
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Hong Chun Zhang Interview

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Interviewer: Emily Dresden

Artist: Hong Chun Zhang

Location: Online, Skype – Chicago/Kansas

Date: February 12, 2016

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



(Photo taken from <http://www.hongchunzhang.com>)

Bio: Born and raised in China, Hong grew up in an academic environment. Both her parents are retired art professors and her two sisters are also painters. When she was 15, Hong and her twin-sister Bo won the national competition to attend the high school attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. From there, she began her professional art training. In 1994, Hong received B.F.A. in Chinese Ink Painting from CAFA in Beijing, M.A. from CSU Sacramento in 2002 and M.F.A. from University of California, Davis in 2004. Hong currently lives and works in Lawrence, Kansas. In spring of 2015, she starts working with Haw Contemporary Gallery in Kansas City.

For 10 years, Hong has studied under both Chinese and American fine arts educational systems, and she has discovered a balance between the two cultures and artistic styles. In China, she developed a solid foundation in painting, but the content was restricted. In 1996, Hong came to America to expand her education in fine arts. The graduate school in the US has provided Hong with the freedom to develop new concepts for her work. This unique experience has been

recognized with a Skowhegan Artist Residency Full Scholarship (New York 2003) a Dedalus Foundation MFA Fellowship (New York 2004) Pollock Krasner Foundation grant (New York 2006) and Scuola Internazionale di Grafica artist residency in Venice, Italy funded by APT (Artist Pension Trust 2015) Hong has exhibited her work nationally and internationally at venues including the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Washington DC) Asia Society Texas Center (Houston, TX) Japanese American National Museum (Los Angeles, CA) The White Rabbit Gallery (Sydney, Australia) The Museum of Contemporary Art Norway (Oslo, Norway) Central Museum (Utrecht, Holland) The 3rd Chengdu Biennale and The 9th Shanghai Biennale (China) Ink Studio (Beijing) Galerie Steph (Singapore) The Portland Museum of Art (ME) The Center for Contemporary Art Sacramento, San Francisco Chinese Culture Center, Lawrence Arts Center, Whitespace (Atlanta) BRIC Rotunda Gallery (Brooklyn) The Chinese Porcelain Company (NYC) Her work can be found in many public and private collections such as Sylvain Levy/ DSL Collection (Paris) The White Rabbit Collection of Contemporary Chinese Art (Sydney) The Ministry of Culture of China (Beijing) The Origo Family Collection of Chinese Ink Paintings (Zurich) Spencer Museum of Art (Lawrence, KS) and Ulrich Art Museum (Wichita, KS) - Bio from <http://www.hongchunzhang.com>

Interview Transcript:

Emily Dresden: Can you tell me about yourself to start?

Hong Chun Zhang: I was born and raised in China to an artistic family; both of my parents are retired art professors. I also have two sisters, one is a twin sister, one is an older sister, who are also painters. So I grew up in an artist environment, and both my parents also taught at a local academy so my early inspiration of art really came from my living environment when I was young. When I was fifteen, I passed a national exam to attend attached high school to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. That's where I started my professional art training, for four years, including all the foundation courses in studio art. Then I went to academy for another four years majoring in Chinese ink paintings. After I graduated from Central Academy of Fine Arts, I came to US in 1996 with my twin sister. We have an older sister who came to the US early on in the late 80s so she invited us to come to the US. Then after I arrived in America I planned to further develop my work and pursue a master degree in studio arts. Then I moved to California and started my new school. First at SAC State for two years, then I went to get my terminal degree which is MFA at UC Davis for two years, and both education in the US really help me open up many possibilities for my work, and I did some experimenting work in different medium, and I try to find a balance between Eastern and Western cultures and life experience. Then after I finish MFA from UC Davis I moved to Lawrence Kansas, and it's a college town where my husband was offered a teaching job at the University of Kansas, and now I have been living in Lawrence for almost- over a decade! [Laughs]

ED: [Laughs] That's a long time!

HCZ: Yeah! Then, I had a daughter who was born in Lawrence. I called her my little tornado. [Both Laugh] So you can see later on, my works really inspired by Midwest environment. I taught for one semester at the University of Kansas art department and I found teaching really moved away from my studio practice. It's really time consuming to prepare for class, so... in between teaching and doing my own work, so I decided to do my work as a professional artist since 2008. So I have been showing and publishing and exhibiting all my works everywhere. [Laughs] From America and Asia and Europe. Yeah. That's pretty much who I am, what I'm doing now.

ED: Great! Can you talk about how you would define or categorize your art?

HCZ: I think my work is really combined with traditional skill and with contemporary idea. My work-- I try to do my work [so it] has more universal meaning, so even though my work is two dimensional and realistic, but the concept really is to convey and reach to a broader audience. That's what I'm trying to do... I started out with something I couldn't do in China when I came to the US first. So it was about my family connections, starting out with the *Three Generations* series - basically, ink mediums that I was trained in China. And this series, the first series, has a lot to do with Chinese politics, social changes, and gender issues. So after I finished that series, the longer time I lived in the US, I started comparing, or see the difference between American and Chinese cultures, so I created the *Two Cultures* series, has to do with both dualities in different countries and my life experiences. And then, I started thinking about my own identity as a Chinese woman and artist living in the US, then I developed the hair theme, the long hair theme. From that, I kind of keep going and moving from personal identity to a broader more universal idea of how you view women's hair has to do with their age, health, and sexuality and power. So move beyond my personal connection to a broader theme. For example, after I moved to Lawrence, I started combining my identity, the long hair, with my living environment. So I created this tornado piece. My past-- my recent work has to do with hair with water theme. So it's like an ongoing project, and the latest work I just created has to do with hair with meditative, spiritual element of incense burning, the smoke. So it's a long journey of development of my work but I try to-- but the bottom line is, when you look at my work, it is very time consuming, very skillful. A lot of craftsmanship, fine details, but at the same time, I also want to try and find a balance, to have more concept behind the image, so when people look at it, even though they might not understand China, or don't know anything about China, but still can appreciate it at a different level. That's what I try to do, yeah.

ED: When I saw the gallery on your website, I really liked the *Hairy Objects*. Can you tell me more about what your thought process was behind those?

HCZ: First I started out with the long hair theme. Then I found my hair in my house everywhere, so when I see that it become very gross you know? So I wanted to address different aspect of looking at long hair. Because when you look at long hair from the back it looks beautiful, but if you see hair in different setting it becomes unattractive, so I wanted to play with both aspects of looking at hair. So *Hairy Objects* is, the idea about this series is all about humor, repulsion, and there's a lot of surrealistic elements in this series. So I wanted to create a series that combined with everyday objects and hair to reveal different feelings and emotions through hair in a particular setting. For example the hair in the hamburger, hair inside a wine glass, those kinds of things, yeah.

ED: I definitely know what you mean when there's long hair everywhere!

HCZ: You know sometimes when you have long hair, you hair fell right!? On the floor, on the table, on the pillow, in the bed, in the bathrooms, so when I see that, then I thought, oh that gave me an inspiration! I should do something with that! That's how the idea happened.

ED: The other thing that was really interesting to me was the Chinese ink paintings that you do? You said that both of your parents did it and that they had an influence on you. Can you talk about how they influenced you, and about the Chinese ink painting process?

HCZ: My parents, they both taught traditional Chinese ink paintings, fine style, which means a lot of details and very time consuming making process, and because of working with ink, it's unforgiving. Which means you cannot make mistakes on the rice paper with ink, so a long time training and understanding the mediums is crucial. So when I was young, I watched my parents, how they do it, and they also gave me brushes and ink so I can start, and practice with the calligraphy and the writing, to be able to hold a brush in the proper way. Once I get used to... how the brush work, and work with the ink and mediums and understanding the process of Chinese fine style which is, you start off with a very detailed sketch, then you transfer the sketch using a light table behind and put a very thin rice paper on top of the sketch, then you use a pencil to trace the line, then you use a brush to apply the ink. You draw the line first then you apply the colors layer by layer. In between each layer you have to leave enough time to dry off. So the tone of black and white is really built up through many layers. Like seven layers, eight layers so you get enough darkness, and after that you apply colors. It's similar to a watercolor process, but it's very time consuming. That's how I trained in Chinese in painting process, and also, when I work with large charcoal drawings, because of my training, I can start out with a smaller sketch first to get the right composition then I work on the large scale paper without getting any smeared on the background, so when people look at my large drawings they always say "How can you keep the background so clean?!" It's always in there you know? Fingerprints or marks, then I told them my training in ink painting then they understand better, yeah.

ED: So, do you have to approach the charcoal works different than ink painting ones? In terms of before you actually start getting the paint down, or the charcoal?

HCZ: With the ink, you start out with a sketch, right? But with the large-scale charcoal I start out with a small sketch first, but use that as a reference and work on the large charcoal, and then I use a different type of charcoal, like the softer one to start out with the general composition. If I don't get the right lines I can use a finger or tissue paper to erase out. And then, I use a different type of-- once I've got a concrete composition and lines set up, then I use a different type of charcoal like a conte crayon so I can add more details with sharp edges and more darkness to build up enough tone between light and dark. So the building process is very similar to Chinese ink painting process. The only difference is charcoal is a dry medium, and ink is a water based medium. So the water based-- each layer you have to leave the time to dry off which takes longer than charcoal. Charcoal if there's some big area that's not right, you can use a kneaded eraser to erase out, or then you can add it up. I think that's the only difference between ink and charcoal.

ED: Moving on from that, I was listening to a previous interview; I think it was with the Smithsonian? You were asked about being an Asian American and you said you identify as a Chinese artist in America, do you also consider yourself Asian American or is there a difference between the two for you?

HCZ: I think there's a difference between East Asian and Southeastern Asian because I think the food is not the same and also the weather, the culture... The show I was in, the Smithsonian was called "Asian American Portraits" [*Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter* at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery August 12, 2011–October 14, 2012]. We had like seven artists all from different parts of Asia to put together a show. I see myself more like a woman artist living in the US, you know? Cause I like to do creative work that has a universal meanings rather than-- I want my Asian heritage become less dominant. I want my work to speak out for myself, do you understand?

ED: Yes.

HCZ: Yes. Definitely the Chinese culture influence is in my work, but I don't want that to be too exotic to attract my audience. I want my audience to see my work; they feel there's an Asian culture behind my work but not necessarily as the focal point... I want to be an international artist really [laughs] and my work doesn't necessarily have to be showed with only Asian artists or only showed with female artists. I don't want it to be categorized in that way... I want to be presented as an international artist, or an artist who makes work that is more universal.

ED: Can you tell me more about the Smithsonian exhibit?

HCZ: The Smithsonian show is quite interesting because I recommended first by [Roger] Shimomura which is pretty well known Japanese American artist who had a show at the Smithsonian a few years ago. Then when the curator told him about this contemporary Asian American portraiture show, ask him for reference. So he sent me an email saying oh I recommended you to apply this show. So I sent in my package which included the images and statement to a curator in the Smithsonian but I had never met them before, only send out my materials. Then later on they told me they liked my work and they wanted to invite me to be part of the show. So when I was in China with my family at that time, I was still making two new pieces for the show, so I had four pieces? I think? Four or five I forgot-- four pieces in that show. Then I had an email contact with the Smithsonian curator. I had never met them until I went to the opening, and they said “Hong, even though you were living in China at that time, you’re the first, fast responder [laughs] to our email than anybody who lives closer in the US.” So it was quite interesting, even though we had seven artists, each one of the artists work with a different curator. Which means seven artists have seven curators for this show, and each artist have their own room, which is like a mini solo show for each artist. Even though we are seven together, to take enough place the whole Smithsonian galleries, but I was very happy to be a part of that show. And that show also traveled for almost two years in three different locations across the US, and I received a lot of good response, yeah.

ED: What are you working on right now?

HCZ: I’m working on the hair with the smoke theme. Last November I was invited to go Venice, Italy for a one-month artist’s residency program. So I started out with the theme there. After I came back I just continued working on the hair and smoke, and I’m also wanting to do a three dimensional work also based on this theme, not just two dimensional, so it’s coming along. [laughs]

ED: Have you done 3D work before?

HCZ: I did some site-specific installations.

ED: Oh yes!

HCZ: Yes. But many of my work is large scale 2D drawings and ink paintings, but every now and then I like to do some challenging work which I prefer you know, to do some experimenting with the three dimensional or installation piece.

END