
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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5-7-2011

Regin Igloria Interview

Julie Hernandez
DePaul University

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Hernandez, Julie. (2011) Regin Igloria Interview.
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Interviewer: Julie Hernandez
Artist: Regin Igloria
Phone Interview: Chicago, IL
Date: 5/7/11
Start: 4:30PM
End: 5:43PM

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

Artist Bio: Born 1974 Manila, Philippines. Lives and works in Chicago, IL. Regin Igloria maintains a studio practice which revolves around teaching and serving as an arts administrator. He teaches studio courses at Marwen, a nonprofit youth arts organization, where he has also served as program and exhibitions coordinator. An alumnus of the program, he helped establish their Alumni Advisory Board and served as its co-chair, run their Alumni Gallery, and served as a teaching artist for many of their study trips to New York City, Boston, and Maine. He has also taught for the children's program at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, where he served as a studio assistant for three summers and worked with many influential artists. Other teaching experiences include Rhode Island School of Design, Terra Museum of American Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and various workshops throughout the Chicagoland area. Currently he serves as the Director of Artists-In-Residence at The Ragdale Foundation, an artist residency program for visual artists, writers and composers in Lake Forest, IL. He received his MFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design and is represented by Zg Gallery in Chicago, IL.

Regin Igloria was raised in Albany Park on the northwest side of Chicago, where he has returned and opened North Branch Projects, an independently run project space which offers community bookbinding and serves as a resource and outlet for the creative process. The youngest of five children, he attended public schools and was immersed in an environment which, as financially limiting as it was, encouraged exploration. His joy was found in movement, though his family almost never traveled or went on vacations (being driven to the suburbs seemed an adventure in its own right). He considered his community, made up of Korean variety shops, supermercados, and Indian video stores, *home*, for nearly twenty-five years. Within walking distance of this neighborhood lay the forest preserves of the city—the urban woods—which provided solace from the complexities of city living. Under the cover of trees and next to the slow-moving North Branch of the Chicago River lay possible contentment. One's identity was neutral here, social obligations were irrelevant, money meant nothing, and power was dictated only by forces of nature. It was the kind of place he sought on a daily basis. Ultimately, however, his immersion in art school within the city—a breeding ground for dialogue amongst a community he felt disconnected with—propelled further disenchantment. Traveling would prove to be a remedy of sorts, and experiencing solitary landscapes would be associated with happiness.

Nature and travel have always been prevalent themes in his work, but actually immersing himself in both would allow him to understand its direct impact on the human condition. A solo bicycle trip done on the West Coast and exposure to an outdoor lifestyle in Colorado brought forth many simple truths: 1) everything he wants he cannot afford, 2) the things he wants he does not really need, and 3) he can never work enough, even in solitude. Ironically, he has since found himself living in very wealthy communities where luxury and privilege tempt him every day, a struggle brought upon himself only by choosing to be an artist. His work considers the compromise

between these kinds of opposing forces, the efforts made that yield loss, the accumulation of equipment that becomes more burden than blessing, and the constant search for a better place.

(Artist Bio taken from www.reginigloria.com)

Julie Hernandez: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Regin Igloria: Sure. I was born in the Philippines in 1974 and then I came to the States with my family in 1977. I moved here to Chicago when I was about three years old. I grew up in the city and pretty much spent all my life in Chicago until I went away for Grad school. But that wasn't for 20 years. I spent a significant amount of time in Chicago and my entire upbringing was pretty much in Albany Park, which is where I reside now and have set up my studio. I am the youngest of five kids. I grew up going to public schools. I attended Lane Tech, then went to the Art Institute for college and took 6 years off working professionally at Marwen. My entire upbringing was Chicago. My family didn't have a lot of money. My dad was an accountant and my mother never went to college. She worked in a nursing home as a dietary aide for over 20 years. So we never really traveled much because there were a lot of us. It actually had quite a bit of impact on my work and deals with a lot of what I do. A lot of my interest in travelling comes from this kind of upbringing.

JH: How would you categorize your art?

RI: I am sort of all over the place. Primarily I would say my work is mostly painting and drawing or works on paper or artists' books. But I have also, over the past three or four years, gotten into performance-based work; but not the traditional sense of performance art that you would see in a typical gallery setting. I am more interested in doing physical labor-based works. I was doing a lot of walks and documenting them all in the name of getting imagery and collecting imagery for my drawings. It was really related to my drawing and works on paper. I did a little bit of video work but it all comes back to drawing so I would put my self in the "works on paper" category if you want to talk about categories.

JH: Was art always a part of your life and when did you start considering yourself an artist?

RI: It wasn't always a part of my life but from a very young age I was always interested in drawing and very interested in the creative field. Some of my earliest recollections with school were based on these particular drawing skills I had. Not to say that I was the best drawer or anything, but I specifically remember teachers being impressed with my skill so they made me do bulletin boards and all sorts of creative projects. I think that's why I was sent in that direction. I was fortunate enough to take art as a major. I know not a lot of high schools don't necessarily have you do that, especially not in public schools. But Lane Tech had a four-year program that you would take from the first year. Most of my actual immersion in art happened outside of school. I started taking classes in my sophomore year of high school at this place called Marwen. That's when I was introduced to the fine art world and a gallery scene that wasn't commercial-based art. But I don't think I really considered myself an artist until well after grad school. Even to this day I feel like I am not as prolific and involved as I could be. But I would say since high school I felt I was going to be an artist and started pursuing it seriously.

JH: I am very interested in your artists' books and installations. They have these beautiful abstract shapes like the ones in *Prairie Book* that come together to form patterns or other larger forms. Can you tell me about the idea and craft behind these artists' books?

RI: The *Prairie Book* was kind of a stretch of what I had been doing over the last several years. That was about 2005-2006. Before that I had been doing drawings of backpacks and things like that. Those were coming out of my grad school experience. If you look at my website and look at what I did around 2004-2005 you will see these overly-sensational backpack drawings. They had exaggerated straps and were slightly abstracted in black and white. Those *Prairie Book* drawings and backpack drawings were basically based on trying to capture this experience of nature without actually drawing nature, and without actually portraying nature in the way you would usually see nature—in landscapes. I was drawing the objects that allowed me to go *into* nature. The way I was drawing these objects emulated the types of forms you would find in nature. So the folds and ripples in the backpacks and straps were very similar to the patterns you would see meandering into a forest, walking or hiking through the crevasse of a mountain or the landscape of a mountain. I drew these backpacks and the folds and ripples of the backpacks as if I were hiking through this landscape of boulders and mountains.

By the time I got to the *Prairie Books* they were much more about the meditation of mark-making. Everything was about this physical experience—these long, monotonous, labor-intensive hikes. When you are hiking up a mountain, you are spending a good 90% of your time just physically enduring this thing. And only 2% of that would be worthwhile or would have some bit of joy. I was doing the drawings to mimic these experiences. A lot of them look like bushes and shrubs. It was about making these marks and then, after you were done, taking a closer look at the drawings (the sumi ink drawings) that kind of resembled leaves and shrubs—and taking a pen and outlining *those* marks. Again it was sort of this meditative path that I went on; not really thinking, but rather *pushing forward* through this metaphoric landscape. It was important for me to think about books for a long time.

Like I said I was all over the place, both physically and psychologically. I didn't have a studio when I was in Colorado, so I did a lot of my work in sketchbooks because those were my portable studios so to speak—this idea of carrying my work and being able to carry your studio wherever you wanted. This idea of *landscape* is very much a part of this idea of carrying your work and your space *through* a landscape; that is what the book represented and how it metaphorically spoke to me. It's important for me to have things that are contained in small sizes that I can easily shove in my backpack. I didn't necessarily draw while I was out there. It wasn't really about me drawing on top of a mountain. It was more about the idea that you can carry a sketchbook on a hike. It is important for the viewer to understand this idea of movement and portability. I was never really interested in working on one of those big canvases; it just wasn't really my thing. Plus, I am relatively small person. For me it didn't make sense to make *big* things and have a lot of big, heavy things to carry. I think it speaks a lot about my personality, too, this fact that I like to carry things nice and neat and have this sense of portability.

So that all started last fall or last summer—for the longest time I was trying to find out what I was going to do with this space. I was trying to create a situation where you would involve a very regimented, discipline-based mode of working where everything I do in this space encompassed *everything* I am interested in in life, and all the things that I would like to contribute to society and all the things that I am willing and able to share with others.

JH: In your artist statement you said, “I have conflicted feelings about the wilderness and the outdoors”... “My eagerness to become part of its beauty and awe is dampened by guilt and disappointment, because I have chosen to enter a world of privilege.” Can you explain what you mean by a world of privilege? Is there an exchange we make as a society between privilege and nature's beauty?

RI: Sure. Well first of all, I am going to go back to where I began. I was telling you how we never had a lot of money growing up. The experience of the outdoors was very much dictated through what I saw in magazines, and what the rest of the world portrayed it as being. Growing up as a city kid, the only real experience of nature I had was going to these places that we called the “urban woods.” There is a particular one called Labagh Woods, in Sauganash, in the Northwest side of Chicago. It’s a forest preserve, but in the middle of the city. I always had this romantic inkling about what nature held for me. There was always this idea that I would find joy or happiness if I got away from this urban environment and entered the world of nature.

And so growing up I had this romantic notion that *that’s* where joy and happiness would be. By the time I became an adult it had become tainted because my experience with nature always somehow entailed wealth and having money to experience it. This would be more specific to my time in Colorado—Snowmass Village. It’s near Aspen so if you are familiar with those areas you would know they are fairly wealthy and there exists a very particular culture of wealth. Culturally and class wise, those people experience nature in a kind of way that I envisioned while growing up; people could afford equipment and afford to travel. But they always needed this specific kind of gear to get them out there. So when I say “tainted,” I am talking specifically about feeling like I’m entering this world that isn’t who I am or what I had grown up to know. I didn’t have a lot of money or the choice to do that kind of stuff. I knew if I wanted to enjoy nature I had to buy equipment. It’s a contradiction to this idea of being human and being natural. You know, just being out there and enjoying what you can by just experiencing nature. It was almost as if you always had to have this particular type of backpack or had to travel to a specific place in the world, or have a very specific type of vehicle to enjoy nature. My fascination with things like Patagonia and REI and The North Face—you know, all of those very corporate, commercial-type ideas of nature—they portray it so romantically! Patagonia does an amazing job of portraying nature and capturing the specific stories of people’s experiences with nature and selling it to the consumer as how nature should be experienced.

I have this love/hate relationship to it. I wanted to experience these things but you actually had to be a rich white person to experience these things, which I was not. That’s how they display this image; with this very specific kind of look and this very specific kind of lifestyle that seemed to be very directly related to that experience of nature; this whole thing about money and not having enough money. People that I knew or people in my family would not do these types of things. You don’t take huge vacations; you don’t go on a European backpacking tour and such. All that stuff just wasn’t common.

So for me to step into that world I felt like I was not being myself. I felt as if I were trying to be someone else. That was the identity crisis going on. Hiking and this world of privilege has an interesting relationship with me because I feel like as an artist, I really set myself up. I chose to be an artist and because I chose to be in artist I ended up in this world where the people around me... well, most of them were white and had money. If you go to a private art school or to world of museums, of galleries—it is dominated by a white population. There is a particular lifestyle that I have been drawn to but at the same time I’m kind of repulsed by it because of the money involved. I am able to experience these things only because I chose to be an artist.

I ended up in Snowmass Village, one of the wealthiest areas in the country, because Anderson Ranch [Arts Center] happened to be there and that’s where artists were. And I was able to experience that world because I decided to pursue this world of art. Same thing with Lake Forest: I have been working at the Ragdale Foundation as the on-site residency director for over five

years. Lake Forest is a wealthy suburb in the North Shore. I didn't want to end up there for any sort of reason other than Ragdale was there, it is an artist community, and I am an artist interested in working in that field. So, it ended up being my home. Choosing to be an artist allowed me to immerse myself in a place where people had money, and people drove fancy cars, and lived this lifestyle that I didn't live—and I really struggled with it! I think a lot of the dynamic in my work has to do with my interest in that and with the struggle and the conflict that I keep talking about. I am always trying to find that fine line between those two places: wanting to be in one world, trying to find out who you are and knowing who you are, what you are interested in, and what you want to experience. I struggle to this day with money. I know I don't really need this stuff but at the same time as an artist I actually *do* need this stuff. I'm making stuff and using this stuff to produce my work. Even technology and all the work that I do with a computer is a struggle; the whole idea of trying to simplify your life and trying to get into another world but not being able to—which I think a lot of people can relate to.

JH: I, as an Asian American graphic designer, sometimes feel like my work doesn't deal with being Filipino American, or culturally related. Do you ever address Asian American identity themes or histories in your artwork?

RI: Quite frankly, I don't. I think I've made a pretty strong decision back in grad school in 04, around that time you are forced to think about identity-type issues. I made a decision that that wasn't really important. My upbringing and who I am is important but I won't make art that has specific *Filipino* connotations or iconography or that kind of relationship. I won't necessarily do stuff that will evoke the Filipino culture. A lot of my work has to deal with not being white but not necessarily with being Filipino. Although...I think if you look deeper into my work you will see my approach *is* very Filipino (or Asian) in a sense because it has a lot to do with humility. It's about masking what is loud and out there, which is a stereotype and a commonality, and is how a lot of people perceive Asian Americans or Asians in general. Humility, especially within the Filipino culture, seems to be at the forefront. Being a Filipino, they know you're not white, they know you're not black. People don't really know what to think of you. You're not really a threat but you're also not someone people necessarily pay attention to. I think I have always wondered why that was and why I never heard of many Filipino American artists.

With this *Tagalog(ue)* show [Tagalog(ue): A Visual Dialogue with Filipino American Artists at North Branch Projects April 23-May 28, 2011], I thought a lot about what the show was about and why we were doing it and why I was involved. I spent a lot of time talking to Joel Javier, the curator, who is doing it as part of his thesis project for school. I basically just gave him this venue, North Branch, to do it. But even for that show we made a decision in the beginning...how do I put it? I'm not going to be very articulate about this. It's his show so I will leave it up to him to explain. I'm not even sure *he* was even sure about how it was going to unfold because it seemed like some of the artists were randomly chosen. The fact that they were Filipino was the only thing that tied us together. None of our work necessarily related to each other's, though there were some collaborations. I felt like my work was very different than what everyone else was doing. I don't think anybody here was doing work, except for Joel, that had anything specifically to do with Filipino imagery or iconography, which is what I enjoyed—it's what I liked about it. It was more the fact we ended up coming together because of who we were as apposed to what we were making work about. I think we had all met through Johannah Silva who put together a show with Larry Lee at her Portage Art Space on Asian American artists. It was a broader scope of work and somehow we all discovered each other around that time. It was the first time most of us met each other and that's when Joel decided to make the show. I am still wondering what the show was about but quite frankly I am not interested in doing anything that has to do with me

being Filipino or me growing up with Filipino culture in my upbringing.

It's hard because I almost feel like, 'What would be Filipino?' I think because I am using sumi ink, which goes back to the history of ink drawings and scrolls, I would say I am definitely interested in Chinese painting and those materials. Some people would consider that Asian but it's not Filipino—it's more Japanese and Chinese. I do like that it is a little unknown though. I think your upbringing and the things you see more often and the things that people say is what affects you. It's hard for me to make a very direct correlation though. I think this is much more subtle and deeply imbedded in a not so obvious way. I like the fact that you can be a certain ethnicity but you don't necessarily have to make work about that.

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

RI: I completely immersed myself in this project since last September. I think my focus has shifted from being in a gallery setting, as much as I'd love to have another show. But for me what's important right now is to be making work and showing it to people outside of the contemporary art audience. I keep going back to my parents and talking about how much of an influence they are on how I make my work, where I show my work, and how I talk about my work. A lot of it has to do with wanting my parents to get into the conversation with me about my work and sharing something with them that I love, but it's also for people *like* my parents: people who don't necessarily have an art school background or grew up talking about art in a way that we did in art schools or in the contemporary art world. To me that's more fascinating. It's the reason why I'm doing North Branch and why I set up in Albany Park rather than Pilsen or some other hip, art-infested area. I want to start a conversation with people who look at art in a completely different way or think about art in a completely different way; people of different ages, different backgrounds, or people who don't necessarily think about the creative process in the same way people in art school do.

That's why I keep talking about my parents who are not necessarily looking at art in the "white cube" gallery setting and instead might look at art in a way you would with a family member at the dinner table or in passing walking down the street. It's become very critical in everything I do. It has a lot to do with what I talked about earlier with class and privilege. Who is looking at art, which has access to work, who is able to see it and talk about it—and also how and why are we talking about it? It's always fascinating to me that we have such a regurgitated cycle of people in the art world; people who were exposed to it at a young age, whose parents exposed them to museums and culturally it was something they did, who all played musical instruments. They had a constituency of people around them who talked about art. So I am really more interested in talking to people who didn't have that upbringing and weren't surrounded by artist-types. That's why I am interested in outsider art. I think I am more overall jaded and just upset with how people are churning out the same old stuff and people are turning out things that are trendy. I have this thing about a particular type of work that is being done that people just emulate towards. There is definitely work that looks like contemporary art but doesn't say anything new or interesting. It sure as heck looks like contemporary art and they are getting attention for some reason—but it's also attention by the same people. I feel like I am in a really good place because I feel like my audiences right now are my parents and people like my parents, and it's actually much more challenging than the curators and the gallery owners, who sort of fall for the same stuff all the time. It's all just sort of the same old stuff. I would just like to see opportunities had by other people. To me that's more exciting than kind of what's happening in art galleries right now. It's having non-artists making art or having non-artists participate. It's more refreshing to get everybody involved other than the people who talk the talk.

JH: So you want to redefine the artist role?

RI: Yeah, definitely. A lot of me wants to be doing what I am doing because I want people to value arts in the same way that they value everything else they are experiencing. There is always a wall that divides artists and non-artists, from people who know art and those who don't about art. It's always perplexing to me. A lot of it has to do with pop culture and what is prolific in the media. I also think it's my age and having this administrative role. I feel like there is a very important thing I have to do at this point in my life. I feel like I have to give other people an opportunity to make art other than the same old people. As an administrator in the residency program (where I work in admissions), I oversee the people who are chosen to make work and people who serve on a jury, or people who select the "winners"—people who get chosen to make work and get chosen to do residencies and people who get chosen to receive awards. It's a little overwhelming and disappointing and disheartening sometimes to see how things go down and how much of a crapshoot it can be. I feel like that's the fight that I'm fighting right now. I'm trying to turn the tide a little so that people who aren't involved in the arts are actually a part of the game.

JH: Could you tell me a little more about the North Branch projects you had talked a little about earlier or about what you are currently working on?

RI: Everything I am doing pretty much has to do with North Branch right now. I am constantly making books. That is actually what I was doing before I called you. I am doing this campaign for *31 books in 31 days*, which is pretty much a book a day—a part of the "book archive" that I am creating for North Branch. I am basically making blank sketchbooks so people like me or people in the community can start to work in a sketchbook. I think it is important to know about the process of using a sketchbook in making art. Or work in a format where you are thinking creatively and thinking about the creative process. I mean, it's different for everyone because not everyone draws or works in a sketchbook format, but that's what I am working on right now. Not to say that I am disengaging from my interest in nature—that is what my work has always been about. I have started to draw backpacks again and bring back to life things that I began many years ago. I also have to become more practical in how I use my space. The fact that I have this community-based space and having a storefront space with people passing by on a regular basis—that's all new to me! Having people come in and engaging in actual conversations with people. I think that's a much bigger part of my work than it ever has been. It's allowed me to be much more articulate and vocal in my interests and what's important to me...and hopefully it's allowing other people to do the same for themselves. It's me taking in what people have to say and them taking in what I am saying and that conversation then spreading around, which is what I guess community is about.

One of the main components of North Branch is teaching people how to make books, and in that process, have them tap into a creative process of their own. I am basically just using books as the medium to have this conversation with people in order to allow those people to be creative. I chose books because that is what I know and what I love. There are other people who are doing the same thing with knitting or cooking but I have this love for books and I appreciate books. That's why I decided to share them with people.

When I show people my sketchbooks they don't feel intimidated by what I am sharing because they are actually holding my work and are able to flip and look through the pages. It's not like a painting that's sitting under a strong spotlight and protected by a guard. That sort of situation can be intimidating. With a book, because you are so intimate with it, because you are physically

touching it and flipping through it, it's much more accessible and "friendly." And again, they aren't so big. I have seen big books but for the most part books are portable and they are meant to be carried with you. I am interested in the traditional perfect bound book. I love paperbacks.

JH: I always think it's amazing when people can make books because it's such a difficult craft to master.

RI: Yeah, one of things that I am pushing at North Branch is using recycled materials because bookmaking is such an expensive and time consuming project. Not everyone has the money to buy expensive, high-end book cloth and all the materials used to make a book. We are letting people know that you can make a book out of whatever. We're beginning a campaign to local businesses to become part of this: send us cardboard and envelopes or junk mail-type stuff and we will make them into books somehow. I am trying to do a whole series of summer workshops on recycled materials.

You know, the first books I made for people as gifts were pristine but then people didn't want to touch them for fear of ruining them! I am trying to make sure people get a little more involved and work *into* the books. I think using recycled materials to make these books allows people to do this.

JH: That's all I have for my questions. So thank you so much for having this interview with me I truly appreciate it.

RI: Of course no problem. I really enjoyed talking with you.

END