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Magdalena Arguelles Interview

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Interviewer: Gabriela Porras
Artist: Magdalena Arguelles
In-Person Interview: Artists' household
Date: May 3, 2013, 10:30 AM

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design. The interview was approved by the artist for publication in September 2017.

Artist Bio:

Magdalena Arguelles was born in 1963 in Iloilo City, Philippines. Her family moved to the United States when she was six and a half years old. Arguelles studied at the Art Institute where she developed her passion for still lifes and landscapes, which she incorporates in her lovely collages. Believing that art is an extension of herself, Magdalena uses her style of art to recreate a memory, or to address more serious issues such as immigration.

Interview Transcript:

Gabriela Porras: Can you tell me about yourself?

Magdalena Arguelles: My date of birth is April 10, 1963, so I'm 50 years old and I was born in Iloilo City, Philippines. I came here when I was about 6 and a half. I didn't come to Chicago first; my parents immigrated to Montreal, Canada. They didn't realize they had to speak French fairly well to work there, so they kind of went into culture shock. They moved to Toronto for two years, then came to Chicago afterwards because we had relatives here. My dad always wanted to be American--watching the Olympics, he would get so proud because the Americans always won all the gold medals! [laughs] I grew up in Chicago and went to Lane Tech high school. I then went to Bradley University for a year, I ran track there for one year, and then decided that Peoria wasn't really where I wanted to be nor did they have what I wanted to study, so I went to Boston to study pharmacy, which is what my profession is. That's my day-job. While I was in pharmacy school, I wanted to study art. I got into the Museum of Fine Arts Program at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Art Institute, and soon after I realized that I wanted to come home and study at the Art Institute [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].

GP: How would you define your art and yourself?

MA: I would define my art as autobiographical. First I started doing a lot of the traditional stuff-- landscape, still lifes-- and then for a period I went into this big memory painting time where I was looking at old photographs, doing paintings of family and immigration issues. From there I went back to still life and landscape because I connect to it visually and historically; I love the painters of that time period, like Matisse, of course. [laughs] So I am sort of stuck between those two worlds. I keep going between addressing immigration issues and being Asian American, but

then also incorporating them with more traditional methods of art. I consider my artwork an extension of myself.

GP: When, how and why did you first get involved with art? When did you become an artist?

MA: When I was growing up, I would always see my dad painting on the weekends. He was a civil engineer by profession, and he had four kids. He didn't have a lot time to paint, but every so often he would pull out the easel and do this Philippine scene, and work at it until it was done, and then you wouldn't see him paint for a while. I grew up seeing this happen over and over again, and when I got into high school I dated this guy whose mother was an artist. We were always going to the art museums, gallery openings, and modeling for her art classes, so that gave me that exposure too. I never meant to go to art school, but when I was deciding what to do for college I told my dad, "I kinda want to study art history", but he said, "I don't think that's a good idea...I'm not a rich man and I need you to make money after this. [laughs] You know, you're not gonna get a job". He was sort of right and even though I was frustrated, I chose to follow his advice and go to pharmacy school, which worked out well because I was able to send myself to art school afterwards, so that's how I got started. I also had a fourth grade teacher named Ms. Wasserman who took us to the Art Institute three or four times a year on the CTA! There were like thirty of us on the CTA! [laughs] It was awesome. She made us pick an artist that we wanted to write about so that was the beginning. Of course, my pick was Renoir, [laughs] I loved Renoir! So I think that year, you know when your young and impressionable, that's what set the tone. As a result I loved going to the art museum unlike my kids who hate going to the art museum! [laughs]

GP: Obviously your dad was a big part of your life. Can you tell us more about your artistic influences?

MA: I didn't think of it at the time, but I think seeing my dad working and doing art just because it was a compulsion for him. He never went to art school. He had those little books from the 50's that were like, "Learn to Draw" or "Learn to Paint". [laughs] So I think that I just saw that that was doable, even though he would have never thought of being a professional painter just because he thought that that was frivolous and he needed to work to support his kids. And so I've had to do that for a long time; I've also had to work at my day job and do art on the side, although my first love would be art. My other influences would be Josie Taliante, which was the mother of my boyfriend in high school, who lived this artist life, who raised five kids. I still am in contact with her, and every so often we e-mail and I ask her, "How did you do it? How did you raise five kids and send them all to college?" Her kids are really great though, they sought their own money for college, they weren't spoiled, they all worked, so it worked out for her in terms of providing for her family even as an artist. So those are my personal influences. And I've met a bunch of really great teachers along the way, Susan Crout at the Art Institute, Judy Koon, and notably Julia Fish. She was a teacher at the Art Institute, and now she is a teacher at UIC. She was amazing. She was the professional, she wore a lab coat! [laughs] Her whole approach to art was that it was her profession and what she loved to do, and she devoted her energy, time, and passion into all of it. It was nice to see that it wasn't just a hobby for her.

GP: Can you tell us about your dad's artwork?

MA: The one's that I have are all pictures of the countryside in the Philippines. I recently went back with my mother, I took her home about a year ago, and I didn't remember much because the last time I had visited was in high school, but when I came back as an adult it hit me in the face. All the stuff that my dad had been painting all these years was of his homeland. He would draw from pictures, memory, from postcards, but it was also places that he had spent a lot of time on. He owned farmland, and still does, so these mountains **[Figure 1]** that he paints are actually in the land that he owns. When I went back, I got off that plane and got on a bus to where the farm was, and I was totally overcome because I felt like he was there. So that was really a great experience. I want to go back to paint, but I have to win the lottery first. [laughs]

GP: What is your work process? Is there a specific message you wish to relay through your artwork and process?

MA: I don't always have a message in my artwork, because sometimes I just want to do a still life when I want to concentrate on the light, the color, or the mood of that particular moment. But when I do have a message or feel like I need to discuss something it usually relates to immigration. I read a lot of books about the immigration experience and assimilation process that goes on for immigrants, so I keep that in mind and keep in mind what most Filipino families went through and specifically what my family went through. I had a friend who was telling me that when she first came to America she had never felt "grass inside before", referring to the household shag carpets that were popular in the 60's and 70's, because we didn't have carpeting in the Philippines. So sometimes stuff like that comes out in my paintings that are more immigration-based. Most recently though, I just finished a whole series of still lifes and windows. So I was focusing on the whole relationship about the person being inside and looking out. Or when you're traveling locally, abroad, or domestically in the United States, you're looking into people's windows as you're passing by and you're sort of like the voyeur looking in. So you're always trying to imagine the drama that is going on the other side, so that was the whole dialogue that I had going on in this group of paintings. Now I'm ready to move on to the next set of pieces. I've been looking at a lot of old, black and white pictures of my grandfather's funeral all based in the city called Iloilo. Iloilo was a city that was built in the 1600's by the Spaniards, so there they have these beautiful, old churches that have been living on for a long time. So looking at that, and looking at how the Filipino's history has progressed I try to find a way to put these ideas into the next series of paintings.

GP: In 2008, you were a part of the *Beyond the Barrelman* (Mercury Cafe Gallery, Chicago, IL) exhibition. How did pieces like "Rice Field" and "Laid to Rest" correlate with the intention of that exhibit?

MA: I think *Beyond the Barrelman* exhibit was about who you are as a Filipino. "Laid to Rest" was about my grandmother being laid to rest and all daughters and their brother had come

together as a family for her funeral. So it was just a memory piece that I did that I also incorporated a still life to. "*Rice Field*" [Figure 2] was a photograph of my sister and a cousin, and my cousin was hanging on to her. I remember that picture being taken because she was really annoyed that she had this arm around her neck! [laughs] And we were in this huge rice field! I mean it was just this amazing space for a 6-year-old. So that was a great memory for me, and then we left all of that to come here. Sometimes it felt like a dream. So I think that fit into the whole immigration thing and going back to try to remember your memory of the old country.

GP: Are there Asian American themes in your artwork?

MA: Absolutely. I always go back to a lot of the memory photographs, the old photographs that we've had in the family, so that's always a reference point for me. And so even with this new set of paintings, I am using the photographs from my grandfather's funeral. Funerals are huge in the Philippines, especially because he was a police commissioner so it was a huge event. It will also be interesting to see old Ilo Ilo because it was a different place back then; all the old stuff is being covered by this new junk. Kind of like a Times Square but on a much smaller scale.

GP: What does being Asian American mean to you?

MA: It just means that I came from a different place, and that I have had a different experience than somebody who grew up here. Also, that my parents struggled to make everything okay because they came from nothing. A lot of these people came from nothing, and somehow they managed to go to school back home because an older brother sent them to school, because what used to happen was if you had a brother that had an okay job and you were sent to school, then you would help the next line of kin to go to school and so on. They didn't really have the resources to send their kids to college, and they didn't have grants or scholarships, so that was the way they did it. Knowing that I came from that... you don't want your kids to forget that. I admire the people who are willing to do whatever it takes to make their lives or their children's lives happy.

END.



Figure 1: Some of Jose F. Arguelles' work.



Figure 2: *Rice Fields*, Magdalena Arguelles