

3-20-2017

Mayumi Lake Interview

Raegen Balton-Watkins
DePaul University, ideallife87@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Balton-Watkins, Raegen, "Mayumi Lake Interview" (2017). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. 99.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/99

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian American Art Oral History Project at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Art Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.

Interviewer: Raegen Balton-Watkins
Artist: Mayumi Lake
Location: In person - Chicago, IL.
Date: February 23,2017



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter Quarter 2017 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio:

“Mayumi Lake is a Chicago-based artist. Her photography and video work delve into childhood and pubescent dreams, phobia and desires. She employs herself and others as her models, as well as dolls, toys, weapons, vintage clothes, and altered landscape as her props.” - <http://mayumilake.com/about.html>

BFA, 1997, MFA, 2000, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Exhibitions/screenings: Miyako Yoshinaga Gallery, Asia Society, Art in General, Artists Space, New York; Fotografie Forum International, Frankfurt; Cornelius Pleser Galerie, Munich; Director's Lounge, Berlin; Bangkok International Art Festival, Bangkok; Galleria PaciArte, Brescia; FOTOAMERICA, Santiago; Ellen Curlee Gallery, St. Louis; O Gallery, Tokyo. Monograph: *Poo-Chi*, One Picture Book #55 (Nazraeli Press). Publications: *The Erotic Doll* (Yale Univ Press); *MUSE*; *Eyemazing Magazine*; *European Photography*; *The Village Voice*; *Contemporary Magazine*; *Art Asia Pacific*; *Lib_Doc: Journeys in the Performance of Sex Art* (Masca). Awards: Illinois Art Council Artist Fellowship; Photo-Eye Award; Bruce Goodman Fellowship.

Interview Transcript:

Raegen Balton-Watkins: Where were you born? I know that you are Japanese. Were you born in America or Japan?

Mayumi Lake: Japan, yes.

RBW: Now, did you attend school here?

ML: Yes, I did. I actually came to Chicago to attend SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].

RBW: So you came here in college?

ML: Yeah, I already had a degree before but I always wanted to start the arts. When I was graduating high school, I kind of got chickened out and I thought I was never going to get money or a job, so I had two choices. I wanted to study art or I wanted to study English. I asked my high school advisor which one I should go through and he said I should study English when I was younger, because art, you can do at any age. So, I took his advice. My first degree is in English language. I studied linguistics.

RBW: Wow, interesting!

RBW: You came here just for school and you decided to stay?

ML: Yeah. First I was a continuing studies student, and then I applied to undergrad and they took a lot of my credits from my first college. So I didn't have to do a full four years. Then I went to another grad school, one year, and I came back here and finished my MFA and I worked as a staff. Now I'm teaching.

RBW: I guess taking your teachers advice was a good idea.

ML: Oh yeah, yeah, he changed my life.

RBW: What would you categorize your art as or yourself as? Do you think your work reflects you?

ML: Uh, yeah. I think my work is sort of always, autobiographical. It reflects my culture. I try to deny it sometimes but it comes out anyways, so I decided this is who I am and... One time I tried to wipe out all the Asian-ness, Japanese-ness but people still say they can still guess, at least, I am Asian. This must be the heart of who I am. I should not deny it. It is always kind of like a mirror of who I am.

RBW: Well, that leads to my next question. Do you consider you work Asian or Asian American?

ML: I don't know. I always go back to that question and state of mind. Sometimes I don't even want people to think about, I'm a female artist...it's an additional thing that

you put on. I should be an artist but I don't want to be like an Asian artist, Asian/female artist, Asian/female/immigrant artist.

RBW: You want to be considered an artist by yourself, without the other labels on it?

ML: Yes. We do this much less to male artists, much less...much less additional names. Females have additional names...

RBW: Do you think you can steer away from that?

ML: My drama is that, even if I try to steer away from that and be natural, an artist, some things just always come out and I can't really help it, so it's a constant drama. It's very interesting.

RBW: Because of that, do you feel like you are not necessarily free to express your creativity completely, or do you feel like you have to fit into a box of being a female artist or of being an Asian artist, in order for people to recognize your work?

ML: Mmm, I don't want to. It's like...putting a label. It's easy for the people to see the work. People always want to categorize who you are...if people have to say Asian American female artist, that's too simple. If you flip it from our side, it's much more complex.

RBW: Do you think that takes away from whatever your goal is, whatever piece you're working on? Saying that you're female or Asian just takes away from the meaning of your work, because they're not just looking at your work for itself?

ML: They have a premade idea of the work that they're seeing and then they don't go beyond that, I think in most cases, it works against my work. Maybe for some people it works, it helps them but for me, it's most likely against it, against my work. It's funny, the work I am making, I'm trying to make it more Asian as possible. Undeniably Asian. Very obviously Asian.

RBW: So your new work is more what you really want, to hit somebody on the head? This is really Asian art! Before, you didn't feel like you were leaning towards that.

ML: No. This is like, who I am. Between a back-and-forth, so that now I want to do things as Asian as possible. It's my roots.

RBW: Like a pendulum, back-and-forth?

ML: Yeah.

RBW: I looked at your work, on your website and it's really, really cool. I noticed that you have a lot of descriptions of your work but "Poo-Chi" (1999–2000) didn't really have any descriptions on the website. I was wondering if that was intentional, because I was told in class, that the work was a little confrontational at the time.

ML: I think I forgot to put it on the website. I thought I put it in my statement but also, it has its own story by itself and then, maybe... three years ago I updated my website, and at the time I didn't want to put a statement on "Poo-Chi" because to me it's old work and it has its own baggage... I don't know if you read about it, but it was the book that I publish using Poo-Chi that was used in the Michael Jackson case. It was evidence when they searched the house. In 2005, there was a scandal. They found my book, among other nude books. I don't know if it's true, but my students mother, who is watching court TV said they found a 13-year-old boy's fingerprints on one of the pages in my book.

RBW: But it wasn't what they thought it was!

ML: First they thought it was, oh my God, a pedophilia book by an Asian artist and then eventually they realized that, oh, this is an armpit.

RBW: So that leads me to my next question What inspired that idea? How did you get inspired, or what made you think of this idea? I mean, this was definitely your goal, you wanted people to think that this was a vagina?

ML: Yeah, well I wanted to challenge the taboo... Considering the child body as a sexual thing is a no-no thing. Still is. I wanted to use that as a trick, to trick the people. What they see, is all that is in their mind. So, it's a matter of what they think about.

RBW: It's their own perversion?

ML: Yeah. I'm just providing a mirror, to make them think that, you are the one that has a dirty mind because it is just an armpit. I'm only doing a suggestion.

ML: [Marcel] Duchamp is one of my favorite artists, his final piece... *Ètant donnés*, I think it's English title is, *Given*. You look through a peephole and there is the cent bodies and dolls laying with their legs wide open. It was a fake thing but it looks, to me, very real... and that's also where my idea is coming from.

RBW: What exhibit are you most proud of?

ML: The most proud... was *Ex Post Facto* (2008). In that series I am dressing as an American girl scout and going back in time like time travel, trying to save my grandfather, to change my family's history. Cause when I did the show, I was working six days a week and I only had one day off. I was working five days as a school administrator at SAIC and one day as a teacher. I only had one day off. And produced work for the exhibition during nights and that one day off. I literally started to loose my mind after...when I was getting ready for the show. I didn't sleep for maybe, three or four weeks. I started to hear a baby's voice...

RBW: You were going delirious?

MY: Yeah. It was very hard, but I finished through the production... I was so proud to complete the project, many sleepless nights but it paid off. So that was my most proud, in terms of being a working artist. I have attached memories because it goes through the

history of my life. The other one is my last show because it was a very hard subject matter.

RBW: What was the last subject matter?

ML: It was called *Latent Heat* (2014). This series was my reaction to the witnessing of the 2011 earthquake in Japan [2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan]... I also had a lot of weird illness, death around me in the U.S and my family in Japan, at the time. So, I was just thinking about the world that I know ending. I wanted to get ready for those endings. Every photograph from this series is like a movie ending scene. It's very dramatic but it's almost like, right before the movie title goes, END. This series was also hard to make because I could not do any images after I saw all those horrifying earthquake aftermath. Most of my work has been constructed landscapes, or constructed reality, but seeing the aftermath was like a slap in my face. No matter how hard I try to replicate reality, I can't really...that reality... I can't win it, or I can't change it. It's kind of like a hopeless feeling. I just couldn't make any work...after seeing it on TV and hearing the people's story. It was just too much. I could do other, fun shooting but...but it took me three years, to go back to face the camera, to put in the feeling into the image. That was very hard to do that and it was also, in that way, I'm conquering my fear, to be able to photograph.

RBW: Do you feel like it was therapeutic then?

ML: Yes, it was very therapeutic.

RBW: Was there a point where you felt like, wow I'm an artist? I'm a real artist, I made it? What was that point?

ML: I found my work in completely unrelated people's sight. Then I thought, oh, these people recognize me as an artist. So, maybe that's a moment. But I still feel like, I have not completely made it. You know, I still have a job. I still struggle every day to come up with time to go to my studio. Because I have a day job and bills to pay. You know, that kind of thing? In that case, financially, I don't think I've made it, but maybe the more and more I find my name in completely random people's websites, saying this person likes Mayumi Lake's work...

RBW: And when you heard Michael Jackson had the book of your photos...

ML: I was like, whoa, I made it! This isn't a normal pathway for artists, but I made it in that way. Maybe, but that was kind of a weird experience. I don't know if that's called, the moment I feel like I made it. Maybe another one is when I was asked to publish my graduate thesis work, "Poo-Chi," as a monograph, I thought maybe I'm going to make it...

RBW: Maybe not financially, but what about just with your art, by itself?

ML: I don't make as much as I use to anymore, because after the earthquake thing, It's still like, it's still hard. I feel like my motivation is not as high. If I was asked to do the

same thing, the same amount of work that I did for that show before, when I was working six days, I don't think that I could do it... I'm still dealing with it.

RBW: Does that mean that you're not currently working on anything or are you just playing with some ideas?

ML: Last year I started to think I have to do a new thing. I am currently in the Chicago Artist Coalition Residency, it's one of the Chicago artists local residencies. They ask you to make a proposal to do new work. I decided... that's the one I wanting to do as Asian as possible. I've been doing all these to the "photography" format with frames for the last 10 years. I used to do video, installation, all of those fun things. I kind of want to go back to that direction, because a photo still has that heavy connotation to me, like a reality. I can't really conquer... I can't really beat that actual reality... so I wanted to do, a little bit more relaxed and fun things. I'm doing a paper cut out collages. I'm still using a photo. I'm trying to make the vision of Eden, of heaven or a heavenly thing because my last two works were about death and ending. I completely shifted it, everything is pink and its flowers.. It's about life and the cycles of life... I've been collecting kimonos and I'm also interested in the old habits that people no longer practice. The kimono is one of those. After World War II nobody really wears it anymore as a daily basis. It's becoming a special thing. No one knows how to wear it. I had to take of classes to learn how to wear it...

RBW: Are you using kimonos in your work?

ML: I have all those kimonos that I've collected over the years and I was a bit curious about a certain flower pattern, often used in little girls kimonos. Those are very stylized flower patterns. I researched it and that flower design is coming from a small really old architectural flower pattern that people believed to be bloomed in the Nirvana. Those flower was often used to decorate inside of sacred buildings in ancient times, around 10-12th centuries. I'm re-creating those flowers using the kimono design for girls. I am scanning the flower in high resolution, prints in various sizes, cutting them out by hand, and assembling. Cutting a photo is uh...I've never done it...because it's a photo, you don't chop it up. It's very different, it's more physical. I wanted to go back to more physical things because everything, my photos have been a constructed reality and it's more imaginary. Something you cannot touch it. And now, that's why I want to do, chopping of the paper, using glue guns and wires, I am enjoying the physicality of the process.

RBW: You're going to take some time to play?

ML: Yeah. It's still very new to me. But that's what I'm working on.

RBW: Do you have any idea when your next show may be?

ML: This work, I am supposed to show it this November, in the Chicago Artists Coalition. It's a very slow process because it's like re-learning how to make 2D art into 3D – figuring out glue A or glue B, tape A or tape B. So, I feel like I'm learning a new thing and going back to childhood.

RBW: Do you feel like the opportunities have changed or stay the same in the last few years for Asian or Asian American artist?

ML: I think it's all the same. When I was in grad school, one of my teachers said Japanese artists, it's always going to be that in a special category, not in main stream. I resisted at the time, but I have to admit I now see what he was saying. I don't think the situation has not changed. However, There's more Asian/Asian American artist around. They are being more vocal, more visible, which is very good. But, in terms of recognition, still, it's still the same.

RBW: Do you think that Asian/ Asian American artists need to create Asian work is still the same?

ML: It's actually... part of the reason why I took the "Asianess..." is that I feel guilty, because it's like, I'm Asian, this is a sales point. It's like I'm a female, look at my body. To me, it was a very... not cheesy but it was too simple. Not too simple... What is the word..? Sly?

RBW: Well, was it that you want to not say that you're a female and not say that you're Asian because you felt that saying that was too easy?

ML: Not too easy... I guess I'm not saying that well... Too easy for people to read, because we still have a stereotype and the stereotype comes with stereotypical images, like all Asians should be good at math... An interesting thing is, someone came to my studio when I was a grad student, when I was not there. They peeked through my space and there was no sign that Mayumi Lake is Asian or even my name. That person said, "is she Asian." No, "Is she Japanese?" I've been thinking about why. What is it, too obvious? Am I using that easy symbolism? Japanese, cheesy, kitschy, pink, or you know, whatever those things...

RBW: How do you feel now? Do you feel like you're following a certain stereotype now to identify with being Japanese in your work in order to...because you said, you're going really Asian right now? Do you feel like there is a stereotype that you have to follow, what Americans think Asian work is, in order to create this "Asian" work?

ML: I think that I'm playing with it. Not for this one. This one is more like a... I'm not using kind of whatever those Japanese things... I'm not doing this anime thing, I'm not doing this cartoon thing... long time before Wabi Sabi decay esthetics, there were bright colors, flowers, it was very Asia. Those silk patterns came from Middle East, transformed in Asia and Japan specific ways. It's no longer part of people's stereotype that they know now. I kind of want to bring that back.

RBW: You're bringing back a little of the old Asia?

ML: The forgotten, yeah. Maybe because I'm interested in that people have forgotten the habit. Even we, the Japanese forgot of what we use to do like decorate inside, like a bright red, flowers and all those saturated colors...

RBW: Is there anything you want to add that I did not ask you?

ML: I was talking to one of my students who saw my work, and she was asking for her work, “How much Asian or of my cultural background should I put. How much is too much? If I do this, this, this and this, do you think it’s too much?” I was very curious about what made her think that, because that is who she is. That kind of reminds me of how I used to think. If I put too much of my culture, it looks cheesy, or it looks like a “Look at my culture!” sort of thing. We all hesitate to show those things. I don’t know, it’s very difficult, balancing. If you do too much, then nobody will understand about this contemporary issue, that the artist might want to raise up. Oh, it’s formal or historical, it’s nostalgic. It’s a very interesting question, that thing... Do you want them to understand as knowledge or do you want them to understand as an experience? That’s why that kind of hesitation is coming. I don’t feel like I am the representative of the Japanese culture... but it’s undeniably in you. So, how do you show were that is a reflection of who you are? How do you categorize who you are? How much do you show and how much do you not show? It’s a very interesting thing. It happens in every culture, every foreign culture, everywhere in the world. People will see it; some people will see it as a very surface a stereotype. Then you have to fight with that and if you want to do anything beyond that, people think you are making a point, you are... it’s a very challenging thing to think about and now, today’s world it’s more complicated. Now Asian is not only Asian, right? Asian born Asian, Asian American, or like even the Japanese people, third, fourth, sixth generation Japanese immigrants... Who are they? Are they Japanese? Are they American? How do you define who you are? If you’re mixed race background, how do you define that?

RBW: So, what did you end up telling your student?

ML: I said, just be honest about who you are and then show it, what you want it to show. And she did.

END.