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# Johannah Silva Interview

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Interviewer: Mal Warning  
Artist: Johannah Silva  
Location: Email interview Chicago, IL  
Date: May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*



**Artist Bio & Statement:**

Johannah Silva is a Chicago-based artist. She received her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999 and currently teaches full-time at Wright College.

In the last few years, I have been making work using the circular shape/form as a starting point for my paintings and drawings. The circles allude to micro as well as macro forms, -- cells and atoms as well as planetary bodies, for example. My working process involves the repetition and placement of these shapes and marks on the painting surface, in consideration with formal elements such as color and space, to arrive at surprising and discovered compositions that follow an internal logic.

I am interested in theories and/or imagery derived from physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy and geology, and in philosophical and spiritual notions regarding concepts of space and time, being and nothingness, internal mind and exterior reality. Thinking about these things influence my work, though the end-result is ultimately arrived at through a personal and intuitive working process.

(Artist bio & statement was taken from <http://johannahsilva.com/about.html#artiststatement>)

**Mal Warning:** Could you tell me a little about yourself?

**Johannah Silva:** I was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the U.S. with my family as a teenager. I grew up in San Francisco and received my undergraduate degree from the University of California at Berkeley, in Art and Psychology. I moved to Chicago in 1997 to pursue my Master of Fine Arts Degree in Painting at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I am currently a faculty member in the Dept. of Visual and Performing Arts at Wright College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. I exhibit my work

regularly and am active in the Chicago art scene, including having recently started a curatorial project called portage ARTspace.

**MW:** I saw on your website that you are into theories/imagines that come from physics, chemistry, geology, biology and astronomy and that you got your BA in art & psychology, which is what I am about to graduate with. Can you talk about the relationship between art and science in your work?

**JS:** I have a general interest in science and was good at it in school growing up. My paintings, from the very beginning, have always incorporated organic and biomorphic forms. A lot of times, they look like microscopic views of cells or atoms. I am interested in these forms and they continually recur in my work. My use of them is meant to engage with perception and phenomena. My study of psychology is something separate. I find my background in that I have used more in my teaching.

**MW:** How do you define or categorize your art and yourself?

**JS:** I consider myself an abstract painter. I also do figurative work occasionally, as I teach Figure Drawing at my college. I am interested in different discussions in art that pertain to practice, art history, theory, curation, art administration. The recent curatorial project I started, portage ARTspace, was intended to create dialogue and community in the art scene here in Chicago.

**MW:** Have you always wanted to do something with art if not when did you decide that you wanted to be an artist?

**JS:** I was exposed to art as a child watching my mom when she took art classes. I did a painting at around 8 years old alongside my mom. But I didn't enter college thinking I would study Art. I started with Psychology, from a general interest in human behavior and education, and only later decided to double major in Art after taking an art class that I really enjoyed.

**MW:** I see that you are currently running an apartment gallery, Portage ART Space. What has this experience been like? Is this something that you have always wanted to do or saw yourself ever doing?

**JS:** No, I never saw myself running an apartment gallery. It was an idea that came up because I bought a house and in the course of getting it renovated, the idea jumped at me. I live in a neighborhood that is pretty residential and I wanted to bring art to my own backyard. I also wanted to create dialogue right where I was and I had a very clear sense from the beginning of what kinds of shows I wanted to put together and what ideas I wanted to explore. I thought that a year-long curatorial/experimental project was the way to do it. I saw it as way to expand my artistic practice into the realm of social sculpture almost, as well as allowing myself to build networks. It has been a very interesting learning experience doing it. I have met a lot of great people and feel more connected to the art community since starting this project.

**MW:** I am really into and interested in your work that you produced in 2005, specifically "Across Egypt", "Bleed", & "Fleshgrid." [*see figures 1, 2, 3*] Can you tell me a little bit about the meaning behind these pieces?

-How did you make them? All three paintings are made with watercolor on paper.

-Technique, material, procedures, intent, & context?

**JS:** All three of these paintings work off of the grid in some capacity. At that time, and still to varying degrees now, I find myself working with the grid as an organizing structure. I use it to create a sense of order, but also as a place from which to diverge from that order. I am very interested in the process of painting and work quite intuitively. I pay attention to the materials and their interaction with other

paints/media as well as the painting surface. Painting is a kind of meditation for me – about the presence of the mark and imbuing it with attention and care. Hopefully these are transmitted to the viewer and they engage with the work intimately, pleasurably and transformatively.

**MW:** I saw that you were recently in the show “Sexy” & also in the show “Sexier” curated by Larry Lee<sup>1</sup>. What kind of work did you show at these exhibits and how and what were your thoughts on this show as a whole or what did this show mean to you?

**JS:** Both shows were really fun. I think Larry started off with “Sexy” and then another space opened up and he thought it would be a good way to showcase more risqué stuff. I made a new, larger-scale oil painting for “Sexier” because the Zhou B. Art Center, where the show was held, was massive. I thought it was a good opportunity to make a larger piece (I have also done larger pieces in the past – 5’x6’ for example). For “Sexy”, I showed a couple of my watercolor paintings on paper.

**MW:** I noticed that you are in another Asian American show called *Tagalog(ue)*<sup>2</sup>. Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes of histories in your art work? If so please give a specific example.

**JS:** It’s only very recently that I have openly and publicly engaged with my identity as an Asian-American in my artistic practice. It’s a complicated thing, because I don’t want to be pegged. I don’t really make “ethnic” art per se – my work is concerned with formal things like space and color – but I wanted to foreground my ethnic identity in order to open up the discussion and dialogue around these issues. I see my ethnic identity as being more indirectly related to my art, in a way – ie. I might be concerned with ideas of visibility or invisibility or perception in general and I believe it adds another layer of meaning of my work to know that it is made by an Asian-American artist. For the Tagalogue show, which came beautifully together, I showed a portrait piece I did of my parents, alongside my abstract work. This decision was deliberate and meant to provoke dialogue about precisely the things I just mentioned above.

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

**JS:** It’s important to me now probably more than it ever has been but, again, I don’t think I make necessarily Asian-American art, whatever that means. And, of course, it’s important to me to claim this identity and take pride in it. I see it as part of the general trajectory of empowering myself as an artist and allowing myself to be seen and my voice to be heard.

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

**JS:** I’ve shown quite a bit in the last year and I’ve become better at creating shows and gathering people together. I am working now on the next level – gallery representation perhaps and shows at bigger and reputable venues.

**MW:** What are you currently working on?

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<sup>1</sup> *Sexy* was held at the Gene Siskel Film Center in conjunction with the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media’s annual Asian American Showcase. *Sexier* was an independent curatorial project of Larry Lee and Molar Productions at the Zhou B. Art Center in Chicago, IL.

<sup>2</sup> At Northbranch Projects (3550 W. Lawrence) presented a group exhibition *Tagalog(ue): A Visual Dialogue with Filipino American Artists* April 23-May 28, 2011

**JS:** I am working on more watercolor paintings on a smaller scale as well as oil on canvas pieces. I have a show coming up in Cornell College in Iowa later this year and most likely, also a solo show of newer works at portage ARTspace later this summer.

**END**



**Figure 1** Johannah Silva, *Across Egypt*, watercolor on paper, 8" x 10", 2005





**Figure 2** Johannah Silva, *Bleed*, watercolor on paper, 6" x 6", 2005



**Figure 2** Johannah Silva, *Fleshgrid*, watercolor on paper, 6" x 6", 2005