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Pao Hoau Her Interview

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Interviewer: Libby Christenson
Artist: Pao Houa Her
Site: Skype (Chicago/Minneapolis)
Date: May 14, 2013

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2013 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design. The interview was not recorded. Pao Houa Her's answers to my questions are based on my notes, which were then proofed and edited by the artist.*



© Pao Houa Her. Above: Pao in Rice Field, 2011.

Artist Bio: Pao Houa Her is a visual artist base in Minnesota. She studied at Minneapolis College of Art and Design and at Yale University School of Art. She can be reached at pher.82@gmail.com. Bio from- http://phphoto.nfshost.com/?page_id=33

Pao Houa Her was born in Laos. In 1986 after the Vietnam War ended, Pao and her family moved to Thailand and a year later moved to Minnesota. Pao is the oldest of seven and currently resides in Minneapolis, MN. She has received a B.F.A. in photography at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and was the first Hmong individual to graduate from Yale University School of Art in 2010.

Interview Transcript:

Libby Christenson: Moving to America, what was that experience like for you?

Pao Houa Her: I was very young, but I remember the refugee camps in Laos and seeing horses sectioned off, I don't have much memory of it. When we moved to Minnesota, I remember it being very *cold!* [laughs]. We had never worn puffy coats before.

My first experience in America was Christmas. I was told that Christmas was coming soon and that we would be receiving presents as part of the tradition. I remember seeing the big green Christmas tree with glowing red, green, blue, and yellow lights. I was enthralled. When I opened my first present, it was a packet of underwear. [laughs]. I got other toys too- my first experience of America was magical and exciting. It was my family's first step towards being American.

LC: Tell me about your project, "Coming off the Metal Bird" (2006-2009)? How would you describe this piece?

PH: "Coming off the Metal Bird" is documentation as well as biographical work, what it is like to be in the midst of dueling power cultures. It was hard to live two lives- trying to understand what its like to be American and Hmong American. It is about the duality of two cultures and how it affects me as a person. As an undergrad, I was struggling with my identity. Now, my work is more personal. My project "Desires" was more biographical than "Coming off the Metal Bird". I stopped being a voice for my siblings and my culture and started being a voice for myself. Instead of a narrative, it was more about my own opinions and answering questions about life in America and what America is.

LC: When did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

PH: I was in sixth grade. My teacher's name was Mr. Johnson and he taught a black and white class where I was able to develop my own film. I took a picture of my great Aunt, I didn't think it was that good at the time but Mr. Johnson thought it was great! He

suggested that I enter it [the picture] into a contest. I didn't win, but having that support was encouraging. I figured, I could do this!

And my dad always had a camera around. He was the gatekeeper of memories. He had a camera all the time, recording events and documenting my childhood. The camera was always there, so I was exposed to that at an early age.

LC: Has photography always been your medium of choice?

PH: I didn't always want to be a photographer. When I was younger I wanted to be a writer. Unfortunately, I was a horrible writer. [laughs]. I moved towards photography because it was the next best thing. It made more sense to me. I am able to reach... [pause] I am able to reach my viewers more than I would through writing.

LC: How would you define your work or yourself as an artist?

PH: I wouldn't call myself a photographer. I would say I am a visual artist and photography is just the medium I am using to talk about things I'm curious in. As an artist, curiosity drives me to make work and it is through this curiosity that the images are realized and made.

LC: I understand that some of your photographs are photo shopped, what is the significance of color in your artwork?

PH: The colors come from story cloths that I remember from the refugee camps. The cloths tell the story of our Hmong history. This was the first time the Hmong history had been recorded, a new tradition that came about around 1970. I think about this when I'm using colors in my work- lots of neon and 2-D. I think of my images as an extension of the tapestries.

LC: A lot of your photographs are portraits and self-portraits. Can you talk about the significance of using people as your subjects?

PH: I try to utilize all genres. I want to use it all, not just documentary. Desire can be very simple, so I like to use different styles of portraits to give complexity to them. And I create integrated self-portraits where other people take pictures of me. I realized that the stories I was showing reflected off of me.

LC: Are your subjects strangers or close friends and family?

PH: Its pretty mixed. I would say both people I'm close with and strangers.

LC: Other than your 6th grade teacher and father, do you have any other influences or artists you admire?

PH: I am constantly looking at work. August Sander, Tod Papageorge, Paul Graham, Richard Prince, Laurel Nakadate, Junot Diaz, Octavia Bulter, Goya, Salvador Dali, and Hmong writers like May Lee. I'm constantly looking at all kinds of art by photographers, painters, and writers. I feel that it keeps me inspired.

LC: Would you categorize your art as Asian American?

PH: Well, I think that Asian American becomes a safe category and that's fine. It was fine when I was first putting my name out there and it was a way to be seen. But I like to think that my art far exceeds the Asian American community.

LC: How has your art progressed or changed since the start? What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

PH: I think since being in grad school, I am more critical, analytical, and thinking more about theory and psychology. My art is no longer about telling a story, I'm no longer interested in a narrative, there's more to it now. As for exhibitions, I think that having Yale attached my name has given me more opportunities. I want to be an artist that isn't attached, but coming from Yale has definitely helped get my name across.

LC: What are you currently working on?

PH: Right now I'm teaching at the Minnesota College of Art and Design and I'm working on two series: a Hmong Veteran series and a Male Order Bride series.

End.