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## Matthew Avignone Interview

Alicia Urquizo

*DePaul University*, [alicialynnu@hotmail.com](mailto:alicialynnu@hotmail.com)

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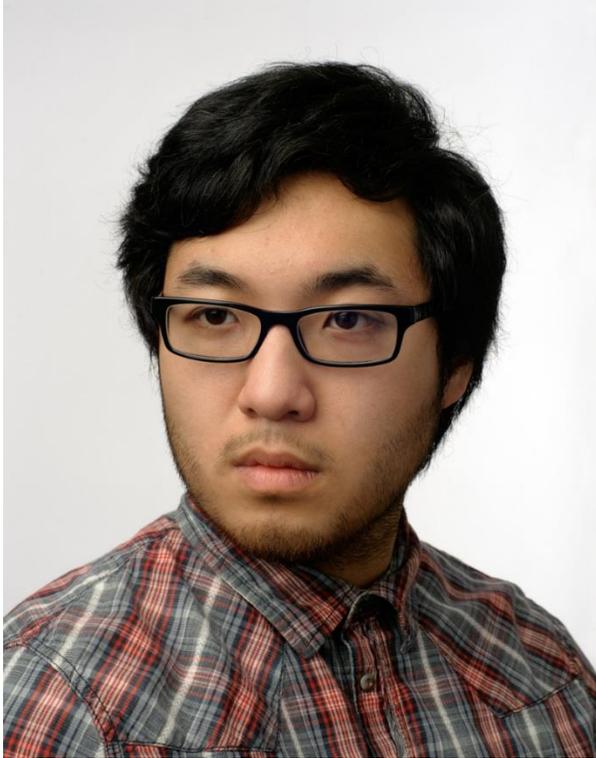
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**Interviewer: Alicia Urquizo**

**Artist: Matthew Avignone**

**Location: In Person- Matthews' Studio in East Garfield Park, Chicago, IL**

**Date: February 10, 2017**



*Photo and bio courtesy of the artist. Headshot from Stranger Than Family series, 2010.*

**Bio: Matthew Avignone** is a Korean-American photographer born in 1987. In 2011, he obtained his B.A. in photography from Columbia College, Chicago. He has been exhibited at the Aperture Foundation, the Pingyao Photography Festival (China), and the Camden Image Gallery (London), among others. His first artist book, *An Unfinished Body* (2011), is part of the collections of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film and the International Center for Photography. In October 2014, after working for five years on documenting his own family, he released his **self-published book, *Stranger Than Family***. The story of this project, along with his photographs, have been featured in the **New York Times Lens Blog** in July 2015.<sup>1</sup> His work has also been published in The Fader, Bloomberg Businessweek, The Wire (UK), and Slanted (Germany). He is currently working as a freelance photographer in Chicago.

Visit his website for his work and much more: <http://matthewavignone.com>

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<sup>1</sup> David Gonzalez, "Strangers No More in An Adopted Family," *New York Times Lens Blog*, July 7, 2015, [https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/07/strangers-no-more-in-an-adopted-family/?\\_r=1#](https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/07/strangers-no-more-in-an-adopted-family/?_r=1#)

**Interview Transcript:**

**Matthew Avignone:** Hello its Matthew and Alicia! In Matts studio in February 2<sup>nd</sup>, oh wait...

**Matthew Avignone and Alicia Urquizo:** February 10<sup>th</sup>!! 10<sup>th</sup>!

**MA:** 2017, coming at you live. From East Garfield Park.

**AU:** Woo! Let's get this started!

**MA:** Yeah there we go.

**MA & AU** [laughs]

**MA:** That's an intro!

**AU:** Yes, it is!

**MA & AU** [laughs]

**AU:** Alright, the first question, tell me a little about yourself, just like basics of you.

**MA:** Okay, well my names Matthew Michael Avignone. I am twenty-nine years old. I'm married and I live in Pilsen. Here in Chicago. One of the reasons you're here today is because I'm a photographer and artist. And my work primarily, so far has involved my family. And I think that's one of the things you might be interested in. Besides that, my family is pretty unique 'cause I am one of five adoptees, who were adopted from Korea and India. I am the oldest and I was adopted when I was five months old.

**AU:** Its very interesting and you mentioned Pilsen, I've been to Pilsen, and they have amazing food!

**MA:** Oh yeah! Well that's the thing, I love the food and its very affordable.

**AU:** It is!

**MA:** And if you have like (the taste for) Mexican food it is the place to be.

**AU:** I've walked down the streets up and down there and I could smell the food, all around [laughs].

**MA:** Yeah there's a place called Pollo Loco, it's like right across-

**AU:** I've heard of that!

**MA:** -from my house and the smells from the grilled chicken that are coming down the streets are so good! Ohh, so excellent! But yeah, my new favorite taqueria is Atotonilco I don't know if I'm saying that correctly but it's on Blue Island and 18<sup>th</sup> across the street from the McDonalds, and for me I just have to walk out the back door of my house and it's right there. So, it's perfect and before, I've been living in Pilsen for the past five or six years now. And I've been like slowly moving east. I use to live at 18<sup>th</sup> and Wood. Then 18<sup>th</sup> and Ashland. And then when I was living at 18<sup>th</sup> and Ashland right across the street my taqueria was Los Tamales and I've developed a relationship with the ladies there because I would just go order food there so much so, whenever I walked in the door, even though there was a line of people they would come to me first. I felt so honored. Two Christmases ago when I was still living there and going often they gave me a Christmas gift. And for me, it's crazy! But I felt very honored, it was a keychain that was a bottle opener, measuring type and flashlight. And I'm like "OH MY GOD! THANK YOU SO MUCH!"

**MA & AU** [Laughing]

**AU:** It's always nice.

**MA:** Yes.

**AU:** Next question?

**MA:** Ha-ha sure!

**AU:** When, how, and why did you first get involved in with photography?

**MA:** When, how, and why, I guess if you want to start a long time ago. When I was a child I remember looking in Kays merchandise which was like a department store. And just lusting over cameras. And I don't really know why, I was interested in them, they just fascinated me. But of course, I could never afford one. And it wasn't until later in my childhood where I received a polaroid camera. And I started taking pictures with that and I loved the immediacy of the polaroid. How you can see an image right away. But being with the means we had I got it for Christmas, I had one pack of film. And then I could never get any more after that! [laughs] It's not like I had a job or anything like that. But it wasn't until my freshman year of college. When I was studying at a different university from Columbia. It was called Olivet Nazarene University

it's in Bourbonnais, Illinois. It's actually – the university is in the same town as, where my parents live currently, and where I lived then. And I was studying mechanical engineering, that was my major. And I decided to take a photography class just for fun. Because one of my buddies that I made there through long boarding was like “Hey! You have any extra class you need to take? You should come take photography with me.” And my friends from back home they were all interested in photography. So, they would go out take pictures, while skate boarding and I would just skate and the eventually I'm like well maybe I should, I want to try that out too. And as soon as I took the class and they gave a me a little point and shoot Canon camera. I just fell in love right away. It was, the camera it gave me a license to go and explore, a reason to be somewhere. You know you can go look at flowers, and I don't know take pictures of your friend, I mean hang out with you friends, that's a reason, but if you're just exploring, by yourself, people are going to ask you “What are you doing there.” But if you have a camera in your hand it's like “I'm taking pictures.” So, I guess that's how I feel in love with photography- also seeing my professor showed me Irving Penn and Richard Avedon's work, I fell in love with Irving Penn's work right away. I found his portraiture gorgeous and how he was able to work with his subjects, was fascinating to me. And within the time frame of one semester I graduated to a better point shoot camera. And in a month's time from when I first picked up that first one the school gave me, and then a month later I borrowed \$900 from my friend. He let me borrow \$900. And because he was saving for a house and he knew I could pay him back because I had a job, but he trusted me enough that I would. And he let me- it allowed me to get my first DSLR. And by the end of the semester, I was really thinking of switching my major from mechanical engineering to photography. And there was a contest that existed called *Jpeg Magazine*. This was younger in the days of the internet and photography where Flickr was still big, like 2006. And there was a magazine that had different themes that you can submit to for free. And if you were selected you would be published in the magazine. So, I submitted this picture, of my high school shop teacher, Bob Strand, a picture of him standing in front of these old lockers, and there's tires behind him, and its black and white. Wide angle you only see waist up. and it low and behold, it ended up getting published and selected. And for me it was like at that time –OH MY GOD! THAT'S MY NAME IN PRINT! AND THAT'S MY PICTURE! And I found it so fascinating and it gave me the confidence to go in a 180 and pursue photography. Which led me to leaving that school and unfortunately I couldn't- I couldn't even pay for it. I had a deficit of \$6,000. I couldn't even transfer to the next school I wanted to go to, until I paid that off. I had to take a half a year off so I could pay back all that money to the school so I could get my transcript, to go to Columbia. So yeah that's how I sort of got into photography.

**AU:** Journey!

**MA:** Yeah, it is a journey. But like all things! It's how it goes. When you're later in life you could see how threads are connected. And what moments were important. But it was through the encouragement of my professor. Bill Gerovich, I think his name was, and in class if he liked your

picture, if he found your picture like to be good he would print it out for you, because they weren't teaching you printing or anything like that. They were teaching you basic techniques.

**AU:** So, like angles, and light?

**MA:** Yeah like point of view, what is aperture? And what is shutter speed? There was one day in class I remember I would like raise my hand till I answered the question, not knowing the answer at all and I would just be like white balance?! White balance?! Because I knew eventually it would be the answer. I had no clue! Because I was super eager and excited.

**MA & AU:** [Laugh hysterical]

**AU:** Always be encouraged!

**MA:** Yeahhhh! Well he encouraged me through the pictures he liked that I took. Like in class like everyone might get one print. But almost every time he picked like 3-5 of my pictures to print and give to me and I just like found that to be encouraging.

**MA & AU:** Yeah...

**AU:** Next?

**MA:** sounds good.

**AU:** How would you define or categorize your art and yourself with in the arts?

**MA:** Man, that's like an intense question. Some people are very good at this question, I am not. For me in my practice [brief pause] and energy that I have I feel like I'm a little bit of everywhere. But when I have the ability to concentrate on something else specific body of work, it can be well more refined. That says absolutely nothing what I just said. But basically, what I'm trying to say is I'm at a place where I find the art that I make and what it is I say and communicate to you as the viewer. I'm going to let you decide more of what I'm about. Than trying for me to tell you verbally cause I'm not a writer, and I'm not a poet. But I'm a photographer and artist, so I'd rather you look at my work and you be the judge. But I guess if you were asking the question, my main body work *Stranger Than a Family*, is about- this book that I made is about how we become to be a family. And in the beginning of the book, then it sort of takes you- I'm actually going to say it's like a fictional tale. Because how I don't have any text in the book and how you as the viewer, viewing histories of different things, that's going to imply how you make sense of the book itself. And I didn't want – I didn't want it to be a traditional documentary how, this is a, b, c, and d. and this ends up to be the alphabet in the end.

I was more interested in the viewer taking their time and making their own assumptions for what they have. And then they can come back to it- then maybe they can find something new within it.

**AU:** Yeah, that's how art- that's how I see art as too. Take in what you can get and make your own moods and give off what you feel. Actually, within that answer you answered two of questions [Laughs].

**MA:** Oh! Oh yeah? Well let's hear them, because maybe I'll expound upon them.

**AU:** One was actually can you tell me bit about the project *Stranger Than a Family*?

**MA:** Okay, so well here I can tell you just like how it came about. The project lasted- it was a span of a 5-year project of my life, when making the work. And the whole thing started with these series of seven portraits right here. That you see on the cover of the book. And it was actually for technical assignment in my portrait class. With Kelly Colonel, who's a photographer, and professor at Columbia. I simply chose the subject cause they were available to me. Like that's my family they are willing to sit down- me have them- like I can direct them. And do what I want. But, so it came out as a technical assignment and going to make seven- like formal head shots. And show them in class- show I can do lighting like this and make composition and etc. when I put those pictures up in class, everybody was like very curious of who these people are and why are they in a group of seven pictures together because you see these two Caucasian older people and everyone behind them are like Asian and one Indian with glasses at the end. And I'm like yeah that's my family. And once I said that they- it brought up all these other questions. "Like how did you become to be a family. That's your mom and dad- they're not your real mom and dad?" All these questions were bound. From there I decided it might be interesting to take pictures of them somewhere. And that's where it sort of started. It just started from, actually not from myself but from the curiosity of others. And also, the immediacy of having them my family as a subject matter. And if you do it on the flip side, if you think about it like everyone takes family pictures. Right? That's just being part of a family. You want to make memories. And for me it was sort of the opposite. Cause I didn't want to make family pictures. I took pictures of them more- I was just thinking- like lighting and composition, and you know making beautiful pictures. It wasn't for about a year and half of continuous hundreds of rolls of film. Wasn't for about then and I took a class with a man named Paul D'Amato. He's a really amazing professor and documentary photographer. He's the one who made a book called *Barrio* about Pilsen actually in the early 80s and 90s and I really admired that guy through his class and through his teachings he opened up my eyes to how photography can be communicated through the content that existed within inside the image. He expanded my eyes beyond just shape, form, and lighting. And I started to read photography as a language. Which like allowed me to then to start being a little more purposeful within seeing how the pictures can connect and relate to each other to tell a story. And that's how it started to come to be but at the end of my graduation I

created like an artist book it was called an “Unfinished Body” of all things. Cause that’s exactly what it was. It was not a complete work. It actually looked very similar to this on the cover and was much simpler. I wish I had a copy here for you to show you to see the difference between now and then. And that ended up placing in this award series that they had at the time. The Blurb Awards. Do you know Blurb? It’s like an on demand publishing service.

**AU:** No, I’ve never heard.

**MA:** You can go to them and design a book and you can have them print it and it’ll come to your door. And that was like a revolutionary thing at the time and now it’s a little more common. But they put up this contest and you could submit your work to it, and it ended up winning. In third place. And it was really cool cause the book and the work was exhibited at the Aperture Foundation in New York. Which is very historical non-profit art organization, photography organization. That existed in Chelsea and I was like flabbergasted that that, was there. I want to hear your next question. Because like maybe and yeah -

**AU:** No, its fine!

**MA & AU** [Laugh]

**MA:** Yeah, its funny!

**AU:** So, we discussed that the viewer, they, what they take in from your work, is how they should feel, like you don’t categorize yourself ‘cause you said you’re everywhere.

**MA:** Yeah I am.

**AU:** So, then this was the question, when people view your photos are there any particular moods that you want them to feel for example in *Resign Rahm Protest* from viewing those photos I felt like anger and powerful. Because of the people’s emotions and their expressions within those photos.<sup>2</sup>

**MA:** So, I’m glad you brought that up because beyond, I don’t know ‘cause I sort of have different sections of myself but they’re all combined and those pictures were originally made just for myself. ‘Cause when I was there I was an active participant in the protest as well and not just there to document as like an outsider. Because I was extremely upset from what took place with the Laquan McDonald, video tape that was hidden for a year. And I felt the need to be out there.

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<sup>2</sup> Myles Tanzer, photographer Matthew Avignone, “What Chicago #ResignRahm Protests Really Looked Like,” *Fader*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/11/chicago-protest-rahm-emanuel-resign-rahm>

And also as a person an individual and the only thing I'm pretty damn good at is taking pictures. I felt like the one thing that I could do is to like document this time, this place, this action that people gathered together have made. And if you could feel the things that you described from looking at those photos I think that's because I felt them too. And I didn't want to dramatize it in any way but, what you see is what you got. And I don't know if that answers your question, or not.

**AU:** No, it does.

**MA:** Okay

**AU:** Yeah [We both felt the tension in the room from this certain mood taking place]

**MA:** Because like it's just one section of my thing, but the cool part about that work was I got a call in the middle of taking a pictures from this music and culture magazine called *The Fader*. There's a good photo editor that I've worked in the past. And she called me up and she's like, "hey are you at the protest in Chicago right now for the Laquan McDonald shooting?" and I was like, "Yeah" and she said, "Hey when it's all over send me and edit of the pictures I'd love to see them and we'll publish them for you." And so then low and behold [I] worked on the pictures when I got home and sent them over to her and she got the edit and they sent...they worked with a writer to interview me, for the pictures. So, it's funny how it all worked out.

**AU:** Yeah but it's also amazing like how far you know a photo can go.

**MA:** Right?! But that's why I felt like the power it was sort of like some power. Because I was doing that for myself and the only thing I could do was like take pictures. But then I was able to share those pictures with like their communities that they have. That was like really amazing. That's never happened before like that. And I felt like that was pretty cool. To see your voice, go out there and do something. And at least show that people are angry because of this. All these others but once you see pictures, you're like "Whoa! That happened." And even looking back now, I'm not going to forget. You know.

**AU:** So, as you mentioned before you're one of the five adoptees. But do you ever address the Asian or Asian American identity themes or histories in your art work? For example, in your album of *Illinois Network of Charter Schools* you photographed many different children with many different cultures. Does this have to do with identity?

**MA:** Interesting you brought that up. When I photographed the Illinois Network of Charter Schools that was actually a commission for the Illinois Network of Charter Schools. They hired me to visit some different schools to make photographs within them. So they can have an image

library to use photographs from. And I feel like when I have commissions it's like I'm working for someone, so they have a specific theme in mind. So I'm using my aesthetic or I guess my eye to give them something they're after. But the way I see it. And I think that's a little separate from like my personal art but, I have to say like I don't know if I have really have touched upon... I don't think I have any problems with like being Asian American or anything. Or I don't know, can you ask the question again?

**AU:** Yeah sure, so like being Asian do you, interpret- or do you bring any of your background, who you are?

**MA:** Oh okay, that's great! I am, on the surface, I was born in Korea, in Busan. 1987. But internally, all I know though of my identity is that growing in America. I am also, like I had, my parents are from the Midwest, and they're white so they grew up in that kind of existence. And that's the kind of life I grew up in. you know. So, I personally as a Korean adoptee, I don't have an influence of an Asian identity. Although on the surface I look like that, so one would assume that I you know, well I do now, know what kimchee is, bulgogi is, I know what banchan is. I'm getting more involved through food, but I don't have a Korean grandmother who told me stories, of the past, or anything. Like my mother is German-Irish. My dad is Swiss and Italian. So that's if anything, that's the influences that I've have.

**AU:** So, like in none of your art work, you have never incorporated any Asian American...

**MA:** Well that's with what I feel about this work, *Stranger Than a Family* is about, "Hey here's a bunch of like Asians and then two white parents living in the Midwest small like suburban home mowing the lawn. You know it's, although on the surface we look like very crazy, - like "Whoa what a unique family!" but actually under everything we are just like idk a Midwest family who likes sits and watches too much TV, and mows the lawn, and has birthdays. But at the same time, we are sort of unique too. My brother and sisters, have special needs ranging from neurofibromatosis, spina bifida, and blindness. And I don't think, well that's a big part of their life, but within the book, I didn't want to emphasize like "Oh here's their disability." No I wanted to show them as people. You know like living within a world and it's our small little world. And I think that's to sort of confront the opposite idea of "Hey they're Asian." Then I answer "Hey were American."

**AU:** Yeah, I completely understand.

**MA:** Right, like I feel, I have to be honest, I don't have a problem, I wish now out of all the other times in my life if I feel like through making that work, I came closer to my family. And before I was a bit more stand-offish. And through investigating my own family. I worked kind of like a detective, when I was taking the pictures. I became closer to them more than ever before. And it allowed me to develop a different relationship with them than I had and I liked it. When I was younger I did everything I could to get away from them. Like a lot of kids, you know. I mean

everyone wants to do that. But I think it was for different reasons maybe but also the normal reasons.

**AU:** Kind of like blood does not define family.

**MA:** Exactly. Blood, is...that is the biggest question I had so it's like, truth fully blood, no it doesn't, it doesn't define family. And that's what I like to challenge out there you know out there in the world. 'Cause now we are coming to a place where it's like- plus sometimes you have family members that you just hate. And it's like crap! They're my blood. But it's like "I don't like you at all."

**MA & AU** [Laughter]

**MA:** And then it redefines your ideas of what family can be.

**AU:** Yeah, it's a language issues of how you define certain words. It's how you use them.

**MA:** Exactly, so I hope that answers your question a little bit.

**AU:** Definitely, so you said earlier, you're not a writer, you hated writing-you cannot write.

**MA:** I cannot write. I wish I could- I mean I tried it just for what I want to communicate doesn't come out correct.

**AU:** Have you ever expressed yourself in any other medium? Like paintings, drawings?

**MA:** Of course, I mean like when I was younger I was drawing all the time and dabble in painting. But truthfully through painting or drawing I was always trying back then to represent reality. And what I found was that I couldn't. you know how some people can look at a still life then BOOM draw that like a picture. And that's what I was trying to do. I didn't actually know that you can have things not look right and that show you actually want it to look. To be a little abstract or expressionist. I had no clue what those words meant, when I was doing this. But I was always trying to make the real thing. And I couldn't. So, that's why I found photography so great. I could make it look like reality 'cause it is, it's an image from reality! I guess that answers your question. But I found in a different medium that when I was managing the gallery David Weinberg of photography, it's the job that I got right out of college. And the gallery is in River North now it's called Weinberg/Newton Gallery. And he gave me the opportunity to create a space called The Coat Check. In the back of the gallery. We had two small rooms. And through that I was able to have a curatorial practice. Where I invited artists in to create exhibitions upon themes that I got to choose. And it was for me, that was a new medium. Working within this white cube to communicate these artist's ideas. And putting different artists together to find a singular thread that they are all interested in. Not only that but selecting the work with the artists and then putting them together. We made newsprints for each exhibition so instead of a catalog, we had this cool design newsprint with an interview. And their picture in a poster, on the back. Yeah, it's really cool, I found, that was the right combination of management and all these things

I'm interested collaborative [work] and working with people together to create this visual experience within a space.

**AU:** Speaking of themes, what themes do you hope to pursue in your art?

**MA:** It's cool you brought that up because I've talked a lot about *Stranger Than a Family*. Because that's five years of my art practice. But through that time, I made a work called "There's just no telling" which is like ephemeral images, sort of feels like fleeting of youth. And I made that work in reaction to leaving school. And when I was working on family work it was very stringent, made it very formal. Used slow camera, it was a medium format, film camera. So, you had to take a lot of time to take one picture. And then I found this point and shoot, 35 millimeter camera that's smaller than the palm of your hand. But you can take it everywhere. And I found myself being attracted to these moments of spontaneity and that was going past your eye in a split second. And in which you're able to capture it. But that, through making those pictures it actually influenced my family work. Because when I came back it, I found that I was looking for something else within it. Like a different kind of picture. So in all, it all influences each other. And I feel like where I'm at now, I'm working on this body work, that you see on this wall over here. It's currently titled "Trip," but for me I think, I actually don't know what it's about yet. That's why there's pictures on the wall. I think it's sort of where its coming from and how I'm making it that's actually from a place of love. Like just as much as I made my family work. Because from the past 3 years I fell in love with this amazing woman named, Agathe, and she's now my wife. We just got married back in August. And I guess it's sort of an exploration and continuation of a new family to be made. But these are the pictures that I'm now making. They are sort of darker, they are all black and white as you can see. And I don't know I'm sort of exploring the cosmos more a little bit. And the ideas of manifestation of how you can think of an idea externally. And either verbalize it, write it down, and how you can bring that idea to life. And make it a reality from an idea within your mind. So it's a little different, it's not whole yet, I don't even truthfully know what it's about because that's what I think it's about. But I need to show it to others to see what they are reading from the pictures. Because I can say all I want but if the pictures aren't communicating that, then it's not successful.

**AU:** Wow! You answered a lot of other questions that I wanted to ask, and that's good.

**MA:** No, no keep going! That's good! I mean that means you're making good questions because they are feeding off the others.

**AU:** So, I'll read the two questions, so one was telling me a little bit about the meaning of "There's just no telling," and then later it would be what are you currently working on?

**MA:** Oh yes! We were just totally covering that. Yeah! I just have to say "There's just no telling," was a fun thing that I needed to do. And basically, it was an experiment for me. It was an experiment of a new way of approaching photography. And that's what it was. I had a lot of really good fun making that work. Because it was basically me being a young person, going out, and having a job but then being out of college, and having money for the first time in my life. Because I did not have a lot of money, I started working when I was fifteen years old. Just so I could afford my own cell phone. And it was a track phone. Put a card in there! Twenty bucks!

YES!! I can text like a hundred times! So I worked my ass off and through my entire life, and for the first time I had a salary. I was like “Whoa! I have a salary, I can afford to buy drinks and go out.” So it was like, I always had my camera on me, and would take pictures, and that’s what I’m going to photograph. And I’m going to give my family a break from taking pictures. And eventually I was, I found I was searching for this, feeling within the image. And then I realized that this feeling was an idea of something fleeting. Something moving. I’m going to capture this action, this moment in time where you know there’s movement implied. And at that time, I caught the tension. And in that time I was in search of the tension. And when I completed that work I had a show, it was actually the first body work that I ever closed the book on. It was so to say “Okay this work is done!” and I could use everything that I learned. And everything from that work “There’s just no telling,” and able to come back to my family work. Start making pictures of that again. So it’s an experiment, try it, feel it out, okay, take what I learned, take it back. So it’s like an experiment. Have a hypothesis, something you’re trying to find, then for me it’s not like science. It’s more fun.

**AU:** Yeah but it came out really good!

**MA:** Thank you!

**AU:** And then currently you’re working on...this work.

**MA:** Yeah, this “Trip” work. It’s weird, I- you can come back to me when it’s like more solidified. I have weird pictures here; you can look for yourself. I’m not just making, or finding pictures, I’m also creating them too now. But I want them to feel a bit absent of my hands. For example, this sphere, which is actually a chrome ball in the middle of the forest, I was wandering around the forest with this chrome sphere, I call it an orb, it’s reflective of everything around it, I find it very interesting of how you can see 360 degrees by looking at this orb, and it’s actually a scientific principle of how light bends. Then the matches, could be in nature, but it’s actually a photograph I made in the studio. But it fits within everything.

**AU:** Its very interesting.

**MA:** Yeah, we will see where it goes. I wish I could tell you more, I mean I don’t know what you think about it?

**AU:** I think it’s a journey of finding yourself, through the works of nature. I see a lot of trees, and when, for example, when I go out, when I don’t want to be bothered with the world, I go to a forest preserve or a park, and I try to find a meaning of something, or how to fix something. And the one at the bottom, those are matches right? I see a whole flame around you- surrounding you, and you’re trying to get out. That’s how I see it.

**MA:** That’s cool, that’s awesome that you instantly applied fire, but they are not lit yet. But that’s cool!

**AU:** The stones in the water, I find those as stepping stones finding yourself and trying to take that one more step to go further. The clouds, was that an airplane?

**MA:** [Shakes head no] That's crazy out of nowhere, I felt like there was a space ship that drew the clouds to the sky.

**AU:** Yeah like that, I find you're shooting to where you want to be. That's how I see this project, but-

**MA:** Yeah that's cool! That's great! I'm happy about that, you're the first person, that I've asked, what do you think these are about? That's cool. I haven't printed these out or anything. And I did this just a few days ago.

**AU:** But it looks like it's coming along productively.

**MA:** Thank you.

**AU:** Let's ask one more question, when you texted me that you were going to Detroit, was that for a photography job?

**MA:** Yes!

**AU:** Do you want to talk about that?

**MA:** Sure! Yeah, so I'm able to make a living through my photography, I'm very grateful for that. And I do that by, a lot of different ways. On Tuesday, that when we were going to have the interview, a good friend of mine Todd, he got a job from Fast Company magazine, and he needed a ride to go to Detroit, so I basically ended up assisting him, and driving him out to Detroit. So that he can go photograph, and I can go help him out there. And yeah, made a couple bucks, but yeah besides that I [shooting for different magazines, my bread and butter gig is for Crate and Barrel, and I shoot with their e-commerce studio. It's like when you do your on-line shopping at Crate and Barrel, and if you see any picture, that's what I take pictures of. They are totally different from this! Hahaha, right?

**AU:** Ha-ha yes! I was like hmm? But yeah, I saw those, they came out so well developed, because like I said earlier I love bright photographs and that's what drew me.

**MA:** Cool, yeah you know it's like I'm just trying to find my path. I think everybody is trying to do that in life. And I'm trying to figure out a way to use the skills that God gave me, and that I've homed to find to make a buck from it, and be able to afford and make art at the same time. Cause I don't find my editorial work, or my commercial work as art. I know some people that work like that, but to me that's like commission. And my true art, is something I make for myself, and I'm able to separate that. I mean is someone wants to say something different about that, that's totally cool with me!

**AU:** Yeah whenever I talk about photography or even art in general I come back to the phrase, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." And in sophomore year of high school, I did- it was a personal project, we were required to do, so we had to pick something that we love. And I loved

photography. And my advisor who was to help me through out, she would always mention, “What are these photos? What are you trying to say?” And it always put me down. But then I talked to another person, for help and to get their second opinion, and she told me beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You can’t let anyone tell you what beauty is, like we said “What is family? Well what’s beauty to you?”

**MA:** Absolutely and also you know, whoever your advisor was, the best thing she could have done was actually tell you what your pictures are communicating. Just like with what you just did! And not saying what you want them to be about, or ask me what they should be about. But what you’re reading, and what’s being communicated through the pictures. I think that’s the best thing you can get. Because it’s still going to be her opinion of it, but everyone, you can take the same picture, with different people, there will be some commonalities, but there still will be major differences. I think it’s very interesting in this day of age where we are at right now. With Instagram, social media, newsfeeds, etc., and we are constantly bombarded with images. But I think it should be important of how images are read. And how that pictures are not truthful. And that we should understand the limitations of what can be communicated within an image. Especially also when you put text next to it.

**AU:** Kind of like the focus of the lens, but what’s happening around.

**MA:** Yeah you have to understand well this is framed. And it’s like what’s outside the frame? What’s the context of this? I think it’s very important now. And I feel like in our education kids should be taught how to read a picture. How to understand what you’re looking at. What’s beyond that?

**AU:** Yeah! I’ve learned that my junior year in the art class that I’ve taken. I took three years of that class, and in my junior year that’s when I started to actually understand what art is, and how other people see. And that’s why I appreciate art so much now. And I question the question.

**MA:** Yeah you should! I feel like in America, I mean that’s being a part of American, you should be able to question what you’re seeing.

**AU:** Yeah but some people don’t take that.

**MA:** Yeah, it’s like what you just want to swallow everything you’re given? Yeah that’s not the place we want to be. And I have to be honest, like my wife is French and she criticizes everything. And at times I’m like “Oh my gosh,” but then other times it’s like no that’s what being alive and being free is about. It’s about to question and criticize anything that is going on. Because if you look back into the history of man what are the points that you can’t question or criticize what is going on. And those are major times of oppression.

**AU:** Yeah and if you don’t criticize or question what will be done?

**MA:** Exactly, exactly.

**AU:** Alright well thank you!

**MA:** Thank you very much Alicia! This was excellent. A very good conversation.

**AU:** It was very successful! I've learned so much!

**MA:** High five!

**AU:** Yeah!

**MA:** Boom!

**AU:** And we're out!

**MA:** Au revoir!

**END**