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Akemi Nakano Cohn Interview

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Interviewer: Allisan Tate

Artist: Akemi Nakano Cohn

Location: Artist's studio, Chicago, Illinois

Date: January 28, 2016

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.



Photo courtesy of the artist.

Artist Bio:

Akemi Nakano Cohn studied traditional Japanese dyeing/printing techniques for ten years under the master Haru Izumi in Yokohama, Japan. She received an MFA in Fiber Arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art (Bloomfield, MI) and a BFA from Tama Art University, Tokyo, Japan. Cohn has taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Int'l Surface Design Conference, Haystack, and others. She was visiting artist at the Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Nebraska, Zijdelings (Netherlands), and artist-in-residence at Anderson Ranch and Ragdale Foundation. She has been in many exhibits, including solo exhibits; *Urban Prairie*; Gallery West (Tokyo) & Art Life Mistuhashi (Kyoto, Japan); *Habitat*; University of Nebraska, Lincoln, group exhibit; *Fiberart Int'l* (touring) The Bellevue Arts Museum, Museum of Arts & Design, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and has executed many commissions including the

Unitarian Church of Evanston and Loyola University Medical Center.
www.akemistudio.com

Interview Transcript:

Allisan Tate: I would like to start with, can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Akemi Nakano Cohn: I was born in Yokohama city, Japan. I grew up and went to art university in Tokyo and then after I...(long history or short?)

AT: Whatever you'd like or are comfortable with!

ANC: Okay, so after I graduated with graphic design major in art university, I worked as a graphic designer, several years. Then I went to India. I was so fascinated by artisans handicraft. It's sort of different from graphic designer, those artisans, because they use hands. And also from really little to children to old people they have something to do-- some kind of part/role to take part. They contribute to work. So I was fascinated and when I returned to Japan, I looked for someone to teach me traditional arts and crafts. So I found one master and started to learn Japanese rice paste resist technique, shibori, those kind of things, under private teaching. And after I studied for 10 years under that master she said you have to discover your own...your own way [laughing]. So I came to the United States in 1985, long time ago, and I needed [laughs] to study English. I studied in a college in Portland, Oregon for 3 years to go to graduate school. Finally the score, reached the point, I applied to graduate schools. Cranbrook Academy, I went. I graduated in 1989...I think '89... I might be wrong but it's alright, in Fiber Art. And a professor introduced me his friends in Chicago. And when I came to Chicago, I think it was September, beautiful day, I thought it's a place really, I should be there. If it's like in winter, like today, maybe I said no, no. [laughter] But it was so beautiful I decided to move and I was accepted, therefore I moved. And I started to work under a designer and he made, the company made, handmade wall coverings and fabric too. I was a textile designer. I worked there for three years and I got married and, from then until now I have been teaching, workshops and schools and to have exhibition to show my work. That's my story.

AT: That's really a neat story. So how would categorize your art or yourself, as an artist, How would you define yourself?

ANC: One time, when I lost my father I was crying, everyday. Everyday, everyday, and he had nice life, but still I was so sad. And then one day, I thought why couldn't I communicate with him. And I cut piece of fabric maybe 3 inch by 3 inch and I started to stitch -- stitch something from our memories and one piece a day I stitched something to, uh tell him, or from the memory. It's a really wonderful healing process. And I thought I was not really trying to make art its more like something to communicate from my

happiness, or sad sadness or, those kind of things. It's really wonderful medium for those kinds of things.

AT: That's a really touching story.

ANC: Thank you, it was my realization. It is a tool to connect with the world.

AT: So when do you think you first started communicating in this way?

ANC: I was not really good to, not shy! But I am not really good to talk with people, especially telephone conversation. I really hate it because in United States, people cannot understand what I am saying and also even in Japan, since I was really little, it was really...I had really difficult to communicate so I really loved just reading books or sometimes I would made cartoons and people would laugh at me or pay attention. Something drawing, or something visual thing, I could communicate with people. I didn't think I wanted to become an artist, but something visual thing it's easy to communicate with other people or to the world. Oh and by the way my husband, he's a musician, he communicates in that way. Everybody has some media -- visual or audio, those kinds things.

AT: My next question came from when I was looking at your website, and I noticed there were not a lot of names for things, the piece I noticed had a name that was *The Cycle of Renewal* piece that was 4 panels. Can you tell me a little bit about the meaning or what you were trying to communicate with that piece?

ANC: [revised answer sent by e-mail on January 29, 2016] It came from the idea of "everything is connected" like a circle, infinite circle. Also, after flower is gone, it makes seeds for a new life. Repeat life and death. Death is not absolute which is more eastern idea than western idea, I think. I liked OBON (soul's day of Japanese) and I see Mexican culture as the day of the dead. I often use dots and cut them out. The image of dots are seed, it indicates cycle of life for plants. The entire use of dots indicates a cycle of life to create a memory.

AT: So following that, can you tell me a bit about the techniques Katazome, Shibori and Nassen techniques that you use in your work. Have you always worked this way or did you begin in working in another way?

ANC: First part of my work is impression when I came to the United States, it's really about women power. I expressed, and then I came to Chicago, I was overwhelmed by immigrants coming from many countries. I felt, I'm really, one of immigrant and trying to adjust to the land. I expressed that feeling and then gradually I paid attention to prairie, because I was invited some opportunity to stay in a real prairie area, and I noticed the prairie itself, and prairie did not exist in Tokyo, Japan or Chicago. I thought, wow! It's really different. I felt vivid and colorful. I used Nassen technique, which use synthetic dyes mix into rice paste and print. The colors are strong and bright. It colors and resist at the same time. Theme comes first. Then, I pick some proper techniques. I noticed that

Katazome which I cut out the shape to print with rice paste, the cut out shape is gone (because I cut), but the shape itself stays as blank shape. I thought hmm, it might be like snowy ground footsteps. The animals are gone and left as footsteps, but animals are gone and they don't exist. Just footsteps tell us their existence. I started to use cut out shape. I tried to spend a lot of different time on different materials and finally, recently, this is the newest one, I put fabric, natural dyed fabric, and put backing I placed Japanese rice paper, easy to cut.

AT: And what kind of fabric is it?

ANC: It's silk. Technique is you can say katazome, but katazome is cut out stencil paper, rice paste is used as resist, then brush natural dye or pigment. After the resisted area becomes white. As you see, my recent work would not considered a traditional Katazome.

AT: So you found your own art?

ANC: Yes, right.

AT: So then what is Shibori then?

ANC: Shibori is one of resist techniques...[gets up and searches for example in basket while talking] like if you, maybe like, not exactly but....it's when you tie some area and then you put it in to any kind of dye bath and then you can get color, the resisted area stays white. It's a different technique compared to Katazome.

AT: Very interesting, So do you start with a larger drawings like the ones on the wall behind you. Or do you start small and make it bigger?

ANC: Mostly, when I try to find ideas, I mostly start on a sketchbook and then make it larger. Sometimes I make this actual size [gestures to a piece behind] but not always.

AT: So what kind of dyes do you use with these techniques because you said you resist dye?

ANC: I used to use synthetic dyes before, but recently I use natural dyes, and indigo.

AT: What are synthetic dyes or natural dyes? How do they differ?
[showing pieces hung on wall while speaking]

ANC: Synthetic dyes are from synthetic materials, like petroleum, but natural dyes [brings our bag of dried flowers] are made from things like this. This is marigold. In my recent work, using natural dyes is important. It symbolizes my idea. Flowers are ephemeral and they live only a short time. Dyes (natural dye) are extracted from live flowers, plants, and roots, such as Marigold, apple trees and flowers, Osage, and madder root. Silk fabric is then dyed with these extracted natural dyes. The extracted color will

stay on fabric. Even though the flowers are gone, the color will stay on the fabric as a dual existence.

AT: Like a memory?

ANC: Right like a memory of marigold!!! The piece *Memory of Marigold #1* creates a memory induced magical world where traces of flowers as a negative space (cut-out dots) and the printed marigold images (positive) metaphorically co-exist.

AT: How long does it take to complete a piece? From start to finish, including the process itself?

ANC: Many people ask me, maybe one month. But it takes time to think about. Sometimes one month, thinking process and thinking also its not just from 8 to 9, or 9 to 5, I don't think while walking or talking, sometimes I think, it might be interesting I must be genius! [laughing] and then the next day I think I must be really, really stupid and put away the idea, but later oh it might work! It's really just a struggling process. [laughing] But Actual cutting and dying one month to sometimes maybe two weeks.

AT: How do you assemble your pieces? Can you tell me a bit about the process?

ANC: It's not one solid piece of fabric because dying paper in indigo is just a physical thing and I don't have huge indigo dye bath, I use small pieces and then put them together and also to make large piece to put rice paper for the backing is technically very difficult.

AT: Is it the material itself that's difficult?

ANC: Yes, yes. You put glue like starch, pick it up and put it on large piece without any tongs or anything. It is really difficult. I learned how to make a traditional scroll making technique, and I follow it.

AT: The material is very thin, right?

ANC: Yes it is. I use thin hand made Kozo paper.

AT: Next question is, do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork?

ANC : Yes, I did. I'm not really conscious about being Asian American, but I always feel I am a foreigner. When I got married, my sister-in-law gave me plants and some plant stayed and lived, but some plants didn't. I thought they are like immigrants. The plants are transplanted to different soil from native land, some plants dye on new soil, some plants survive, just like immigrants or it's just like me. I am being transplanted. For instance people who came from Eastern Europe, they have light skin. They look "Americans" after they become 2nd 3rd generations. While, Asians are still "Oriental

looking” when they become 2nd or 3rd generation. Their colors and face stand out and always I feel being, migrated or immigrant. Yes, I express these feelings in my work.

AT: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an “Asian” or “Asian American Artist”?

ANC: Hmm, I think few years ago, my piece was included in an exhibition but generally speaking people don't put label as Asian American. Myself, I showed my pieces as transplant or taking root those trying to adjust to different country, those I made several pieces...oh yes, yes I did some exhibition, *Sense of Place*. But not Asian, it was as an immigrant, yes I did.

AT: If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

ANC: At that time, yes. I felt but now I'm probably merged maybe. It means I have been blended in this society. I think now I've changed. I don't feel really strongly I am an Asian American.

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

ANC: I'm not sure, can you explain a little more?

AT: Like this question means what kind of gallery showings have you done, or what types of opportunities have you had to show your work, and how have the opportunities changed?

ANC: Mostly university's gallery invite me to show my work because it's connected with a visiting artist situation. Titles were *Trace*, *Urban Prairie*, *Material Matters*, *Cycle of Renewal*, etc.

AT: What are you currently working on?

ANC: Right now I'm invited by university gallery in Durango, Colorado [Fort Lewis College]. Therefore, I'm working on it.

AT: How did you start doing workshops?

ANC: Word of mouth. I have many classmates from graduate school and they were teaching in a college level. After I quit teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, they recommended me to teach a workshop, e.g. Haystack School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and Penland. They asked me to teach again. Once a workshop is published (catalogue and website), other schools contacted me. I have been invited by many universities as a visiting artist, e.g. Indian University,

University of Nebraska, Southern University of Illinois, etc. All were through words of mouth, I think. Luckily I don't need to promote.

AT: That's really neat. I think that's the end of my questions so thank you!

END.