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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Emily Hanako Momohara Interview

Madeleine Tick  
*DePaul University*

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**Interviewer: Madeleine Tick**  
**Artist: Emily Hanako Momohara**  
**Skype interview**  
**May 13, 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 Art, Media, & Design.*

**Artist Bio:**

Emily Hanako Momohara grew up near Seattle, Washington and earned her BFA in Photography and her BA in Art History from the University of Washington. She went on to receive her MFA in Expanded Media from the University of Kansas, where she studied under Roger Shimomura. She was an Associate Professor of Art at the Art Academy of Cincinnati where she headed the photography major through 2013. Now Momohara is in her studio fulltime.

Momohara has exhibited nationally, most notably at the Light Factory with artists Mary Ellen Mark, Sara Moon and other. She has

been a visiting artist at several residency programs including the Center for Photography at Woodstock and Fine Arts Work Center. She received a 2011 Arts Council Excellence Grant. (Bio taken from the artist's site: <http://www.ehmomohara.com/aboutme.html>)



**Interview Transcript:**

**Madeleine Tick:** Tell me a little bit about yourself.

**Emily Hanako Momohara:** Okay, well, I grew up near Seattle...let's see, how personal do I want to get? I don't know if I want to tell you my age! [laughs] I'm *hapa*, so I'm of

mixed race. My father is of Japanese ancestry, that side of the family came to America via Okinawa and Mainland Japan, they settled in Hawaii and Seattle, and that's where most of the family lives. My mom's side is primarily British, but that goes way back, like, daughters of the revolution back. I grew up in Seattle, and then I moved to Hawaii briefly when I graduated from high school. Then I decided to get serious about life and art and I came back and attended the University of Washington for undergrad. I studied with Roger Shimomura at the University of Kansas for graduate school, and I ended up taking a teaching position in Cincinnati, that's how I ended up here. I recently just decided to spend full time in my studio, so I'm only a teacher for another week. [laughs]

**MT:** [laughs] Those are two very different outlets, I'm sure.

**EHM:** Well, I was teaching photography and had earned Associate Professor last year... there's just not enough time in the day to really do all of the projects that I want to do as well be an academic... something had to give [laughs], and teaching was that. I'm sure I'll miss it, we'll see how it goes over the next year or so.

**MT:** You mentioned that you taught photography. How did you get introduced to photography and any other art forms that you might practice today?

**EHM:** Well, photo was an accident. I was putting myself through college...I went to a community college first to get some credits taken care of. Within my schedule, the only studio class I could fit in was photography. I thought, "okay, I'll take it." I thought of myself more as an architect or a sculptor. I thought I worked more three-dimensionally. And then, I kind of fell in love with it. I was painting on people and objects and then photographing them. So, I was still working in three dimensions, but my finished product would be a print. I really fell in love with photography. So, I took more and more classes and then when it came time for me to transfer to the University of Washington, I transferred into the Fine Art Department in Photography.

**MT:** When did you know that you wanted to work professionally as an artist, either as a photographer or with any other means that you thought you might be an artist?

**EHM:** Do you consider design in that same realm?

**MT:** Sure.

**EHM:** Probably junior high. Maybe a little before? I always loved to draw, I was making ceramic figurines, and when I was younger I did a lot of sewing. That was just my natural tendency, making things with my hands. [laughs] So, I just figured I'd end up in architecture because you could actually get a job at a firm. [laughs]

**MT:** [laughs] Right, what the parents want.

**EHM:** But that didn't turn out to be the right path for me.

**MT:** Do you have a favorite subject that you like to photograph? Or is there a particular theme that you like photographing? Something that you like to repeat over and over in your work that really interests you?

**EHM:** Thematically and medium-wise I tend to jump all over the place... I go back and forth between moving and still image. I also investigate several genres... as far as landscape, still life, portrait. [laughs] But, the one consistent aspect is that I'm really trying to mine history: family history, cultural history, community history. I'm interested in how we learn from the past and how we interpret the past. That's always woven through all of my work.

**MT:** Sort of with shared histories you like to portray that in your work?

**EHM:** Yes, it tends to be ideas that are closer to me. Right now I'm actually starting a documentary film, which is something brand new, [laughs] I haven't done anything like that with my work. It's (my work) been a little bit more conceptual. The film is about a specific woman and her experience during World War II through the present. There's some overlap in her personal history and my family's history, but I'm really interested in that storytelling and how we build legacy...all of that is just fascinating to me. I've never done a documentary film so we'll see how that translates with my aesthetic. [laughs]

**MT:** I was looking over some of your work before on your page, and some work that I found really interesting was the "Koden" series. With that, what is the meaning of this series? Are you trying to convey something particular with your images? How long did it take? But most importantly, what do you want viewers to see when they look at this series of photos, what kind of feelings do you want to illicit?

**EHM:** First, they're all taken in funeral homes. So it's about loss, about legacy...that idea keeps coming through in my work. I hope that people get two ideas: narrative and visual intrigue and mystery because there is so much we don't know about when you pass on, or about people who have passed on. I often find myself wishing that I was older when my great grandparents passed away so I could have asked questions. I never met my great grandfather; my great grandmother died when I was eleven and I wish would have been more aware and able to ask her questions about her life. There's a real mystery behind it...someone not being present anymore. I hope that people get that visually from the eeriness and the strangeness. They're cinematic in their formats, staging and lighting so hopefully people get that there is a storyline there and there is a greater narrative.

**MT:** Were there any kinds of hints or indications of ghosts in the photos? I noticed a lot of interplay with shadows.

**EHM:** Yes, at first I was working a lot with shadows. The shadows started becoming a little too obvious though, so I started dealing with motion, opacity, and light: different ways that you could talk about that spiritual realm and moving on. There are definitely visual clues pointing to “ghosts,” there is so much in our visual language already that it makes more sense for me to try to tap into that symbolic language rather than create my own.

**MT:** Was it a very long process? Had you been thinking about it for a long time and planning it or was it more of an “Aha! Here is inspiration!” moment?

**EHM:** Well, I had been thinking about it a lot...I started that series in the summer of 2007 when I was on a residency at the Center for Photography at Woodstock... and up to that point, over the course of a little over a year, eight people passed away in my life. So I had been thinking about how I wanted to memorialize them and to talk about that loss. But you know, at first when something happens to you, you can't articulate how you feel. It took me a while before I could actually start making work about it. When I got to Woodstock, I had just finished up a body of work and I knew that I wanted to start working with it [memorializing] but I had no idea what I wanted to do. So I asked if there was a funeral home in the area...I was interested in the spaces where we grieve, this idea of secret spaces. I was told that there was a place, and they did a little introduction for me and I talked to the owner. He was really interesting and allowed me to photograph in his space. So I actually went a couple of days, I didn't photograph, I just figured out what I wanted to do in there...just looked around at the space. The first one I did was the dragon image (fig. 1), and that's because my friend that passed away in the previous year was named Tatsuo, which means 'dragon,' it's almost literal [laughs]. After I did it, I was really interested in that idea, you know, the shadow connecting to the person, the dragon lady as a stereotype... there's a lot more to it than what I was initially thinking about. I had to get the process down, how to create the shadows in the right proportion amongst other things. I only completed three pieces in those two weeks that I was at Woodstock [laughs] so it did take a long time. Once I figured out what I was doing and

what I was looking for in the spaces it wasn't as cumbersome. I think it took two and a half years on that project.



“Dragon” (2007)

In memory of Tatsuo Nakata  
(taken from artist's website)

**MT:** Wow.

**EHM:** [laughs]

**MT:** Do you address Asian or Asian American identities, histories, or themes in your art? If so, could you talk about them, and if not, why not?

**EHM:** I do. I reference stereotypes, as you can see with that dragon piece...the dragon lady, which comes out of our history and cultural history in the way that Asian women were viewed, especially at the turn of the century and around World War II. It's not in too much of the Kodan series, although there's one called “Soldier” that is a specific

reference to people who have passed away. A friend's brother passed away in Iraq, so I was trying to reference him. But I also wanted to talk about that generation that went to war during World War II, including family members...my grandfather was in the 101<sup>st</sup> battalion...they all volunteered and served the country. I just have so much respect for them even though I am still quite puzzled as to why they wanted to fight for our country after everything that was happening to their families. So there are references there. I think that in other bodies of work there are more direct references; in the Desert Sand series there are actual artifacts that I'm using, those are specific to immigration and cultural history.

**MT:** So would you say that identifying as Asian or Asian American is important to you?

**EHM:** Yeah, half of my family is Japanese-American and their experiences have formed the way that I grew up. So it's part of me, and I think it's also part of how people see me as well... you can't get away from the way that the world views you [laughs]. I also think that after moving to the Midwest—you know I went to school in Kansas and then I moved to Cincinnati—not being around a huge Asian American community has really made me investigate who I am and why I am that person. That comes out in my work. Also, wanting to share, hoping to connect with other people who may not be Asian American but are also from groups who feel marginalized helps everyone.

**MT:** Has your work been shown in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American? Have you been labeled as an Asian or Asian American artist before?

**EHM:** I've been in exhibitions that were primarily Asian American, but not significantly. There was one show in the Seattle area that was a community fundraiser. I've been more involved in panels. I was speaking with Laura Kina on a panel in Portland Oregon about hapa artists, spoke in D.C., and I've been to DePaul for the Mixed Race Critical Studies Conference and was part of a panel there. So I think it's more the information sharing and community building that I am involved in. I should add that I spoke at the Civil Liberties Symposium in Idaho for the Friends of Minidoka.

**MT:** Would you be worried about your work being put in a box in terms of expectations and stereotypes with that label or is it not a concern?

**EHM:** It hasn't come up. If I was only getting those kinds of exhibitions then I would try to diversify, but I feel that it's spread out enough that I'm not too worried about it. Because I do show in other types of venues, I certainly want to be able to give back to my community specifically and it's great to get involved with the Asian American community as well.

**MT:** I'm also an avid photographer, I took a photography class for an arts requirement in high school and was amused that we got involved with that art in similar manners. [laughs] With that, what kind of advice would you give to aspiring artists? Specifically, what sort of advice would you give to young artists who identify as Asian or Asian American? Are there any difficulties that they will have to overcome? Are there ways to calm their inner conflicts of identity they may have?

**EHM:** The advice would be the same across the board. Figure out who you are immediately [laughs]. Do all those crazy self-portraits where you're wrapping yourself up naked in saran wrap and jumping off roofs, get that all out of the way. You don't want to be doing your senior thesis project and not know...I've seen people struggle with that. Find out what your identity as an artist is: are you an artist? Are you a woman? Are you Asian American? Are you a Japanese American? Are you a daughter? Are you a mother? All of these different things. Figure out what those are first so that you don't have to feel that you're always searching for yourself in your work. The themes that come up will be the ones that stick around for the rest of your life. Do all of those identity projects by the time that you graduate. Then try to be more specific with what you want to do.

The second thing that I would tell every art student, and this is the teacher coming out of me, what separates the people that make it from the ones that do is not isn't talent. Those who make it bust their asses...they're out there networking, they are at openings, they are talking to people, they're passing out their business cards, they are offering to be involved in different organizations...they're the ones that are out there and are really working hard. The ones that are shy or a little lazy, saying, "no, I don't want to go to that thing tonight" or maybe are afraid, "I don't want to email that person," they won't make it. Find yourself a mentor, email that person. That's how I ended up working with Roger Shimomura. You might be surprised at how receptive other artists will be to talking to you as a student. I would say be out there, be visible, and work really hard. For Asian American artists and for female artists, I would also advise to get a mentor that knows the lay of the land, to help you. I think that being young can be to your benefit when finding galleries to represent you, and yet your inexperience can hinder you. So get a mentor and have someone who you will be able to take your questions to... so you don't stick your foot in your mouth or do something silly that might alienate you from someone that you really want to be friends with.

**MT:** You mentioned The Friends of Minidoka?

**EHM:** I'm actually chair this year. [laughs]

**MT:** Tell me about your work with that...why you got involved and what you do.

**EHM:** The Friends of Minidoka was created after President Clinton designated Minidoka as a national park. We started with initially three [people]; we were doing public meetings trying to figure out what folks wanted to see as Minidoka was developed. It became evident that a community group needed to be involved. Considering the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, government officials were not exactly their favorites to talk to {laughs}.

**MT:** As I would imagine.

**EHM:** Yeah, so we started by doing that. We also started doing pilgrimages, started the Civil Liberties Symposium, got some books published, and just worked on different projects surrounding Minidoka. It's been great...the people that I've met, the work that we've done, places we have been to—I was able to be out there (at Minidoka) and photograph archaeological digs that the National Park Service did—all of this really inspiring stuff that I've been able to do because I was involved. I'm always there [laughs] like “oh, what are you doing?”

**MT:** That's exciting.

**EHM:** So that was what started, and I was on the group, four of us actually started it and now the board is twelve people. We've got all these different committees working on different projects. We write grants...we worked with on the honor roll, it has all the names of everyone that was in the service during WWII, which was put up because we got a grant. We also got a grant to reconstruct one of the guard towers and that'll be done in a year and a half. Those kinds of projects may not seem so exciting, the grant writing and all...

**MT:** I would imagine so. But it's necessary work.

**EHM:** Exactly. I love it. I've met so many great people, heard amazing stories, and that feeds my work.

**MT:** Are there young people involved or is it more often older people?

**EHM:** Not enough [young people]. If you want to get involved you can! [laughs]

**MT:** So you don't think that there's enough youth involvement with these sorts of projects?

**EHM:** I think I'm the youngest person. No, there's one other person who's younger than me. She's in her 20's and I love that. But after that, the people are probably late 40's...my dad's generation makes up at least half of the board. It's a problem, trying to figure out how to get folks to care even though it was maybe their grandparents who experienced the incarceration.

**MT:** It seems that there is almost a sort of age-gap disconnect going on.

**EHM:** It's unfortunate.

**MT:** That could be your next project. Get some young artists in there.

**EHM:** I'm trying to use social networking to get the word out there in a vehicle which would be more appropriate and get younger recruits. But we'll see.

**MT:** What types of exhibition opportunities have been available to you? Have they changed over the years?

**EHM:** When I first got out of grad school, I was participating in juried shows. I tried to build up my résumé in that way. Now I only apply to jury shows that have a jury whom I really want to see my work, maybe they've seen my work or juried me before. A lot of times the people at jury shows might be grant jurors somewhere else so you want to keep putting your work in front of them. Now I'm working in either galleries, nonprofits, museums, or art center types of spaces for shows, which to me is very comfortable. I'd love to be showing at major museums...baby steps, working on it [laughs].

**MT:** What are you currently working on? You mentioned the documentary film...are there any other projects that you're excited about right now?

**EHM:** I'm working on a new body of work, more of a still life. It doesn't have a name yet. [laughs] I don't know! I've only got three of them done right now, I'm still working on that. And I've also been working quite a bit on the film. It's amazing how much work goes on behind the scenes: contacting the Seattle School District, trying to get someone there that I can interview, getting permits for the places that I want to shoot...all that kind of work. Especially since I haven't done this before, it's taking me a little bit of time to learn as I am going.

**MT:** I'm sure that's a real change of pace for you and a very interesting experience.

**EHM:** It's very different! [laughs] I'm so used to being in my studio by myself.

**MT:** So I take it you mostly work by yourself so group collaboration is quite challenging.

**EHM:** I actually just did a collaborative piece for an arts organization here in Cincinnati. Usually I have a student intern during the school year that helps me in the studio because a lot of the time I need more than two hands, like when I'm building things or setting up shoots. I usually have someone for about five hours a week for that. But, most of the time it's just me and my work [laughs].

**END.**