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Anida Yoeu Ali Interview

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Interviewer: Tymothy Levine  
Artist: Anida Yoeu Ali  
Site: in person interview at Anida’s apartment Chicago, IL  
Date: 5/29/09 8:00pm

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.

BIO: Performance artist, writer and global agitator, Anida Yoeu Ali is a first generation Muslim Khmer woman born in Cambodia and raised in Chicago. Her interdisciplinary performances use Butoh to examine the poetic potential of the body and collective healing. Her performance work transforms loss into conversations about reconciliation. Since 1998, Anida has toured over 300 colleges and venues with the spoken word ensemble, I Was Born With Two Tongues, and the multimedia collective Mango Tribe. The Tongues' pioneering live performances and critically-acclaimed debut CD, "Broken Speak", ignited a new generation of Asian American voices. She is also a founding member of Young Asians With Power!, Asian American Artists Collective-Chicago, the National APIA Spoken Word & Poetry Summit, and MONSOON fine arts journal. Her artistic work has been the recipient of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, National Endowment of the Arts and Illinois Arts Council. From Copenhagen to Ho Chi Minh City, Anida lectures, exhibits and performs internationally.

For more information visit: http://atomicshogun.com/
Tym Levine: Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Anida Ali: Well my full name is Anida Yoeu Ali, and I try to go by the three names because they are all part of how I try to identify my heritage. I was born in Battambang, Cambodia on December 8, 1973. I also consider myself of mixed ethnic heritage – Cambodian, Cham, Thai, and Malaysian and of course American.

TL: How do you define your self?

AA: Well the actual question of “how I define my self”, I’m not sure there’s a clear answer to that, because I think its still a continual process. I think to give an answer that definitive is not who I am right now. But if your question was, “how do I define myself”, that would be different, a matter of semantics. My identity is a complex set of Identities, not singular. Its multiple and complex, layered. I’m an Asian American, I’m a woman, but as an Asian American I’m also some one who comes from a mixed ethnic background. I was also not born here, I was born in Cambodia so that makes me an immigrant here. I’m actually a refugee, because that’s how my family came here. Their status is that of being pushed and displaced out of their country as a result of war and under the circumstance of never being able to go back, because you fear for your life. So there’s all those layers but I’m also a mother, I’m a wife, I’m a daughter, I’m a sister, I’m a community activist, I’m an organizer, performance poet, I’m doing installation, I do costume work, and I perform movement based work. So yeah hopefully you can figure it all out!

TL: Haha, yeah that’s a lot!

AA: It is and, it’s never singular or definitive, in terms of Identity.

TL: When, how and why did you first get involved with Mango Tribe? In your Bio I saw that you’re the founder.

AA: I got involved in Mango Tribe around 2000 and I’m not sure at that point if we officially called ourselves Mango Tribe. It was actually a gathering of a handful of Asian American women, and at the time I was part of this other performance poetry group, and we were touring around the country. But what I noticed that was absent was the voices of
Asian American women. I felt like there really needed to be this collective of Asian American women who needed to come together to put our stories on stage. And so Mango Tribe was born with the specific intention of doing collaborative work for the stage. Whether it was theatrical or performance poetry, it was sort of whatever we wanted to do as a collective. But it was a little bit more experimental than just reading a poem. That’s how Mango Tribe came into being.

**TL:** Tell me about the meaning of your spoken work “Not Your Fetish”, you seem very angry, what is fueling your anger?

**AA:** Tym! Tym is fueling my anger! I’m kidding! Well “Not Your Fetish”, which is similar to a lot of my poems that I wrote around that time which is in the late 90’s were poems that responded to the environment and circumstances and the reflection of peoples mentalities. At that time I noticed there was a lot of Asian women being “in”, and that Asian identity was really “in”, but particularly Asian women. This was clear if you reflect on old Madonna videos, and Gwen Stefani videos as an exoticization of Asian culture, whatever Asian culture is. They really sort of blended in what was maybe Chinese, or Japanese, Korean, maybe even Thai, and stereotyped it of being Asian. Anyways the whole poem came about because I was working in this graphic design firm and I had this boss who hired Asian women to work for him. He was an Italian guy, and we all thought this was kind of weird, like why is he *always* hiring Asian women? There was this one time when he said to me at lunch-time that he went through his “ethnic women stage” and I’m not kidding! And he’s a total suburban man with 2 kids and a wife, but he has this sort of seedy side. I also met other men who “just find Asian women so beautiful”, and above and beyond other women. So the poem, which has a really clear statement, stop masturbating in my culture, stop masturbating in your own glory. That’s something I made up because I can just picture these seedy white men who have an image of Asian women as dragon ladies as exotic lotus blossoms who are sexually repressed and at the same time totally like crazy sexually. It’s an interesting dynamic that’s very stupid and totally objectifies women. Yes it’s angry and rightfully so. Even when I went to college, I would have this experience of going in bars in my early twenties and having these stupid pick up lines, “like hey lotus blossom”, you know?
TL: Wow! That terrible!

AA: Yea! It’s so stupid and it’s just like what the fuck! So that’s where it came from, all the anger was compounded over the years like stupid cat calls but with this racialized image of myself.

TL: In your lecture from class a few weeks ago you talked about your Activism, how do you define your self as an Activist

AA: Well I think that it’s reflective in the work that I’ve done but particularly for me its using my art as a tool for activism. That means that you don’t necessarily march on the streets although I’ve done that and it’s still symbolically important. There are different ways to show your support, and interests in different political issues. I think that for me its about using your artistry that comes through the poems you write, the kind of graphic design you can create with propaganda, or with even more subtle kinds of work. Things that aren’t overt through theater, or performance art, songs, whatever it is. As long as you feel politically empowered at that moment to really do things like break or subvert stereotypes, or looking out for your people and putting out stories that enrich, empower, complicate, humanize, Asian people as a whole. Or that reflects on something that’s really problematic within the society like police brutality that doesn’t really just affect a certain ethnic minority, but all people. I think for me the activism came out through my art.

TL: Do you ever address Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

AA: Absolutely, that’s because I can’t separate my Identity from who I am and from the kind of works that reflect me, you know what I mean? You can see that in a lot of my work. There’s a one woman show that I do called “Living Memory/Living Absence”, and that is about exploring my struggles with leaving Cambodia at a very young age, and going to Cambodia again for the very first time and addressing certain issues such as fear and un-belonging. So that piece of work is very autobiographical. I think that every poem I have is something that reflects my identity. Again it’s a very layered identity, there’s some part of me that’s always going to be in my works simply because its me doing it.
For me it’s really important that the work has an honesty in it, and that its genuine. You know it’s like your not making shit up, and that’s not what I do. There’s people who do that, and they’re great but I just cant do that. There’s so few of our stories that are real.

TL: Like yours, very much so actually.

AA: Yes and that’s what’s important to me is being genuine and authentic with my narrative work.

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

AA: Hummmmm!!!!

TL: Yea I know it’s a pretty complex answer to give I’m sure!

AA: Yes the growth from my work! Its come from being as simple as performing on a mic, to writing a poem, to things that are a lot more layered and complicated, now to where I’m dealing with a mixed medium. I’m performing with costumes which are very important in the installation of the work and than there’s the music aspect that I bring and its not just music, but more ambient sound. Some times the work is spoken, but most of the time the work is coming out of movement. So I’m actually transitioning to trying to use my body without words but sill expressing complicated narratives.

TL: What are you currently working on?

AA: I am collaborating with my husband on some spoken word videos so we’re still going to explore that to take it to a more visual level, which is going to be exciting for me. I’m performing poems on camera, which is changing things up a little. It’s not just the camera on me and I’m performing, its sort of a little bit more poetic than that, and its going to be real interesting to see what his vision brings to the table. I’m also working on a show at the school of The Art Institute in Chicago. The show is starting at the end of August to September. It’s a gallery show and I’m going to be doing an installation piece that I’m going to use yards and yards for fabric for this sculpture thing I’m creating. Then I’m working on my MFA thesis work and I’m hoping to graduate with an MFA in May 2010. Mother Fucking Artist degree, that’s what I call it which is supposed to be by the spring so we’ll see what is coming out of it. A lot of that, I’m thinking is going to be
about spiritual deities and a feminist approach to religious icons like the bishop, the imam, the monk, the rabbi, those sort of iconic images and flip that more into a feminist perspective.

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