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Leonard Suryajaya Interview

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Interviewer: Megan Casey
Artist: Leonard Suryajaya
Location: In person - Chicago, IL South Loop
Date: February 12, 2016



Photo courtesy of the artist 2016.

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

Bio: BFA, 2013, California State University, Fullerton; MFA, 2015, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Exhibitions: Irvine Fine Arts Center, CA; Expo Chicago, IL; Chicago Artist Coalition, IL; The Center for Fine Arts Photography, CO; Roy G Biv Gallery, OH. Publication: Lenscratch; Chicago Magazine; South Side Weekly. Lectures: Society for Photographic Education 2014 National Conference, MD; Society for Photographic Education 2016 National Conference, NV. Awards: New Artist Society Award; James Weinstein Memorial Fellowship; Claire Rosen and Samuel Edes Prize for Emerging Artist.

Interview Transcript:

Megan Casey: When did you move to America and how long did you live in Indonesia?

Leonard Suryajaya: I moved to America when I was like 18. I turned 18 on the plane coming over, and went to California to do my undergrad at Cal State Fullerton. I started out as a theater major but I started taking art classes in my junior year. I found photography and fell in love and kept going with it. I kinda had a choice to go here (Chicago) or Irvine for my masters. Chicago was a great choice. Irvine is kind of similar

to Fullerton so I felt like it would be a more rewarding experience to go somewhere completely new to figure out how, you know, to be a maker.

MC: You never wanted to go to L.A.?

LS: I think I fell in love with the school [School of the Art Institute of Chicago]. I was just interested in working with the people who are here. Barbara DeGenevieve was my hero. She still is. I don't know, L.A. is kinda nice but it was too close to Fullerton. And I felt like I didn't necessary fit in, as far as thinking about where I wanted to go with my work and what I wanted to do. I don't know. Maybe because I grew up in a city. I grew up in Medan, North Sumatra [Indonesia], where you know, it's a city; everything is kind of compacted, everything is really fast. When I first moved to Orange County, not knowing what it was like, I almost thought it would be similar to New York because I grew up watching *Friends*. So when I got there, I was like "Where is the fun? Everything is so slow." You know? L.A. is fun but I think the Hollywood culture is overpowering so I kind of wanted to go somewhere where I didn't know much of so I could explore a different side of the country. It's been kind of great. Chicago has been great in embracing emerging artists. I think the pressure is less apparent here. It's not just driven by the market. There's more opportunities to do explorations. I've been enjoying Chicago.

MC: So how long have you been in Chicago?

LS: Two and a half years. I moved here July 2013.

MC: In your bio, it said that in Indonesia you experienced suppression of your culture and sexuality. How do you think that has shaped you as an artist?

LS: I feel like part of being an artist is being able to respond to the questions at hand: what is currently going on in my world as an artist, and our world. But it also has to stem from where I come from as an artist. A lot of those experiences growing up in Indonesia help me think about the questions that I'm sensitive about or the questions I'm interested or curious about. I grew up in Indonesia where we're still the minority. My grandparents moved from China to Indonesia when they were little. That's like before Indonesia was independent. When Indonesia got their independence, they were kind of undocumented and it was confusing especially coming in when Indonesia was an open space for trading. The Dutch was really trying to establish Indonesia as a market place, so they opened Indonesia for a lot of countries. My grandparents and their parents moved from China to Indonesia to flee communism in hopes of a better life but you know they got stuck in Indonesia in a sense. And my parents were born in Indonesia as a first generation and I was a second generation.

So, you know, throughout the history, the majority of the country always thought that Chinese descent were visitors. It took a while until we were regarded as Indonesian citizens. My parents were born with Chinese names and they had to change their names to Indonesian names or international names. When my dad got his name changed, he didn't have a last name. So when I was born and my sister was born, he gave us random

last names. He added on a last name for himself later on, so now all four of us have different last names. When I was born, I had my birth certificate but we needed another document that said we were in support of the Indonesian government and we wouldn't fight against it. I don't know, you know... It was just the extra step to further put limitations on my citizenship status as Indonesian citizen of alien descent.

In 98, a big clash happened because of the economic rupture. And the first scapegoat was the Chinese ethnic groups because they saw how we were able to flourish and find a living in Indonesia. The social tension got worse and worse so we had to run away from the country for a month and then that was the point when the government was like, "Ok we really need to figure out something." That was also the end of the presidency of Suharto--he was the president for like 31 years. He was basically becoming a dictator. But he was overthrown and a new government tried to set itself up.

That's when efforts in accepting Chinese Indonesian became more available. Prior to that, all Chinese festivals, celebrations, even the language were banned. I remember when we were little, we kinda had to hide when we were celebrating Chinese New Years. We were not able to speak Chinese. We kinda had to hide for Chinese mandarin lessons. It was kinda funny now that I remember it. We couldn't say it was a Chinese lesson. Even the teachers were not to advertise. After the new government took over control, they tried to make some changes. Things were getting better. But you know it's still developing. When I was there, in Indonesia, a few weeks ago, things were still wonky with the new president. I would come across a lot of online hate mails, basically saying, "oh let's relive what happened! Let's do what we did to the Chinese."

Things like that happen a lot. And I feel like those sets of experiences helped me question and be critical. They became the foundation in helping me think about the global occurrences. Basically what happened to Indonesia is similar to what's happening here with the racial tension and also with the immigration crisis in Europe. It's always a question of power. The blindness to acceptance and that persistence in holding on to a limited notion of what the core value of a national identity is. Look at how [Donald] Trump is using that as his tactic to spread his power. It's just confusing and happening all of the time.

MC: How did you get involved with photography?

LS: Growing up, I always wanted to make movies, I guess. Now that I'm older, more mature and clearer in what the experience was, I always had the drive to create and to speak my story. I want to create a different world or even a narrative that is not so oppressive. So I think, you know, out of high school my desire was "I want to be able to tell a story". And movies were just that. So when I moved to California, with the language barrier and the cultural differences, I thought theater was like movie theater. I thought theater majors were like how to make movies. When I got there and all I saw were all these 18 year olds wanting to be famous, it was kind of a shock.

And then in my junior year, I wanted to learn to be something better. I wanted to use that theater experience as a craft and an art form not just as a medium to get famous. So I started taking art classes and took my first photography class. It was so amazing because I was able to be free in creating or telling a story. And all I needed to do is rely on myself. When I have my camera, I get to do what I want. I think that was the beginning when I found a sense of freedom in being who I am and being able to communicate. Eventually, I started tracing all of the theater trainings and all the lessons I took. They found their ways into my photography. It was junior year of my undergrad and then I just kept going with it.

MC: Can you explain the meaning behind your work “Don’t Hold On to Your Bones”?¹

LS: The title came out from a video that I made with my mom. It was a video that I did right after my grandfather’s cremation and it was right before I came back to Chicago. I wanted to talk to her and kind of like come out to her. She told me what she wished and what she hoped for to happen when she died. She told me, “Don’t hold on to my bones. Just let it go. But as long as you put my name and photo in the temple where you can remember me, that’s all I ask.” So the title came from that conversation I had with my mom. To me, it carries so much meaning and emotional weight but also there’s like an ambiguity that is kind of funny and silly. But it just has so much weight. So yeah, so in a sense, don’t hold onto your bones is one big question of how much do you hold on to your identity and how much of your culture and your origin shape where you are today and tomorrow. The show I’m doing in March also has the same title but with different works. I think of my works as one big body of work. I just try to break it down into smaller subchapters, in a sense, to help me ask what is missing and where to go next.

MC: Do you have a personal experience that inspired your piece “Wishing for a Green Card”?

LS: I feel like in my head the ultimate defiance and the ultimate full circle is when I can use where I come from and come out at the other end with being an American.

MC: Are you an American citizen?

¹ Leonard Suryajaya “Don’t Hold Onto Your Bones” BOLT Resident solo show, Chicago Artists Coalition, Chicago, IL March 4-24, 2016. “*Don’t Hold On to Your Bones* pricks at the viewer’s intimate experiences of and ideas about other people, cultures, and identities. Prompted by Leonard Suryajaya’s upbringing as a second generation Chinese Indonesian raised by a Muslim woman, the exhibition explores complicated expressions of allegiance in a globalized world. *Don’t Hold On to Your Bones* utilizes citizenship, motherhood, and partnership as an invitation to self-inquiry. The interplay of videos, photographs, sounds, and installation reveals and conceals an experience of order amid chaos.” <http://www.chicagoartistscoalition.org/programs/bolt-residency/dont-hold-your-bones>

LS: I still have my student visa but I think I'm getting married actually. The whole process with green card is really interesting. In the process of marriage for green card, basically what you need to do is present proof that you are together and that you are kind of in love. So yeah, I started working with my partner. I found my partner in my first semester of grad school when I moved here. I always think about what photography is and what photography can do, as well as how deceitful the medium is and how I have the ultimate power to make the viewers think a certain thing. So I set out this exploration or this challenge to myself. Basically I just posted online like "I will hook up with you if you let me photograph you nude as my lover."

For some reason, that whole questioning of power exchange that's embedded in photography connected me to my partner. It opens up the bigger question of intimacy and the complicated notion of citizenship. How do you prove that 2 people are in love and how can you prove that a person has an allegiance to the country? The requirement asks that we send to the government proofs that we are together and we are in love. If I can make someone I just met, a stranger, look like an intimate lover, I don't think this is going to be a big challenge. Similar to photography, how much of it is me having to hang on to a certain narrative and try and go along with it to provoke a sense of trust and believability.

So I guess yeah, I'm in that process now. So, "Wishing for a Green Card" is based on my question of citizenship. It's kind of surprising how far it's gotten right now. I think it's important for me to hold on to my personal narrative as a way to invite the viewers to think about these questions.

MC: So it looks like your art uses different forms of mixed media, what kind of other forms of art do you implement into your photography?

LS: I would say that my work is based in photography. I like to think with photography. I like to think of it as my guidance in questioning what the act of seeing is. Sometimes I work as a painter and sometimes I work as a sculptor. I don't know, I like to think of what I do as giving an experience for the viewer to respond to and you know, we see things every day, we use cameras every day. What else can I do to really make the viewer think critically about the questions that I want to ask through seeing? And I don't want to be complacent, I guess. In the way that I make, I get bored with things that I've done before so in one way it's a way to challenge myself to open up different ways of making and different ways of seeing from the viewer.

Thinking of my work as creating an experience, sometimes it manifests itself in the interaction with the subjects while taking the photographs. Sometimes it's an installation in a space where the viewer gets to experience. Sometimes it's a video. So I think it's a matter of what questions are at hand and what questions I want to ask and answer.

End.