
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Chris Naka Interview

Cheryl Franzen
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Cheryl Franzen
Artist: Chris Naka
Online chat interview Chicago, IL
Date: 5/31/09
Start: 1:00P.M.
End: 2:45P.M.

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.

Chris Naka: Hey Cheryl!

Cheryl Franzen: Hi!

Naka: Let me know if this format works for you. I just thought it might be easier for you to record everything.

Franzen: Yeah definitely. This works well, instead of taking notes, and hoping I am able to write down all the important information.

Naka: Haha. Yeah. Sorry I haven't been able to get more artwork up on my web-page for you. I'm in the process of packing up all my stuff to move to a new apartment and I already took down my workstation computer I make my videos on.

Naka: So I have some limited access to files at the moment.

Franzen: Ahh yeah I saw that. That's no big deal

Naka: And unfortunately I took down most of my Youtube videos/my web-page when I was applying for grad schools. I didn't want the reviewers to Google me and find some really shitty videos I like, but no one else would.

Franzen: Haha. I see. Okay yeah that's fine with me.

Franzen: So is that piece that says click me with all the unicorns and rainbows anything then?

Naka: Not really. It was a script for web-pages developed by someone not very long ago. I saw it implemented as a joke on espn.com a few weeks ago and decided it would make a good web-page. I added the drawing of Legolas, because it seemed like the only thing lame enough to accompany the unicorns.

Naka: Every week or so I'll change some things on my web-page (at least until I put up a real version again), because my dad will always call me and complain. About the lack of updates, the lack of anything useful. etc

Naka: haha

Franzen: Ahh okay.

Franzen: Well I figure that talking about the staring contest, in addition to the other Asian/American artist questions I have for you will be enough for an interview

Naka: Sounds good to me.

Franzen: Nice.

Franzen: Okay so, starting from the beginning with some generals, where/when were you born?

Naka: I was born in Chicago, IL in 1983. I grew up in west Roger's Park, but my family eventually moved to the north suburbs and I attended high school in Skokie, IL.

Naka: Pretty much my dad's entire extended family lived in a three flat in Roger's Park for awhile. It was my family, my uncle and his family, my aunt and my grandma.

Naka: Also--many cousins. It was a little nuts.

Franzen: Wow.

Franzen: After that, where did you attend college for you undergraduate/graduate degree?

Franzen: And did you major in an art major, or did that interest not develop yet?

Naka: I received my BFA in Fiber and Material Studies from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in...2005? I think. I know I finished college in five years after enrolling part-time for a year to work. I'll be starting my MFA studies at Northwestern this fall in their Art Theory and Practice department.

Naka: My concentration was Fiber and Material Studies--which is always a fun anecdote now that I make primarily video and have only exhibited video.

Franzen: Interesting. So is your dad also interested in art, or anyone in your family?..like how did that interest start?

Naka: Hmm..That's a good question. My dad isn't really interested in Art (capital 'A')--nor is my mom. My dad likes paintings that look like the things the painter is painting and my mom likes pictures of covered bridges in Iowa.

Naka: It's interesting actually.

Naka: My sister majored in performance and theatre at Emerson college in Boston and has worked in creative direction for theatre companies and I almost went to college for acting but my parents wouldn't let me because they said, "one is enough"

Naka: haha

Franzen: So I take it your sister is older?

Naka: I actually got into visual arts through designing my high school yearbook and newspaper

Naka: yes--she is two years older than I am

Naka: I did graphic design work and wanted to pursue that in college because I thought I would be able to get a job, but once I got to college I realized I wanted to pursue other interests

Naka: It was actually kind of a scary thing for my parents when I was applying to colleges. I had pretty good grades, good standardized test scores, etc--but I wanted to go to art school. Even though I had never taken an art class in high school. But I guess it turned out alright in the end.

Franzen: Yeah I could imagine them being worried.

Franzen: So have you lived in Illinois your entire life?

Naka: I have. Are you from Illinois or somewhere else?

Franzen: Illinois too. Western suburbs (Lombard)

Naka: I've just been through Lombard for the first time recently. My GF started working at the Dupage county coroner's office as a deputy coroner/death investigator, so I'm out in those areas a bit more these days.

Naka: Lots of restaurants and things around Wheaton off the highway--I'm surprised they can have like 20 PF Chang's all right next to each other and stay in business!

Naka: haha

Franzen: Haha yeah. They recently opened one up in the mall in Lombard too.

Franzen: So since you've been in Illinois your whole life..how do you identify yourself (Asian, Asian American, American, or something different)

Naka: I think it has changed throughout my life and now I'm not even really sure anymore.

Naka: When I was much younger I wanted to be 100% white, because when I was in 1st grade the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were at the peak of their popularity and I guess the giant rat character Master Splinter was the most "Japanese" character on television that other kids were exposed to and he always ate sushi and the ninja turtles ate pizza and said things like "awesome" and "cowabunga" and had very west coast, American personalities

Naka: this is a long way of saying that

Naka: there were many sushi/raw fish jokes in my life when I was younger

Naka: haha

Naka: and I blame the ninja turtles so up until a certain point I always bubbled the "white/Caucasian" box on standardized tests in high school I think I switched over to bubbling the "Asian/pacific islander" boxes and used to joke that I was bringing the math scores down for the Asian kids around America

Franzen: Haha

Naka: In some ways I would identify as being Asian American

Naka: There are definitely things about my upbringing that fit a very Asian American template.

Naka: I can't enter a house without taking off my shoes.

Naka: If that makes someone Asian American--sign me up!

Franzen: Haha.

Franzen: Like you were saying about the Ninja Turtles, there is a lot of media out there that makes kids think it's best to be white--we talked about Aladdin in one of my classes. Where even though he is Middle Eastern, he is very European-ized. Where Jafar is the "bad guy" and very stereotypically Middle Eastern

Franzen: So I'm not surprised at all to hear you say you bubbled in the "white" box

Naka: Yeah. I think where I went to high school had a lot to do with how I ended up formulating my adult identity

Naka: I went to Niles West in Skokie which was something like 65% Asian when I attended

Naka: This included people from India, Pakistan, Thailand, a lot of Korean students, Chinese students, Japanese students, etc but it didn't feel like being Asian made you a minority in the same way as a majority of the student body had a similar experience growing up.

Franzen: Okay that makes sense

Franzen: Were your parent's born here in America too, or somewhere else?

Naka: My parents were born here. My mom was born in New York City and my dad was actually born in California in the Japanese American internment camps. Manzanar specifically.

Franzen: Okay, so were your grandparents born somewhere else then..like how long has your family been here?

Naka: My grandma was born here--I don't know much about my grandpa on my dad's side of the family. He passed away before I was born. I just found this story out last weekend, so I'm excited I can tell you how we ended up here!

Naka: My grandma's father was the 2nd son born in the family in Japan, so he was entitled to nothing as far as inheritance and assuming a prominent role in the family so he moved with his family to America to make his own way in life and actually my grandma was born in the US, but quickly moved back to Japan for awhile

Naka: it's a strange story by modern standards

Naka: my grandma lived with her brother by themselves in Japan and they were probably 10-14 years old they didn't know where money came from who paid rent on their property or any kind of taxes

Naka: supposedly my great grandpa was sending money back from the US and had other relatives looking in on them from time to time. Eventually they came to the US

Naka: my mom's side of the family has been here for just as long. Her great grandma came to the US from Romania or Germany--not really sure.

Franzen: Okay. But you are still 100% Japanese..or something else too?

Naka: I'm a bunch of stuff. My dad is 100% Japanese. My mom is...German/Russian/Romanian

Naka: haha. Maybe I should've explained that earlier. If I was 100% Japanese I would've had much less anxiety identifying myself in kindergarten.

Franzen: Haha okay.

Franzen: Okay, so now more about your artwork. I'm guessing you started getting involved in the art community in college?

Naka: Yes.

Franzen: Are you involved in any Asian American organization right now?

Naka: Not right now. I'll help out the Asian American Showcase at the Gene Siskel Film Center every once and awhile with the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media

Naka: <http://www.faaaim.org/>

Naka: I helped curate a show with Larry Lee a couple years back to coincide with their film festival

Franzen: Ooh okay, yeah he came and spoke to our class one day

Naka: Yeah. I met Laura through Larry. The one thing I'll say is that the Asian American art community in Chicago is VERY supportive.

Naka: People like Larry, Laura, Tim Hugh at FAAIM they want to see young artists succeed and are very helpful in that regard

Franzen: Yeah Laura seems to be involved with a lot of things with Asian American Art.

Franzen: We've had several semi-well know artists come speak to our class that she personally knew, which was kind of cool

Naka: Yeah. Laura is amazing. I can't say enough good things about Laura. I honestly don't know how she manages to be involved in so many things at the same time.

Franzen: Yep.

Franzen: Okay so your staring contest piece..When did that start?

Naka: That started quite awhile ago...I think I had the seeds for that idea close to eight years ago when I was a first year student at art school.

Franzen: Oh wow.

Franzen: What started that idea?

Naka: I'm trying to find a picture of the old, old version of this which was slightly different.

Naka: Bah. I can't find it now. Anyway--

Naka: I thought the different reactions my artwork would get from my parents was kind of profound and somewhat universal

Naka: I was making some terrible paintings in my first year and a lot of really bizarre environmental art but mostly high concept, low craft stuff and my dad hated it but my mom was like a typical mom and liked anything I brought home to show them

Naka: at the end of my first year of art school I interviewed my parents separately and asked them to talk about my artwork to try to explain it, to talk about if they thought I was making good artwork if they felt like it was a waste of money to go to art school etc

Naka: and then I played the videos on two monitors facing one another

Naka: so it was kind of a dueling dialogue of my mom saying she is proud of me because I was able to feed myself on my own for a year and do my laundry properly and my dad is complaining about the lack of technique in my artwork and how I don't really know how to draw and that's what he thinks art is

Franzen: Was that art realistic?

Naka: No.

Franzen: Is that what you are saying your dad wanted it to be more?

Franzen: more realistic..

Naka: Well--art is very complicated. I'd wager to say that 99.99% of the world does not engage in "Art" on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

Naka: I think high Modernism, Jackson Pollock, Rothko, et al kind of scared my dad's generation off of art.

Naka: At least those people who didn't have a relationship with art to begin with.

Naka: It's always amazing to me when people think a Jackson Pollock is the newest kind of painting when in actuality there are decades of painters that came after the Modernists

Naka: but I think for people like my dad that was the end of their engagement with art so he missed out on 70's performance art, the dawn of video art

Naka: post-modernism

Franzen: Hmm okay

Naka: post-structuralism

Naka: I was just at a wedding last week with many of my family members and I always have to explain what a video artist is which is great, because it reminds me of how ridiculous what I do is

Naka: "I make art, but my medium is video--just like how a painter used paint...I use video."

Naka: "I don't follow you there Chris. So you want to direct commercials?"

Naka: "No. I make discrete works of art that are displayed via video/moving image."

Naka: "Huh"

Franzen: Haha

Naka: So I think my dad wanted to see me painting an awesome horse.

Naka: I remember I drew three eggs laying on a paper bag for a first year drawing class

Naka: that was a requirement and to this day I think that's probably the thing my dad liked the most

Naka: haha

Franzen: Ooh okay

Franzen: Oh and just as a note..I should have mentioned earlier..I don't have any kind of background in Art (I'm a psych major)

Naka: That's okay and probably better for your expected standard of living when you graduate

Franzen: Haha hopefully

Franzen: Does your staring contest have a name yet?

Naka: It doesn't. I don't really like naming artwork that much. I'm kind of a wuss like that.

Naka: I'm trying to think of something for that one though, but I'll probably just end up with "Staring Contest"

Naka: haha

Naka: I've always tried to make things that don't need a title to inform the meaning.

Naka: I don't want to make something that needs a title or little card to explain what's going on.

Naka: In fact I think a lot of my art is so direct and straight forward that people get confused and assume they don't understand it because it is too simple

Naka: Laura wrote about my work a bit for a letter of recommendation for me and I like what she said, "intentionally dumb"

Franzen: Okay interesting

Franzen: and she also mentioned that when you display the piece you want to put two monitors facing each other, and the view would sit in between them

Franzen: So to watch, they would have to turn their head back and forth, like a tennis match?

Naka: yeah. That's what I think would work best, but I need another TV and DVD player to test it out! The video is filmed in at the kitchen table at my parent's house and they are sitting where they have always sat for meals which is right across from one another and my sister and I sat at the other seats when we lived there so my view of my parent's interactions had that view

Naka: where you would have to look back and forth between the two of them

Franzen: Oooh okay. That's cool

Franzen: Anything more about that piece. I did notice that your mom had a lot of difficulty keeping her eyes open, and then your dad kept basically the same expression the entire time

Naka: hahaha. Yeah--that's pretty much it.

Naka: hmmm

Naka: actually

Naka: I made that video three years ago, showed it to a few people and then never showed it to anyone again

Naka: it just seemed too personal--which is strange

Naka: I just think it revealed too much about my parent's relationship, but in a very subtle way

Naka: and I didn't know if I wanted a lot of people to infer things about my parents from a six minute video but now that I've had a lot of time to live with it I sent it to Laura when she was looking for work for an exhibition she's working on putting together

Franzen: The one she is doing in like 2011?

Naka: yes

Franzen: Yeah she mentioned our class was the largest group of people that saw that video so far

Naka: yeah. Laura called and asked if it was okay to show the class and I said "great!" I think I also have more exhibitions under my belt and more real world success with my art compared to when I first shot the video so my parents are probably more willing to trust me!

Naka: hahaha

Franzen: Haha

Franzen: yeah that worked out well we just watched that

Naka: what class was it? Is it an Asian American art class? or an art class in general?

Franzen: Yeah Asian American Art class

Franzen: So it's a lot of more recent material, since the Asian American Art community is semi-new and still growing

Naka: yeah. Which is also great in a lot of ways, because it is easy to meet people or track them down if you want to

Naka: when I was an undergraduate student I e-mailed Kip Fulbeck (not sure if Laura has shown some of his stuff in class yet)

Franzen: hmm no I don't think so

Naka: and was able to get him to visit the art institute when he was doing photography for his book

Naka: <http://www.amazon.com/Part-Asian-100%25-Hapa-Fulbeck/dp/0811849597>

Naka: and he gave a lecture at the school and photographed for his book

Franzen: Oooh yeah she just showed that

Franzen: I wanted to see the book, but she handed it around at the end of class and it never got to me

Naka: aw boo! I think Laura is in the book. I'll have to look at my copy. I know I'm in there, but I look super weird.

Naka: I think I'm the palest person in the book.

Franzen: She actually read part of your paragraph..the part where you said females found you mysterious..something like that, which worked out well since you got laid

Franzen: haha

Franzen: and yeah she is in there too

Naka: hahaha. See--man. Haha. I wrote that for partially social-political reasons!

Naka: haha.

Naka: I, um, was going through this big Asian empowerment phase when I met Kip and had him come to the school to lecture and I felt like Asian American men and Asian men in general were completely emasculated by western media

Naka: so--in my own way I wanted to try be the asshole, hyper-masculine persona that every other race was allowed to be on television

Naka: looking back on it--it probably wasn't the best thing to write but at the same time I wanted to end up in the book!

Franzen: Haha, well it definitely got a good laugh from the class

Franzen: So are you working on anything else right now..I know you said you do work with Blue Man Group now..

Naka: Right now I'm just trying to gear up for grad school. I'm embarrassed by the amount of art I've made in the past year or so.

Naka: I started working on a really, really long video, but it got completely out of control and I've retired it

Naka: I'll give you a synopsis

Franzen: Okay

Naka: haha

Naka: Well--there's a bit of back story needed as well.

Naka: I was engaged several years back to my girlfriend from college and out of college

Naka: she was a Chinese-Indonesian international student and came from a very traditional Chinese family in Indonesia

Naka: umm...

Naka: she wasn't a US citizen, so she was always having visa issues and we were going to get married so she could stay in the country but also because that's what people in love do!

Naka: anyway

Naka: her family hated me because I wasn't Asian enough or the right kind of Asian or because I was a westerner

Naka: long story short

Naka: I went to Jakarta to ask her parent's permission to marry her but they wouldn't even really talk to me so it's kind of hard to ask permission when no one will look at you

Naka: haha

Naka: and then a bunch of other things happened and now she's in Indonesia and I'm in Chicago and dating someone else but after everything was all over I was kind of devastated, because it was a relationship I had put a ton of effort into

Naka: both of us did

Naka: and pretty much her dad just said "no way"

Franzen: Aww. That's a sad story..

Naka: and I had some problems making art for awhile because I was going through this real emo thing that I haven't experienced since high school where you break up with someone and don't know how to deal with it, but you can listen to music that explains things better than you do

Naka: so I was listening to all this stupid sad music

Naka: haha

Naka: and thinking, "man--this Rufus Wainwright song got love so much better than I ever could!"

Naka: and one day I was listening to "November Rain" by Guns N Roses on the bus ride to work and I thought, "I will never make anything as awesome as November Rain" (which I still believe)

Naka: and then I had this ridiculous idea: what if I wrote November rain?

Naka: so I started working on this giant video using footage from my trip to Indonesia footage from my personal life as well as integrating fake interviews and other things into a kind of VH1 behind the music wherein I document how I came to write November Rain and I ignore the fact that it was written forever ago by Axl Rose

Naka: I was primarily inspired by this weird phenomenon that happens where people have some kind of personal relationship or ownership over songs/movies/TV shows and they mediate their existence based on their understanding of popular culture

Naka: like how when I hear a certain Mariah Carey song, I can't help but think of some girl I dated in 6th grade and how that song got it "so right"

Franzen: Yeah I know what you mean

Naka: and in a way I do have a certain claim over the song as I supply that meaning from my own life

Naka: so yeah--I was making this big thing

Naka: and it ended up being wwaaaaaay too personal

Naka: waaaaay too self-absorbed

Naka: and just something that probably was a good idea, but not with the material I had.

Naka: I also started dating someone else and I felt it would be an awkward moment to say, "here is this hour long video I spent six months editing/writing that is about the last person I dated!"

Franzen: Yeah true

Naka: the last thing I made was a video of me singing the song "one song glory" from the musical rent with a bunch of kids from Youtube which was kind of fun

Franzen: Ooh okay

Franzen: So do you think you will ever pick that long video up again. Or is it done for good?

Naka: I don't know. Some of the footage I have is gorgeous, so I am hesitant to hang it up for good. Everything was shot using really crappy cameras too which adds to the charm.

Naka: I'd like to rework it at some point, hopefully during grad school I'll have enough time to dig into it.

Naka: and more perspective not to make it crazy.

Franzen: Yeah

Naka: I think I do my best work after someone dumps me, so I'm a little sad I squandered the opportunity!

Franzen: Haha

Naka: Er--I didn't get dumped in that instance, but end of relationships.

Naka: Because you're always like, "I'll show you how awesome I am!"

Franzen: Haha

Franzen: Ohh and with the Blue Man Group...what you do isn't really art related correct?

Naka: It isn't. I work in their group sales office. I used to do a number of more creative things at the theatre, but after the economy took a crap on everyone's lives

Naka: I was laid off from my creative jobs and moved into an office role where I'll generate revenue instead of sucking it up

Franzen: I see

Franzen: Okay, well I think that's all I really have for you

Naka: Sweet. I hope that was useful! Let me know if anything else comes up. I also have DVDs of my videos if you need to look at something for whatever reason. I can drop something in the mail for you or something.

Franzen: Yeah that was awesome

Franzen: Thank you so much!

Naka: no problem! Take care.

Franzen: Yep. Bye!

END