrast between what is recyclable and what is not is supposed to engage the viewer on the kinds of materials we use on a daily basis. It's kind of amazing the materials we go through, and that scenario for analysis through art is intriguing for me.

Joe: Those are actually all the questions I have for you, so thank you so much again for taking the time to meet with me.

End.