



4-19-2013

## Wing Young Huie Interview

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### Recommended Citation

Hendrickson, Anna, "Wing Young Huie Interview" (2013). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. Paper 60.  
[http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral\\_his\\_series/60](http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/60)

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**Interviewer: Anna Hendrickson**  
**Artist: Wing Young Huie**  
**In Person Interview: Minneapolis, Minnesota**  
**April 19, 2013**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor of Art, Media, & Design.*



Photo from <http://www.mplsphotocenter.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/wing-young-photo-crop-602x200.jpg>

**Bio:** Photographer Wing Young Huie earned a B.A. in journalism from the University of Minnesota in 1979. Huie became a full time professional photographer in 1989 and is most well known for his photographs documenting people in a culturally diverse and changing urban landscape. Several of his projects focus on Minneapolis and St. Paul neighborhoods. Huie's photographs have been exhibited nationally and internationally in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Chicago, Westport, New York City, West Palm Beach, Budapest, and Rotterdam. Four books based on Huie's photography projects have been published and are listed in the *Selected Works*. – Bio from <http://collections.mnhs.org/mnauthors/index.php/10000974>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Anna Hendrickson:** Okay, so we'll start off with some general questions, where were you born and where did you grow up?

**Wing Young Huie:** I was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota.

**AH:** Okay, so you grew up there too? You went to high school there and everything?

**WH:** Yeah I went to high school, junior high, first two years of college and then I transferred to the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. I started off at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

**AH:** When did you graduate from the University of Minnesota?

**WH:** I think it was '79.

**AH:** And then what did you study?

**WH:** Journalism, reporting, not photo journalism. It was called news editorial back then.

**AH:** Really?

**WH:** Yeah, what's your major?

**AH:** I am majoring in sociology and minoring in photography. When did you become interested in photography?

**WH:** I was your age, 20. And I was already journalism major, I had already declared. And I took a trip and bought a camera and took pictures on this trip, very ordinary, and came back just fascinated by photography. So I started to get some photography books, I bought a book on technical manual photography. I had never bought a technical manual anything that wasn't for a class, before then or since then. Except you know photography now, so then I thought I would switch majors but I decided I am going to stick to journalism and I will teach myself which is what I ended up doing. I became a freelance journalist and would get reporting gigs from local publications, and say hey I can do the photography too. Slowly I built up my photography portfolio and quit the reporting part, focused on photography, and eventually was able to make a living and then do all kinds of photography... such as journalism, advertising, weddings, whatever. The most of it was editorial journalism. Then I did that for a while and then decided to do my own projects.

**AH:** So, no one taught you, you did it basically on your own?

**WH:** I don't have any formal training. I took an intro to photography course in college and after graduating from the U of M I took two one week photography workshops which weren't technical, they were more about how to see and aesthetic issues that sort of thing, and all different kinds of things. But that's it.

**AH:** How would you identify yourself or define or categorize your art?

**WH:** I think that it's shifted over the years. It took me awhile to call myself a photographer, to have the confidence, or a professional photographer. Then it took me quite awhile to say that I am an artist, and then after that I didn't really care because you have to define yourself when you're applying for grants or in certain situations, but in a way I don't have a real definite or clear definition. For instance, say I'm a photographic artist, because I make a living as an artist, but I really make a living talking about what I do. I'm a professional speaker. I work with schools, colleges, corporations, organizations, all different kinds. When I describe what I do I don't say that, that's what I do, that's just

part of my artistic practice. I own a gallery. A gallery is a special place though, it's called *The Third Place*, and it's not a typical gallery. I'm the proprietor of *The Third Place*. I incorporated ping-pong into one of my projects; I called it a ping-pong retrospective, I put ten ping-pong tables in an outdoor area and projected images onto a wall from thirty years of work, 1,300 images. I called it ping-pong retrospective. After that people started thinking of me as a ping-pong artist. So then now I'm working on a project with the city, working with urban planners, and figuring out what happens if you merge the artistic process with the city planning process and what would happen. So there are a lot of names for that kind of art now, place making is one name, or social practice. I guess there are a lot of things but is there one name or term that encompasses it all? No. I'm an artist I don't know, social engagement artist. I'm a photographer. I'm a gallerist. I create spaces, that's what *The Third Place* is. It's been interesting and probably in the last several years things started coming together in different ways. So that it became even more clear. I can see that there's a value of not defining what you do.

**AH:** What was your favorite project or piece of art to create?

**WH:** I think since there's been so many projects, large ones and small ones, in a sense my first project in *Frogtown*. The day of the opening and everything you imagine, there it is, and you're innocent. Nothing is going to equal that. Not that losing your innocence is good or bad, but after that all of a sudden you have a reputation, you have responsibility, you have to live up to that reputation, there's all these other things that came with it. After awhile that just became my job. Rather than, wow, an opening, this is unbelievable. *Lake Street* was what I followed *Frogtown* with and I guess in that sense that was special because it was kind of my life, it was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. I didn't think I was ever going to do another 6-mile exhibition, and even when I started doing *Lake Street* I never thought of it as a 6 mile, it just grew and grew. Then, 10 years later I ended up doing *The University Avenue Project* which when I was approached to do that I said no, I'm not going to do this. I think that *Lake Street* is probably, but then again they've all been different, I've learned a lot. My work has shifted a lot from *Lake Street* to *The University Avenue Project*, so I don't know, it's more that I am attached to what I'm going to do than what I've done.

**AH:** Why do you consider *Frogtown*, *Lake Street USA*, and *The University Avenue Project* to be your most well known works?

**WH:** They were the most public. Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour was my most personal project and that was made into a book. It's probably not as well known because it was a museum exhibition. I'm probably known as a public artist, although I've done a lot of work that's never been shown in public installations. Just as I'm a self-taught photographer, I'm a self-taught public artist, I never set up thinking I was going to be a public artist, so people would ask me about public art and I don't know a thing about public art, I don't know what else is going on out there. It sounds like it was influences by this or that. Since then I've paid more attention to what's going on out there, I have a better idea.

**AH:** You mentioned that your artwork has changed as you've grown older, how exactly do you feel your artwork itself has changed.

**WH:** I think that I started off as a kind of traditional, documentary, black and white, stark reality, kind of a thing.

**AH:** When did you start being recognized as an artist?

**WH:** *Frogtown*, I was being self-taught, I didn't have shows. My first show was outdoors in an empty lot. There's an art community, they get in my face, they've have practices and shows. Then I remember I'm getting invited to be part of art happenings or panels and things like that. I remember I went to one organization and one person mentioned something like, who are you? You've come out of nowhere. So that was kind of interesting because I didn't grow up in an art culture. I really didn't know that much about art. My parents I doubt ever set foot in a museum. I taught myself photography, and really devoured everything I could about it. I knew a lot about a certain kind of photography, but art, I took an art class in college, that's it. Then all of a sudden I'm talking to curators. I didn't even know what a curator was. I wasn't quite sure when they approached me, I wasn't quite sure. I ended having a show at the Walker and finally I was like I'm not sure how this all works.

**AH:** You mentioned earlier that you have talks, and speeches, and workshops and things like that, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

**WH:** Yeah that's really how I make a living. I've given hundreds. I just got back from a one-week workshop in Philadelphia, followed by two days in Columbus and I'm booked kind of for the year. I make a living talking about what I do, not doing what I do. Although I'm always applying for grants, you know I sell photographs, but that's a very small part of my income. I have traveling shows and I get paid for different things, but for the most part it's from doing workshops and lectures. It started off after *Frogtown*; college photography class would call me up and say, hey could you come to talk to my intro to photography or something? The more I talked about what I did, a lot the questions I didn't really know how to answer; like the why, and all this. The more I worked out a lot of my ideas through these lectures, and people asking me things. Then at some point the way I talked about it, evolved, without me really thinking that it was evolving. Then I think it was probably, I don't remember now, my memory for dates and years, lets just say ten years ago, I'm doing a photography presentation for an intro to photography course taught by a friend of mine at North Hennepin Community College. The students are often older and have families and so on. There were like 8 people in the class, it was \$100, and one person in particular was asking very sophisticated questions. Afterwards I'm talking to people and came up and I said that I really appreciated the questions, they were really insightful. She said yeah, that's because I'm the President of the college. She had heard about my work and she said that this was the best lecture I've ever heard on diversity without it being on diversity. She said would you be interested in doing a school wide project? That was sort of a key moment, so since then I started getting more opportunities and how to put things and how to talk about what it is that I

do. I've described it so many different ways but basically, I photograph the cultural landscape, using photography to investigate or address all the issues that involve who we are and who gets to say who we are as Minnesotans, Americans, as whatever. I think then *The University Avenue Project* my idea is that it shifted. It first started off as people will ask me, what do you think the impact of this exhibition was with *Frogtown*? I say, well I'm not an activist; I don't know what the impacts are. How could I even know what the impacts are? People come and they see it, make comments, and they leave. You're asking me too much to think about. I'm an artist. Activism implies that you're trying to change people's minds, or trying to enlighten them. I think that in a sense that felt a little bit arrogant. Art can only do so much, I just thought that it would be interesting to put them up, in a neighborhood that is often stigmatized that I didn't know about, or only knew a little bit about. Part of what I was doing was an act of discovery. I started thinking about how; I don't want to redo *Lake Street*. I thought my work had shifted and that with documentary photography often it's about victims, because the idea is that you're supposed to show issues and by photographing this human condition that we're supposed to feel a certain way. But often what that does is exoticize and objectify the people in the photographs in way that they're not individuals; they're more objects or metaphors for this issue. I thought, what's a way to connect the viewer to what is viewed, so that the people in the photographs are individuals. Using the chalkboard is one way, and then also thinking about it, being more conscious of it changes how you photograph and changes what you choose to end up exhibiting. Part of it is just a closer physical distance between me and the person being photographed, you know so there's a lot of other considerations. Using the chalkboard, I thought it worked well, but I thought it was a little gimmicky. I wasn't willing to do too much of it, but then when I showed people all of the photographs I was doing, they would gravitate right towards the chalkboard ones. I thought well I'll just keep doing it, and half the photographs ended up being chalkboard. Realizing this is a good educational tool, that's a lot of my workshops, being based on the chalkboard and having people have a conversation based on these questions or add on more questions and get outside of your own cultural, individual, technological bubble.

**AH:** Why has identifying as Asian American and focusing on Asian American subject matter been something that has been important to you?

**WH:** I think with Looking for Asian American, so the third book. After doing *Frogtown* and *Lake Street* I wasn't thinking about my own cultural background, not directly. I got a grant to travel around the country for 9 months to think about these things. At first I was just going to photograph Chinese restaurants, then it wasn't clear once we started, but then I started photographing everything from people to the hotel rooms. After coming back from this I had two years, the Minnesota Museum of American Art gave me an exhibition so I had a deadline. The exhibition was in 2004, we came back in 2002, I had two years to prepare for this. I'm going through all the images, and videotapes, and thinking what is it that I have? Then I thought well, I'm going to call it An Ethnocentric Tour, the original title is 9 months in America, An Ethnocentric Tour, there's no Asian America in the title. 9 months makes sense to me because it has a lot of layered meanings, it is a lucky number in Chinese numerology. Birth, gestation, there are a lot of good reasons to call it 9 months. That just happened to be how long we were on the road.

I thought if I'm going to call it An Ethnocentric Tour, then I'm thinking I don't even know why I decided to call it An Ethnocentric Tour, it just made sense to me. Then I had to understand why I thought that was a good name, and then I realized what the exhibition was really a reflection of my life and what I was interested in. Maybe about 40% of the photos have no Asian reference at all. The whole point of it was that my ethnocentric filter is assumed, so when I say An Ethnocentric Tour, you're going to assume that's going to be about Asian stuff, then you're going to see this non-Asian stuff and say why is this in there? Because I realized during this putting together of the exhibition, I realized what my true ethnocentric filter was. That's why I called it that because it was always in the back of my brain but I never really admitted to myself out loud that my true ethnocentric filter is white. I grew up in Minnesota; I am a product of popular culture. Popular culture is overwhelmingly white. Once I realized it really annoyed me and then I had to think about that, and that's what the exhibition is about.

**AH:** With Looking for Asian America An Ethnocentric Tour, was there anything in particular that inspired you?

**WH:** No, it was more a reaction to *Lake Street*. Here I've done this thing for 4 years and now when I applied for the funding, I was thinking, I wanted to get outside of Minnesota. Both projects were Twin Cities based and I wanted to explore the country. Part of it is who doesn't want to travel around the country? If you have the chance to see, and not have a real concrete plan in mind. That's part of it too.

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

**WH:** I think because the more you do, the more people know what you're doing, the more opportunities there are. I think I am fortunate to have a lot of different opportunities but it's not art for art's sake. It's not like people say, hey we want you to exhibit because we think your photographs are great. I think I'm a pretty good photographer; there are a lot of good photographers out there. It's how I do it, how I think about it, and a lot of it is how I talk about it. A lot of my opportunities arise from that. In a way my constituency is not really curators, it's educators, it's community people, it's you know all that other stuff. If it were art for art's sake I could make a living, I wouldn't be where I am today. I think a lot of what I'm doing is about impacts. But how do you do impacts that's still not really activism?

**AH:** My last question is what are you currently working on?

**WH:** Three different projects, so this is one [points to picture board behind him] this is going to go up, it's through windows. Sort of a mini *Lake Street* or *University Avenue Project* but I have different concepts that I'm experimenting with and how to connect people that don't really know each other so each project is called *We are the Other*. One of them is I'm photographing neighbors that don't really know each other, and then I photograph them in each other's spaces. Also people that don't know each other I connect them with the chalkboard so they have a discussion so they might be just walking

down the street, or in different ways. I have one set of photographs that I don't even have on the wall yet I call them Joke photographs. I was putting photographs in windows and also inside of businesses. So like in Tip Top haircut I'll put a photograph in the window but I'll also put photographs on the ceiling, because there's no place to really put photographs inside so I wanted to do it in ways that are unexpected. Plus people when they're getting their hair cut are able to look up and see the photographs so it makes sense. So I was thinking what's something I could do that could sort of connect the avenue a bit, and then so I thought Joke photographs. I approach people on the street and I tell them a joke and then I photograph them at the punch line.

**AH:** So those are the three latest ones you've been working on?

**WH:** No, that's one project, the second project is this thing with city planners. It's called *Creative City Making* and the third is, I got a grant to do a project on Chinese-ness. Which is I guess a continuation of Looking for Asian America, but more specifically about Chinese identity.

[stepped away to answer a phone call]

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What is cultural identity, what is national identity, what is personal identity? Especially for someone like me who is not born in China, like a lot of Chinese people or like my relatives that look at me and say "You're not really Chinese." So how does Chinese-ness migrate? In China, what is the idea of Chinese-ness? Also one of the biggest questions that any child of immigrants has is what they would have turned out like, how they would have turned out if their family had never left. That would mean me going back to my parent's village, or nearby and photographing myself as other people. Say that someone stands as a gallery guard in front of building, for like four hours completely still; I would do that literally in their clothes and set it up so that they photograph me and then I photograph them. Then I would put the photographs together; it's just different ways of getting at identity and for me to experience another person's reality.

**AH:** Thank you so much for interviewing with me today.

**END**