
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Nor Sanavongsay Interview

Sittha Abhay
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Sittha Abhay
Artist: Nor Sanavongsay
Phone Interview Chicago, IL / Elgin, IL
Sunday, February 28, 2010 at 2:00 pm

*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.*



Nor Sanavongsay Age: 31

BIO: My name is Nor, pronounce Naw, I was born in Thailand. My family moved to the US when I was four years old. We landed in Kingport, TN and stayed with our sponsors for about six months before heading up to Illinois.

I grew up watching Transformers, Bruce Lee movies, Thundercats, and all the great 80's cartoons. I also have a facination with comic books and graphic novels. I began drawing at the age of six with my uncle as a mentor. I honed my artistic skills as the years pass by.

For more information on the artist visit:

<http://www.nawdsign.com/>

<http://xiengmieng.com/>

Interviewer: To start off I need to understand your origin, age, date of birth, where you spent your life in the United States, and your life history.

Nor Sanavongsay: I was born in Thailand in 1975, I came to US when I was 4 we came to Bridgeport, Tennessee. We had a sponsor there. We stayed there for 6 months then we moved to Elgin and thats where I have been living most of my life. I went to school at NIU, Northern Illinois University. I

studied fine arts. Initially I wanted to go into making comic books. I wanted to make comic book stuff. Second year into my major I kinda switched. That's when the Internet came off. So I started to do more interactive work and started learning more programming and animation but, I still had fine arts as my major and I set an emphasis on interactive media so I have been doing interactive media ever since.

Interviewer: You mentioned about being born in Thailand and moving over to the United States could you tell me about that? Just like immigrating from Thailand to the United States. I remember you were young at the time. Just pretty much what you remember.

Nor Sanavongsay: Thailand is really tropical and we came in January in Tennessee we did not have much clothing. So the first time we saw snow we were all freezing and stuff. We had a warm welcome from our sponsor. The first few days were pretty hectic because a lot of the local news papers wanted to interview us and take pictures since we were the first refugees to come to the area. We were getting interviewed and stuff. That's all I remember was getting photographed.

Interviewer: Typical Asian American Artist have a hard time with identification. I want to understand how you identify yourself culturally and do you think it has an effect on how you are viewed.

Nor Sanavongsay: Growing up I had a lot of Lao friends so we did a lot of. Play a lot of Lao games spoke Lao to each other. It's been pretty diverse, like in kindergarten and first grade I hung out with a lot of my Lao friends. After like second and third grade it was predominantly white friends that I had. I had to kind of fit in with the crowd. I did a lot of the stuff they did. Get more assimilated with the American culture. I am still have contact with my Lao friends. I still try to stay in touch with the Lao cultural. So I am like going back and forth between the two.

Interviewer: You feel like you are in the middle so you feel like you are leaning between Western and leaning towards your culture.

Nor Sanavongsay: Yeah just struggling between the two. The culture is so diverse just trying to make due with the best we have. Just try to make life the best we can with the two cultures.

Interviewer: Do you think this affects your artwork in anyway like how people view your artwork?

Nor Sanavongsay: I can see like two different sides of the world. It kind of helps me build my creativity. Helps me see both sides of my culture. When I do my artwork I get opinions from both sides. So that I can make better artwork and get better opinions. It helps me think of different ways of expressing my creativity.

Interviewer: Speaking of the topic of identification. Do you understand Aesthetics? Art Aesthetics? Aesthetics is the conception of beauty or art that appeals to one's senses. As the refugees and people immigrated from Asia to America they had a hard time defining an Asian American Aesthetics. Do you believe there is an Asian American Aesthetics?

Nor Sanavongsay: I don't think so. Everybody has the same views on what looks good to them. It's one of the things that is hard to explain. Something that appeals to me may not appeal to everybody. I try to incorporate what I think what people appeal to. I try to make that balance as best as I can. I know I cannot please everybody. So once you try to please everybody it is when you start to fail. The first step

is to make sure it looks good to yourself first then make modifications as needed to strengthen your artwork. Life makes has a lot of influence on the art work subconsciously. What ever we see around us and what ever we see people react to. That sort of subconsciously get into our mind as we create the artwork. A lot of stuff you do not really think about but you feel it is the right way to do things.

Interviewer: What drew you to the arts and what influenced you to become an artist?

Nor Sanavongsay: For me it is more of changing peoples minds. A lot of people seem to be to close to their own way. I just want to opens peoples eyes to new ways of doing things. Thats why I jumped to the Internet. When I was doing my artwork or painting or stuff like that I am always thinking about how can I show this to more people or how can I bring this out to the world. When the Internet came along I was like this is great this is the best avenue for me to go down. So I started learning more about the technology. The instant you put something up you have the potential of having millions of people seeing your artwork at once. It is that idea of being able to change peoples minds through your art work or have an influence on how people see things. A lot of that drives why I became an artist.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about your artworks?

Nor Sanavongsay: Most of my artwork is about life. I do a lot of realistic drawings and paintings. My main strength is in graphite illustration more pencil its all black and white drawings. Mostly I do a lot of portraits and life drawings.

Interviewer: Have you had any chances of getting your artwork into any exhibitions or chances of showing your artwork in a live situation or is it all on the Internet?

Nor Sanavongsay: Its all just Internet right now. The only time I have ever shown my artwork was at the school. When we were have a perform you showing. Other than that is mostly on my website. I have not done a lot of drawings lately. A lot of it has been web work interactive. I started working on this little project the Xieng Meing project. Its more educational. I am building it for the new generation. The younger kids now can understand what the Lao culture is all about they can write and learn the words and pronunciations and the different types of cultural activities that we do. Like going to the temple, Lao new year festival, speaking the language.

Interviewer: The main reason I took this class was to get an understanding about me as a Laotian. Since I grew up with little access with Laotian people. I grew up in a very white breed part of America. I do not really understand my culture. That is why I took this class. That is why I am really happy to have interview with you than the other artists I had the choice to do.

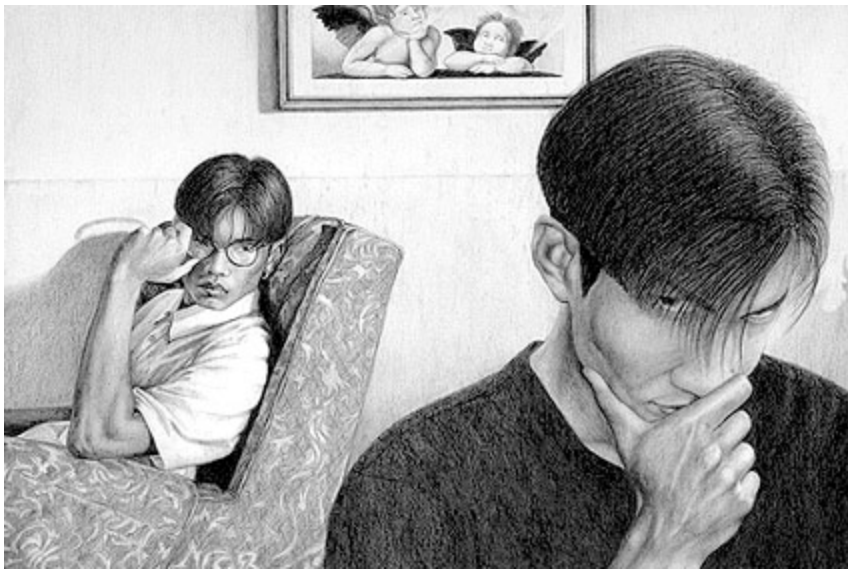
Nor Sanavongsay: Its great to have different types of friends from both sides. Its nice to have because you can gain more understanding of the world.



Title: Me & Boyz II Men

Graphite drawn picture

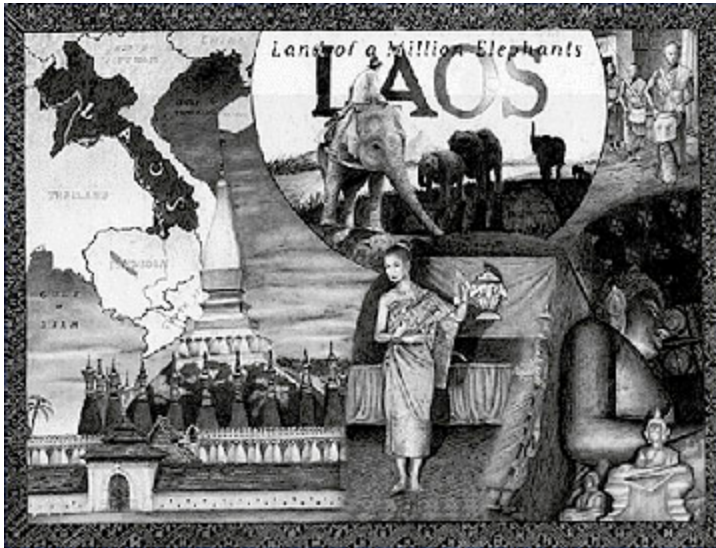
Inspiration for picture: Assignment was to find a famous picture and draw yourself in it



Title: Evil Twin

Graphite drawn picture

Picture was made from a photograph of himself that he spliced together.



Title: Laos Collage
Graphite drawn picture
Collage that resembles the culture of Laos



Title: Bruce Lee
Graphite drawn picture
Caricature of actor/martial artist Bruce Lee