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Ann Marie Chua Lee interview

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Interviewer: Jasmin M. Ortiz

Artist: Anne Marie Chua Lee, Co-Founder of RedStar Costumes and Clothing

Phone interview Chicago, IL/Vernon Hills, IL

Date: 2/5/10 10:00am CST

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*

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Artist Bio

Anne Marie Chua Lee is the youngest of four siblings. Her brother was the first one to introduce the gaming community. From there, she went on to experience the anime and cosplay fandom. Cosplay would prove to be a major part of her life. After graduating from DePaul with a BFA in Art and Art History, Anne Marie applied for an entry level temp job for graphic design. Due to lack of promise at the company, she quit and applied for another design job. However due to unseen circumstances, she had to leave. Her cosplay partner, Renee Werth, had talked about creating a business for cosplayers like themselves. This became an actual feat for them. In 2008,

Redstar Clothing and Costumes was born and has been in steady business for conventions ever since. Both founders attend conventions all over the country, promoting their business and gaining clients. Their company is responsible for creating costumes, wigs, props, and accessories.

JO: To start this off, tell me a bit about yourself in a biographic kind of sense.

AM: I'm from Chicago. I'll be twenty-six in two days and I'm the youngest of four kids. I have two older sisters and one older brother. And that pretty much had a huge impact on me. My brother is the reason why I got into video games. And then video games lead to anime and of course that is what I'm still doing today after years and years. It's still my main hobby and I'm trying right now to make a good living off of it.

JO: Could you expand on that? Like where you grow up, go to high school, college...

AM: I spent the very beginning of my life in Liberty Hill then moved to Vernon Hills which is not very far away at all. I went to Stevenson high school, which at the time was a fantastic high school. It's huge. There were about a thousand people in my class. I was kinda the art kid, I was proud to say there was an anime club and I was the very first member of the Stevenson anime club which still exist today. It's existed for about ten years now. And I eventually became friends with the anime people and that lead to knowing more and more people and the gamer community. I worked at Gamestop for three years and most of the people I know have worked at a Gamestop at one point in their lives. That was actually an extreme work experience that was actually a lot about how to deal with people and I think retail is a terrible terrible job to work but what you learn about people is priceless. That was during my high school years. I wanted to make video games so I went to the Illinois Institute of Art in Chicago so I got an apartment there. And I hated the school and I felt like I wasn't challenged and I had an issue with a professor, a color theory professor. Who had adopted two daughters from China and he would talk about how he saved them from a terrible and barbaric country. And I actually went to the administration to complain and they said they couldn't do anything to a tenured professor. I said I quit.

So I ended up applying to DePaul and got accepted and went there and was initially a Computer Science major and I thought okay, I wanna do something that was actually practical. Asian parents are like you should be information technology or a doctor or a lawyer. Okay, let me do this computer thing, I couldn't do it, it drove me nuts. Really, I actually like the people in Computer Science so I actually ended up going to Art and Art History. Pretty quickly, actually. And so while I was doing that I thought I'm gonna be a graphic designer. It's a way to do art and make money. But even as a graphic designer, the salary is awful around here [Chicago]. I think the average salary is around thirty to forty [thousand] just if your regular graphic designer. Senior graphic designer, you could probably go around forty to fifty [thousand]. And creative director is a six-figure salary but that takes years and years. You know that's like years and years of experience so you can make money. Its just extremely competitive and I understood this.

When I was a kid, I thought okay. I'm going to be a starving artist its gonna be what I do. I'm gonna do what I love and be happy and honestly I kinda feel that way right now with my work. I

feel like I'm a starving artist but I'm so happy with what I'm doing. People don't have that any other way. But once I graduated um you know I think when your between the ages of like 18-22-23 and your still in college and you have a lot of hope in what your going to do and once I got out and I was employed. I was being paid very little and I being treated really badly. They hired me on as a...what they usually do is like a contract to permanent. For a long time, they could tell me to come in whenever. My hours were incredibly erratic and finally I was promised work and I went on to that and they said "Oh, wait this position is not going to be available for another three months." And I thought okay, what I am going to do now? Eventually I found another design job and um I had really bad experience as I mentioned and I ended up turning around and suing the company. Um it was eh you know I'm not supposed to talk about it. I was fired. It was a discrimination case and it really turned me off, you know. I just became completely hopeless. When Renee ended up quitting her job, she just said okay let's finally do this.

Okay, well everything I went through was a blessing and but there was a definitely the post grad course happening. Oh my god, I don't want to do this. You know, why did I spend the last four years of my life studying this. I think I did end up leaning a lot you know it was fortunately a BA not a BFA so I ended up taking all kinds of class. I took Asian American studies courses, Catholic Studies courses um you know I took a psychology class and sociology class. Nice balance of things to learn and it wasn't at all pure art at all. I took a lot from my education esp. the experience of living alone. I've lived in the city of Chicago for five years and there I just thought I hate the city and the L makes me feel nauseous. By the time I left, I wished I was leaving and now I wish I was living there right now.

JO: How do you identify yourself?

AM: Let's see, I identify myself as somebody who, well you know, what I like the most is how I identify myself. So also you know what I am too. I'm like an Asian American, cosplayers, fashionista, designer and animal lover and game and anime fan. All the things I love is what I identify myself with.

JO: When, how and why did you first get involved into cosplay?

AM: Well, I always liked sewing and I started sewing when I was eleven. And I loved Pokémon, this is probably the most you know older and popular franchise in the U.S. umm and Japanese franchise. So I thought, I really want to make a Pokémon costume for Halloween. And I didn't have anyone to go to conventions with, my fandom. I didn't have a lot of friends who liked the same things I did. When I got older, I met them and they all said hey lets all go to a convention and I thought, hey what a perfect place where these costumes I've been making for Halloween already. So I went to Anime Central 2002, it was such an awesome fantastic time that I couldn't stop. It changed my life. I do conventions and cosplay now at least four times a year up to seven.

JO: During your subculture presentation [Anne Marie Chua Lee spoke at DePaul on January 21, 2010], you mentioned you were a god for a day at the convention. How did this affect you if anything?

AM: Well it really depends at which convention I'm in honestly. For example, when I was at a

place like San Diego Comic Con you know nobody's gonna really notice me under hundred thousand plus people that are there. Um so its kind of, I'll admit it's a great feeling to get stop in a hall and you'll stop for five minutes and your blinded by camera flashes and people are you know calling out your character's name. Its feels like paparazzi or something. It's a thrill. It feels good. Umm but umm it doesn't happen at all conventions.

JO: Tell me about the meaning of the Redstar costumes and clothing. How did you start the business?

AM: Well, umm it went all the way back actually in 2005; I had known Renee for about four years. Today, I've known her for about ten years. And I had known of her for maybe four years. We had known of each other through our friend circle and our friends tell me that wow you should really talk to Renee you both cosplay and you know none of them cosplay except for me and her. So I guess it was inevitable that she and I would get close to each other and wound up going to conventions. About a year of us going to conventions and cosplaying together, I mentioned to her, that we should really start something together. And we kept this in mind and then she became employed by this big time commissioner whose also in the Chicago area. I also eventually became employed by this commissioner. And we learned so much. We learn not only different tricks and skills on how to make a costume efficiently both with time and quality. But at the same time, we learned a lot about how the business runs and it was small at the time, maybe five employees max. We got to see the owner dealing with the accountant and having to pay taxes and uh her system for orders and e-mails and all that. So we really really took from that experience and we both ended up leaving for one reason or another. You know we got together and decided we're gonna do this and uh that was at the end of 2008 that it started.

JO: Do you plan on expanding the website any further? For example the clothing section has yet to be established.

AM: Yes. Absolutely, the thing is that the costumes are easy to put up on the portfolios and um with the clothing section unfortunately, do we make this into a store like a web store is it another place for a portfolio placing in where we put the clothing of what we made? Whenever we go to a convention we will have clothing and accessories on hand so that's where it gets sold but it hasn't been on the website. I'm hoping to make that into a store and I hope that I actually hope that actually costumes are the bread and butter of our company. But I'm hoping that clothing can become just as big if not bigger than the costumes part. Because You know costumes part is fantastic and wonderful but to make something original and some of that off, technically whole bunch easier and better because we're not infringing on any copyrights of any sort.

JO: Do you think you ever address Asian American identity or themes in the work that you do?

AM: You know, I am ..let's see. The anime gamer community is really diverse. People from all class or races are anime games are so accessible especially now to anybody. I think that the Asian American community, I think back to why I got back into Asian cinema and those cross fandoms. So if you like anime and games, you probably like Harry Potter or Asian cinema. So with Asian cinema, I started to watch it because I really wanted to see something with people like me. I wanna see people look like me on screen and that really you know it happens here

every now and then. But if it does, then there is a lot of stereotypes out there versus the portrayal of the media and the so it was great to get Asian cinema. I think that um with anime. I told a story during my presentation that um how my father said that he thought that this kind of fandom would bring pan Asian unity to everybody. I completely agree because uh the my friend quote unquote circle is uh there's a lot of Asian people in the Chicago area. I think we are like number 10 or number 9 of biggest Asian population in the country. Lot of us you know we are all-Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino Americans and um we all get together and um have these games in anime in common. It's a great feeling. If you're into Kpop or you know into anime or into Asian cinema it brings us together we are all culturally connected. We have a way of to feel connected to each other.

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JO: Do you think considering yourself Asian American is important to you? For example, the future clothing section that would be uploaded, would it be important for people to label you as an Asian American artist?

AM: I think that it would be important to me. Actually right now plan out a line of t-shirts, things that are steamed purchase rather than you know made tailor [stock ready-to-purchase versus made-to-order custom items] and I wanted it to have kind of like an Asian vision pop feeling to it. You know with the neki neco and the Asian food. To have that kind of product, I do, you know, I would say I draw this from my back ground and it is important in what I create. Um being an Asian American business owner and a woman, I think is extremely important and um saying that hey I got this business and we have a presence and so, yea I do think it is important.

JO: Do you think that they [customers] approach you because your Asian American or because of your work?

AM: ooohhh, you know I wouldn't know umm I uh I wouldn't that type of attitude wouldn't surprise me but that situation where that happen. Uh, she's Caucasian and I'm Asian American and we advertise ourselves as partners. I'm not entirely sure if that has happened or not.

JO: What are you currently working on?

AM: I'm crazy busy right now. I just completed a boatload of stock for Katsucon. Normally there is an artist alley table you know then the dealer room. The dealer room has booth and I actually was able to get an artist alley booth. I was going crazy trying to make stock and just making making make it. At the same time, I haven't made a new costume since July and before July I haven't made a costume since December. And it was really important to me stock, work on the stock and now pretty much finished with stock. And now working on the costume again. I leave for my convention, I was suppose to leave on Sunday and Katsucon is in Washington DC, there's huge record breaking snow storm so I was suppose to leave tomorrow and was suppose to leave on Sunday but I don't know if that is gonna get cancelled. Um but uh the convention is not for a... it's a week away. I'm still safe with the flight delay but it's coming up real soon. After dc, I can start working again, hardcore on my costume.

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