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## Dana Weiser Interview

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**Interviewer:** Julia Boucher

**Artist:** Dana Weiser

**Location:** Phone Interview, Chicago to Los Angeles

**Date:** February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017



*Photo Courtesy of Artist 2017*

*Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.*

**Bio: Education:** University of Colorado at Boulder, B.A in Fine Arts, May 2001. Penland School of Crafts, Attended August 2001-May 2001, woodworking and blacksmithing. School of the Art Institute of Chicago, B.F.A, Ceramics, May 2003 & Post-Baccalaureate Certificate, Ceramics May 2004 University of California at Los Angeles, M.F.A in Ceramics, June 2007 & M.A in Asian American Studies, December 2016.

**Awards:** National Scholastic Art Award in Ceramics, 1997. D'Arcy Hayman Award, 2005. Laura Andreson Scholarship, 2006. Elizabeth Heller Mandell Memorial Scholarship, 2006. Laura Andreson Scholarship, 2007. Finalist in Artist Runway.com, 2008.

**Exhibitions:** National Scholastic Art Exhibition, Corcoran Museum, Washington DC, June 1997. School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Post-baccalaureate Exhibition, Chicago, May 2004. Greater LA MFA show at CSU Long Beach, August 2006. 3 x 5 at Paul Kopeiken Gallery, Los Angeles, January 2007. UCLA MFA #3, White Gallery, Los Angeles, May 2007. Art Gathering 2007, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien", Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea, August 2007. "The Chef's Theory", 533 Gallery, Los Angeles, 2009. "Wall-to-Wall", Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, June 2010. "Born Into Identity: The Asian Pacific American Adoptees Experience", Wing Luke Museum, Seattle, November 2010. "Who Are You?!?", Solo exhibition, Burnet Gallery, Minneapolis, September 2011. MAS Attack, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance October 2013. "Freeway Studies #2: Inside the Quad", Otis School of Art and Design, Los Angeles 2014.

MAS Attack, Santa Monica Airport, 2015. InKAS, Seoul, Korea 2015. "Cross Fade", Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles, 2015. "We're Adept At It...", Solo exhibition, Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles, January 2016. "And Who Is My Neighbor: Stories From the Margins", Biola University, September 2016.

**Publications:** "UCLA MFA 2005-2006" Catalogue, June 2005. "Artquake" By Bruce Hainley, The New York Times Sunday Magazine, October 1, 2006. "Adoptee & Alien: Visions from the Periphery" Catalogue, August 2007. "UCLA MFA 2006-2007" Catalogue, June 2006. "UCLA MFA 2007-2008" Catalogue, June 2007. [www.thisisrollarcoaster.com](http://www.thisisrollarcoaster.com), August 2010. O.K. Periodicals #5, The Body Issue, 2010. Protein Journal, Issue #02, 2010

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Julia Boucher:** Alright well to start off tell me a little bit about yourself.

**Dana Weiser:** So, I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis, and I was born in Korea. I came to the U.S. when I believe I was about 10 months, and I was adopted by a Jewish family. And I have one older sister who is also a Korean adoptee. And then after high school I moved to Colorado to go to school at the University of Colorado Boulder for 4 years and then I moved back to Minneapolis. I spent half my time in Minneapolis and then half my time in North Carolina to go to a craft school, to Penland School of Crafts, where I studied blacksmithing and woodworking. And then I moved to Chicago and I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) to finish off my BFA 'cause I didn't really want to stay in Colorado anymore because I was kind of over the school and a little late getting into the BFA program. So, I was able to go to finish off the credits at SAIC, and then I stayed an extra year and did my post-bacc in ceramics there. And then that gave me the opportunity to work on my portfolio and ended up going to UCLA in the ceramic department to get my masters, and that's where I got my MFA in 2007. So, I've been here [California] since that.

**JB:** What made you want to stay in California opposed to all the other places you lived?

**DW:** Well I actually tried to move back to Chicago probably like 2010-ish, I kinda was over L.A. and I missed seasons. So I drove out, maybe this was like 2011, I drove out with my dog and I rented a place for a month. But in L.A, I realized that my art community, you know you make a community of friends and connections while in grad school, and I really didn't have that in Chicago. Cause when I was in Chicago I used to work part time at a pizza joint and since I was a transfer and I was a little bit older I didn't have that many friends. And people weren't really doing that many pop ups or projects, and if they were they were kinda like in people's apartments so you had to know the person who was doing it, which I didn't. So I came back to L.A. and I realized that the community here is really helpful, you know, and supportive, and all my friends are artist or connected to the art world, and I have a great studio and there is just so much more, you know, so many more galleries that show emerging artist which are always popping up. So it's kinda of just a little bit different, and it think it's more similar to New York's gallery scene. So that's why I ended up staying, and when I came back I was really happy in making my choice to stay in L.A. I started to really enjoy being here.

**JB:** That's a really good reason, for sure. When did you start to realize that you wanted to be an

artist?

**DW:** Hmm, well I guess... I don't know. So my mom she was an architect, she didn't design buildings, she did interior and like office spaces. She just always took us to museums and really strived for us to have an art education. She would take us to do camps, I think we would do camps at like the Minneapolis Art Institute, or something affiliated with that. And whenever we traveled she would take us to, well both my parents would take us to museums. And then my aunt, she's actually a ceramicist... but I would go over there and she would just teach me you know how to work with clay and she taught me how to pinch pot and coil build starting from a really really young age. And I don't know I guess in high school I really still enjoyed it. I think my senior year I won the national scholastics award in ceramics that year. I think it's like 6 to 8 pieces from around the country get displayed at the Corcoran Museum, which I don't know [if it] exists anymore, it was sold to George Washington [University] I think [laughs]. I had one really great art teacher in high school, and she really pushed me in ceramics.

And at Colorado, Betty Woodman-she left the year I started, but her influence was obviously there in how big the ceramics program is there and how good it is. I would take classes kinda, being that my majors art, but I'm not a BFA major, or whatever it is. And well actually my parents were like you have to back it up with something, so I was like well I was into chemistry in high school and chemistry and ceramics go really well. I tried to go back into that while I was in college, but I was like this is horrible I don't want to do this [both laugh]. And I think my parents, they met with an artist, there was a moment where my dad was talking to the artist, he's an L.A. artist his name is Joe Good, and he's one of those, you know, old school L.A. painters. So my dad and him were having a conversation, and they [her parents] were like "well we just think Dana should have something to back up her art career", and so Joe asked my dad "what did you study in college?" and my dad was like "well I actually ended up going to law school... and you know I became a lawyer," and Joe further asks him "well did you back that up with a medical degree?" And that's when my dad, he's a businessman, realized you don't need to have a backup. At that moment they really supported and pushed me to further my art career. So, but, I don't know I guess I have always made 3D things, I really didn't draw that much as a child. I actually would make things out of the cardboard sheets from my dad's dry cleaning and things. I guess I was always kind of creative and had very large imagination I think my mother would say.

**JB:** That's a very good story, a good reason. How do you define or categorize your art?

**DW:** Well I guess, uhhhh, hmm...

**JB:** It is a hard question.

**DW:** Yeah, well whenever I write my artist statement I always say that my art deals with issues of race, identity, and adoption. And I think that is how I define my art. I feel like there is multiple strains and multiple seams in different connotations of those words and those ideas. And how it comes out is this process and how it comes out is the work based on those three words, kind of... and especially lately I've been kind of branching out in different material forms. But I feel like that kind of exemplifies those three concepts.

**JB:** And your piece “Fresh Off the Boat,” what was the meaning behind that one? (*Figure 1*)

**DW:** That one is actually one of my thesis pieces, so let’s see... you know being a Korean adoptee you have a lot of, I don’t know I guess struggles about identity issues. Especially most of us who were raised in white families because you are really never a part of like the white community other than what your family is, if you have a really supportive family... but especially in Minnesota and Minneapolis in the 80’s there just isn’t very much diversity. The only other Koreans I knew were other Korean adoptees so we were all just kind of leading each other being lost. When you get into other Asian communities, especially Korean/Korean American communities they don’t see you as being like Korean or Asian enough... Actually, other Asian People would actually call other Asians who had newly immigrated or visiting from other Asian countries, they’d be like “well they’re a F.O.B.,” like they are fresh off the boat. Think of immigration. What does that mean if you, your parents, or your grandparents are up to a certain generation are “fresh off the boat”; especially now if you look at what [Donald] Trump’s doing, and everything, it [the piece] kind of still has meaning to what is fresh off the boat.

I was looking at the painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware” [1851 by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze] And at the time I was using doll porcelain which is really really not fun stuff. It really only tests to a certain size and I was kind of pushing it with my size of the children babies. So there’s multiple elements... I obviously didn’t put as many people in as in the painting, but I was looking at that, which is an iconic painting. And then these doll porcelains... it’s really interesting when you look at them, it’s like all the ethnic or skin types are like... the titles are like “Cameron” or “Asian” or you know something of that vain. But like white, or Caucasian is called like “blush” or “snow and it’s not by race. It’s really interesting in the way they like categorize their own products, the doll porcelains. And then, also the doll heads, is like Asians always being considered these dolls, like you know, the China doll, and especially Korean adoptee’s you always hear “you’re my little Korean doll.” I really was into using these, you know, I bought a child mannequin and I cast it and then I bought all these Asian stylized faces, like racially stylized. And thinking about adoption, you know the dolls have multiple heads which is thinking about how we contain multiple identities inside ourselves. Being an adoptee I have an Asian Identity and I have a white Identity because of how I was raised in my community and by my family... but racially I’m Korean, so you start to take on multiple identities, and that’s kind of what I was conveying with that. It was a very large piece, my friend and I, he’s a boat builder and he helped me stylize this boat, which is 6-8 feet tip to tip, so it’s quite a large piece. Then there are all the pieces inside.

**JB:** It’s really cool I really like that piece.

**DW:** Thank You!

**JB:** What is one of your favorite pieces you’ve done?

**DW:** So I guess... uhh it’s so hard... it’s not because I have a favorite, it’s because it takes me a really really long time to make pieces. Even with clay you can only push the material so far in each day. So even if you’re like “I only want to work 12 hours today,” the clay can only take a certain amount of time just to dry, and it has to set up, and you can push it, but there is a lot of

issues with pushing the material. I end up spending like months on pieces, so by the time I've finished them I'm like so sick of them [laughs]. I don't really have like any favorite pieces. Like I'm happy with them, but I actually don't keep any of my work in my house because I'm just so sick of looking at it.

But actually I was in this phase of, and there is no actual images of it because they don't photograph very well, but I was in this phase where I was recreating my own illuminated manuscript, and I made a little one. And I was basically Photoshopping illuminated manuscripts and then kind of like collaging them together to create my own illuminated manuscript, and then recreating them in my own type of styles, you know, with gold beads and Swarovski crystals, and the text I had in it was... one of them said "Hiya Chink, Hiya Chink" and they actually are like conversations, because I use a lot of outside sources as my ideas, like interacting with other people. So like this man was like "Hiya Chink, Hiya Chink," and so I put that in one of them. The second one, I don't know, I was in this store and a woman was like, we were talking about what I do and my work and how I'm an adoptee and she's like "Ohh I have two friends that are Korean!" and I'm like "oh really? Are they adopted too?" and she's like "No, but I know someone who adopted a baby from China." So it was these gross, kind of really funny and kind of weird instances I have with people. And this third one, one that I really like said "You speak good English" [laughs]. So I was like "yeah... you too..." and like I'm gonna leave that there. So actually that "you speak good English" one was one of my favorites because it was small and intimate I really enjoyed that. And now when I look back at it I'm like "that was a good piece." But I don't know, I don't really have a favorite. I kind of just... I like things looking back but it's just like I stare at them all day long, then you start to see the flaws and everything.

**JB:** Oh yeah, I know.

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**JB:** You obviously touch on pieces about Asian Identity, but do you ever look at the history of Asian Americans in your work?

**DW:** Yeah, I always do research... and look at images and stuff. I'm actually doing a piece right now, that I'm doing embroidery on. I'm embroidering these Korean folk paintings on this specific Korean cloth like dress, so like, Korean woman wear these fancy dresses called Hanbok, but like the sleeves they are normally really decorative with stripes and bright colors, it's called celadon fabric, I believe. And it's hard to get, 'cause I had my friend in Korea get it for me and ship it to me, and she had a hard time finding it, so I'm glad she went because she speaks Korean and I don't. I'm embroidering these Korean folk images... which I collage... I like really Asian stylized images. I'll actually go on Google and I'll google "Asian stylized flowers" and see what shows up, you know, or like "Asian stylized waves" and then kind of use those images in my work. I'm doing these embroideries and I'm working on the third one right now, and actually I'm looking at like The DMZ [Korean Demilitarized Zone], actually the second one too, and... well it's not necessarily a long story, but it kind of all started when I was thinking about memory and fantasy and dreams, and how, you know, your memory is never a true telling because you either fantasize it more or less in your re-telling or your thoughts... like it's hardly ever like how actually really happened. From there, that was like the first embroidery, and then the second

embroidery I was actually at a BBQ with a bunch of other Korean adoptees, and for some reason someone brought up tigers... and he said “well you know tigers exist in Korea, they live in the DMZ,” and I was like... “ok what the hell is he talking about?” And then I remembered he was reading this book on land that had seen like mass destruction, like Chernobyl and the DMZ and how nature, with humans not existing there anymore, nature has come back after these mass destruction kind of things. So, like places humans can’t go anymore, like people don’t live anymore in Chernobyl anymore because of the radiation, but they are finding all these animals and all these plants are coming back from whatever happened. In the DMZ they are trying to create a UNESCO spot, or something like that I’m not really sure which organization, but they are trying to keep it a natural habitat because this area, people can’t go in it other than a select few, but they are kind of dying out. All these plants are coming back, like the Asiatic bear they found there, and the red crowned crane has come back there, and all these plants are coming back. So what this guy meant was if tigers existed, because tigers used to exist in Korea because they use to swim there until they were killed off by poachers, that if they lived there would live in the DMZ, and that’s where it started...what intrigued me most about him saying, not only about how tigers did exist, which then made me google it and I found this guy, this Korean tour guide who actually believes he’s seen ten of them who live there, but he hasn’t seen them he’s just seen like tracks... so there might be evidence that they do live there which is totally interesting, but coming back to the memory and dream thing is that as a child I used to dream about tigers... and being like kept captive by tigers. Which I thought was interesting that at the moment when I’m, you know, doing this whole series on memories and dreams and fantasy that this guy randomly brings up tigers.

And so that is just a lot of my work, things that happen through conversation or gestures or something that happened, and so I made the second one about that. And I really started studying and I got a list of the animals that have come back and the plants that have come back. And then it’s also interesting that what’s dying out there too, I think it’s the farmers that live in that zone have decided to give up because it’s like a really hard life because you are stuck in between, you know it was a war zone and there never was a cease fire, it never was a concluded war, they are still in war. The ginseng farms and the rice farms, which are human made, are actually dying out. Which I thought was kind of interesting too that like when you take humans out what’s dying out and what’s coming back. And from there this third embroidery that I’m working on... and I have visited the DMZ, and I remember this incident with this tree. There was this tree massacre because the U.S. wanted to cut this tree down because it was blocking views into North Korea, or something along that vein. The U.S. soldiers went out and started to cut down this tree, and the North Korean soldiers were like “what the hell are you guys doing?” So, they came back and actually attacked them, and killed two of the soldiers with the axes the U.S. soldiers were using to cut the tree down... so like really brutal.<sup>1</sup>

**JB:** Yeah wow...

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<sup>1</sup> On Aug. 18, 1976, Capt. Bonifas and 1st Lt. Mark Barrett were murdered by North Koreans by “ax-wielding North Koreans” “during a tree-trimming operation within the Demilitarized Zone,” according to Erik Slavin, “Tragic 1976 ax murders at Korean DMZ recalled,” *Stars and Stripes*, August 16 2008. <https://www.stripes.com/news/tragic-1976-ax-murders-at-korean-dmz-recalled-1.82005#.WMbEsBLyub8>

**DW:** And then the UN comes back in like full force... and I forget which president it was, but they were like we can't have this basically. So they created "Operation Paul Bunyan." Which is a Minnesota connection so I'm like "what the fuck," how do I have these connections even when I'm studying this tree that I was mesmerized by years ago but I never looked up, and now I find out it's called "Operation Paul Bunyan." So it's like are you kidding me?

**JB:** Really what are the odds of that?!

**DW:** Seriously! I am putting in the image of the tree cut down, and then just hiding a little Babe the Blue Ox within this folk painting, and it's the same type of tree, that Poplar tree that caused all this commotion at the DMZ. So that's what I'm working on. I don't really remember the question [laughs]. Oh history it was about history!

**JB:** Those sound really cool. They are 'gonna turn out great I bet.

**DW:** Thank you!

**JB:** Have you ever been in an exhibit that was contextualized as Asian American?

**DW:** Hmm let's see, a couple years ago, which is how I met my dealer now, my friend who's an art consultant curated a show and put me in it. And she was like "I was thinking about your work," my work, "and who else would fit in with [your] work." 'Cause she didn't know that many artist... or how to approach the subject. So she went in and proposed this group show that was a mix of Asian, Asian American, and African American female artist. It was called "Cross Fade" and you can look it up it's on the internet.<sup>2</sup> I have been included in a lot of adoptee shows, some are Korean American adoptees some are Korean adoptees, because we aren't all from America or went to America. And then I've been included in like Asian adoptee shows, or Asian American adoptee shows that included like Vietnamese adoptees and things. So yeah, I have been in that kind of work. Really only one Asian American I guess.

**JB:** Cool, is identifying as Asian American something that is important to you?

**DW:** Umm... I don't know. I really know if I actually identify as Asian American because again it brings up the whole what does Asian mean, and not really being a part of that community. I actually had some free time and I ended up getting a second Master's recently in Asian American Studies where I could use my artwork as my thesis and then write a thesis like a shorter paper... but it turned out to be like 40 something pages. I actually just finished this past October, and it was really an interesting experience because I was actually around all these Asian American students and faculty and staff. Which is not what I'm used to. Even being in L.A. I'm not really ever included in other Asian stuff, because I don't really have that many other Asian American friends, especially before I went to school. I don't really know how I would identify. I definitely don't really feel Korean enough, you know, because a lot of what I know about what being

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<sup>2</sup> *Cross Fade*, Walter Maciel Gallery, July 12–August 16, 2014, Los Angeles, CA. Curated by Brenda G. Williams. <http://www.waltermacielgallery.com/crossfade.html>



Korean is or what the culture of Korea is stuff I Google. And I guess if I had to like give a broad term it would Asian American, I guess. I also don't really like being called American, which is probably the best term for me. I don't know though, it's difficult. I think I identify more as Artist than any of those, does that make sense?

**JB:** Of course, that totally makes sense, there is like a disconnect.

**DW:** Yeah, and I'm still trying to recognize what putting myself in those categories and self-identifying that way, like what are the benefit, why should I, or why do I have to? It might change because... who knows. I think I also identify more as being an adoptee, and an artist. It's hard because I always feel like racially judged by who my parents are, but that's not really who I am, but I also don't have an Asian culture really.

**JB:** That's the nice thing about self-identifying is that you can identify however you want. This is a total change of topic, but how have your exhibition opportunities changed or stayed the same over the years.

**DW:** Hm, let's see. They were pretty stable for a while, you know, since grad school. UCLA at that time, and probably still does, when I was there it was 2004 - 2007 and we were kind of on the end of this like "hey day" where galleries would swoop in young emerging artist. I had a couple shows when I was in grad school and I did a lot of group shows. I think I would do about 2-3 group shows a year. And then that was kind of how I was doing it, I was all over... a couple times in Korea, and I finally did a solo show in Minnesota, my first solo show ever in 2011 or 2012. Hold on I have it written down.

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**DW:** 2011! At the Burnet Gallery which is associated with.... the something hotel, Meridian hotel I think.<sup>3</sup> So it's like an art boutique hotel, and they have a separate space where they actually do these huge art shows. But they don't actually have a roster of artist that they show they just bring in a bunch of artist and give them group shows or solo shows, but they don't actually have their own artist. That really helped I think, it was really fun to do my first solo in my home town. Then... I did the "Cross Fade" show at Walter Maciel Gallery. After that Walter and I had gone out and we talked and he was like "well I want to give you a show, like a solo." So I had my first solo with him in 2016, January 2016. I still pick up group shows, like I did one in Korea last November, and I did one at BIOLA University, which is the biblical institute of Los Angeles. That was a really interesting show. I think it was... something "Thy Neighbor" [laughs], it has some type of religious context to it.<sup>4</sup> It was funny though because I went down there and I was like uhhh... they know I'm Jewish right? Like I don't know how I got included in this show. But it was about race and identity and it was a really fun show. So I do a couple group shows still

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<sup>3</sup> Minneapolis Burnet Art Gallery, Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis, Minneapolis, MN. <http://www.lemeridienchambers.com/minneapolis-burnet-art-gallery>.

<sup>4</sup> "And Who is My Neighbor: Stories From the Margins," The Earl & Virginia Green Art Gallery, Biola University, La Mirada, CA. Curated by Nery Gabriel Lemus and Jeff Rau. <https://www.biola.edu/events/2016/and-who-is-my-neighbor-reception>.

but I talked to Walter again and my next solo will be fall of 2018 I believe. Sometime around there in 2018. So because I work so slow all I'm doing now is just making work for that show. Which it seems far off but it really isn't, not when one piece takes like three months.

**JB:** That's a good segway to the next question, what are you currently working on?

**DW:** Well, I'm doing those embroideries. I've got two done, and then you know just little tweaks I have to do. And then I'm working on the third, I just started that maybe a week and a half ago, maybe two weeks ago. I've got a couple ideas to do some light pieces and... I don't know. It's like who knows what's 'gonna happen. I feel like because there is so much going on, like after the election there was a massive overload for me with the protest and just being in this total complete depression. And a couple people said this, that artist are the ones to lead the protest, like they've always been and will always be so artist need to step up now. Which is like are you kidding me...? I've always had a political agenda, like not necessarily blaring but it's always kinda there. But why now? Because you and a couple other people feel this way now I have to make political work? And when I've always done it? So I felt really annoyed and kind of mad so I was like I'm just 'gonna embroider. Now I feel like... I have to do it on my own terms. And I'm excited about these light pieces because I feel like it's in a good vein, but I can't discuss it more because I'm a little superstitious that way... like I don't like people taking pictures of work that's not finished or talking about ideas that haven't happened yet. I don't know what's happening now it just kind of seems that there will be a lot more opportunities to make identity work so... I don't know.... We'll see what happens.

**JB:** That's perfect. That was all of my questions, you answered them great! This will turn out really good.

**DW:** Awesome!

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**JB:** Thank you so much again!

**DW:** Oh, you're welcome this sounds like a fun project. I'm glad I could help!

**END**

Figure 1



Dana Weiser

"Fresh Off the Boat," 2007

Porcelain and wood

Installation 72" x 36" x 48" with porcelain figures at approximately 3' tall x 18" wide.

Installation view New White Gallery, University of California Los Angeles, 2007.