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Tony Moy Interview

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Interviewer: Sarah Song
Artist: Tony Moy
Location: Via phone - Chicago, IL.
Date: May 22, 2018



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 Spring Quarter 2018 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio:

Tony Moy is a mixed media artist who focuses on watercolor and Gouache living in downtown Chicago. He has published art in books from the X-files, Dungeons and Dragons, Tome I & II, Memory Collectors and among others. In addition, Tony has over 10 years of teaching experience and currently teaches illustration and design at the School of the Art Institute. His inspiration comes from studying traditional and classic watercolorists combined with the modern influences of pop culture comics, anime and fantasy. <https://www.tonymoy.art/about-me>

Interview Transcript:

Sarah Song: To start off, tell me about yourself and your background.

Tony Moy: (giggles)

SS: I know that's a hard question.

TM: That's a loaded question. Well in education, I got a bachelor in biology. I was premed for a while. After that, I went to get my MBA. I got my MBA in marketing and e-commerce at Loyola. And after that, I worked at Kraft's Food for a while working on internet and marketing and did some packaging concepts for Oscar Meyer and Mac and Cheese. After that I ended up working at a comic book store a little bit for Dungeons and Dragons and then I had a tough time with art right away and just ended up going to teaching at the Illinois Institute of Art. I ended up starting my own company for a while. We did websites and mobile apps; went in and did a lot of programming, design work, and things like that.

SS: Well what moved you to jump from being in pre-med and wanting to be in the medical field to pursuing art?

TM: Well, initially...it wasn't necessarily jumping *to* art. There are a lot of professions you can choose where you can look back on and you can be like "I am an accountant today, but I've always wanted to be a musician or I'm an architect, but I've always wanted to be a teacher. But I felt like if I was going down the road I had serious experiences with art and what not that I was like well you really shouldn't do that if your going to be in medicine, if your going to be a doctor. You don't want to get ready to go into heart surgery and go "you know what I always wanted to draw comic books." That's one of the few professions where that has to be your primary focus and passion. I've realized that it was a passion that was competing and I just couldn't see myself do both. The other part was that the big reason why I medicine and being a doctor and what not was for me was that I just wanted to affect people, I wanted to do something that was empathic, help someone in some way. At the time, the best way to impact someone was to save their life, right? But I had a few experiences where I had some art and it inspires other, its always drawings, and I realized that art is another way you can inspire and improve and impact and affect. By that virtue, art and being creative has always played a role.

SS: How would you define or categorize your art or yourself as an artist?

TM: On my business card currently, it says water colorist and comic book artist. I guess that's the simplest way to categorize myself.

SS: Yes, that's a perfect.

SS: In our Asian American Art class, we always discuss different backgrounds and cultures. My father is Chinese and my mother is Vietnamese, in class we talk about how being raised in an Asian household is always difficult to want to pursue dreams like art. We all have generational differences with our parents, so what was your experience with pursuing art?

TM: Well, I'm slightly lucky but I do understand that Asian experience really well. My mom came when she was in her teens so she still retains a lot of the sort of traditional core values of an Asian. My dad came when he was five, and if you didn't look at him, you would not be able to tell he has traditional values or East Asian to that extent. So for my mom's side, I don't believe she's ever complimented or supported or encouraged that sort of art. In fact, I'm the oldest of four. I remember once I told them I didn't want to go to med school, she took the sketch books away from my brothers like "no more drawing for you!" My dad put it very eloquently me, he goes, "I work very hard to provide for my family, to give you guys the opportunities that I didn't have growing up or to give you the opportunity to pursue what you want. So the idealistic side of me wants you to do whatever it is that you want, because that's what I worked hard for. But the practical side of me says its going to be to tough, it's a tough world, there's better ways, you're a smart guy, you're multitalented, there's other more practical, consistent, well-paid jobs that you can do." So he has been that sort of buffer, anchor, and encouragement, at the same time a voice of reason for a lot of the things that I've been able to accomplish and continue to pursue.

SS: What sparked your interest in watercolor painting?

TM: It wasn't something that I thought that I would ever pursue or get involved in. If you ask me ten years ago when I started this creativity thing, it was always pencil and ink. I do remember telling myself, or convincing myself, that I only saw the world in black and white and shades of grey, like color was just this foreign thing to me. I had taken a relatively long hiatus of starting my own company and digital art, in terms of designs and websites for a long time where my sketching was delegated to meeting rooms, and meetings and require on the phone like doodling on the pen and paper nearby. Anything nearby had doodles on it and what not. But it was just pencil and pen. At some point, I had felt like let me just be a little more diligent with my art again and I had this weird calling and I just wanted to challenge myself. For some reason, there was just this calling to expand my horizons. I thought well I haven't picked up anything but a pen and a pencil in a long time, so let's see what's out there, let's just push the boundaries. Where my line work with pen and ink was one of precision. I would find the right line, find the right line weight and you know, precision was my forte. I was like well, what's sort of the opposite? How do I challenge myself? What's the opposite? One was adding color, I tried digital and it didn't quite click and well watercolor, I hear controlling water was the challenge and it's the exact opposite of control. You want to give it into the medium. But initially I took it as a personal challenge and no one told me it's easy to get some paper or brush, some colors and water and done. No, totally the challenge is with it and I just stubbornly roamed through trying to figure out this medium and over time it started to click and big progression and colors begin to make more and more sense. And

approximately six years later, which is today, I'm glad I picked it up. It has allowed me to express myself much better and kind of interact with my art and give it a new dimension instead of just line work.

SS: I used to do acrylic and oil painting and I know that is completely different from watercolor painting. It's just interesting the different element and vibe a certain medium gives.

TM: Yeah completely, you can go over things, change the values, light to dark, dark to light with acrylic and oil. If you don't like something, you can paint it white and go over it again. I initially didn't understand the challenges of watercolor.

SS: Yeah, for some reason you would think it's easier because it had to do with water, you know, but it's so much more detailed.

TM: Yeah because it seems like the simplest thing we all did this in like what, first grade? Kindergarten?

SS: Exactly, exactly

SS: So I know you define yourself as a multimedia artist, besides from water color what is a medium of art that you're also drawn to?

TM: Well combining them, I think is fun and interesting you know like just the pencils, ink, and watercolors. I've gotten a little into overlaying on top of watercolor occasionally and I'm still messing with acrylic here and there, but not very much yet. I'm still sticking my big toe in there. But I do have some pencils and color pencils that sneak their way in, different types of inks, ink washes occasionally, but yeah that its I haven't really branched out into full on acrylic and oils yet.

SS: I know you do a lot of comic art, and every thing I've seen on your website, all your work, are extremely detailed and intricate. What is your creative thought process when you are creating comic art? Where do you find the inspiration for these stories and how do you come up with all the characters?

TM: Well, one of the things you do in comic art, the first source of inspiration is usually from the very first comics you read growing up. To me, I still see the influence of some of those artists. Some of the creativity of when I was a kid, you got people like Jim Lee, Arthur Adams, Barry Windsor-Smith, some of those older comic book artists that I grew up on, those art styles, they have been impactful to my work. But it's funny to hear when other people describe my art, or say whether it's other artists or bloggers, they say "Oh that's a Tony Moy style," I'm like Oh, I have something like that? I guess in some way it's a natural evolution thing. The other thing I think from getting the inspiration and what not, you have some direction. A comic book artist is sort of like a director. For a movie, a director does not necessarily write the script, they don't necessarily create the story. They might have some input in it, but it's all about how you cover the story and how you

translate the script that becomes the director's art. And in some way, being a comic book artist is that goal. You decide what angle, what look, and what dynamic, what shots, how you frame a scene, how do you make two people in a restaurant eating pizza look exciting so that someone wants to read through. From that, you watch movies, you read books, look at other art out there, and constantly asking yourself "what makes this cool" or how can we use this heroic shot that we see in these movies or whatever else and integrate it here. The inspiration comes from all over, to be a comic book artist isn't just like having one certain focus. You know you have people who say I'm a landscape painter; there only going to do landscape and they may only specifically focus on forest landscapes or mountain landscapes. As a comic book artist, you need to be able to draw anything, people, puppies, animals, cats, forests, and cliffs, Mars. Name your place, name your people, you'll have two people in a meeting room, you'll have to draw a club scene, all these different shots and you have to be comfortable doing it all. So you basically need to find your inspiration from everywhere.

SS: Do you have a storyline before you begin drawing or does it build upon each other as you go?

TM: You technically get it in twenty-two page increments. If I am involved in creating the story, you have an idea of like hey what's the four or five-issue art maybe if you're really daring, you might say this is a 10-issue art or 12-issue art which is a full year to the person reading it right because one comes out every month. And in that, you really only have to write or envision the first twenty-two pages at a time because that constitutes as one issue. That issue has to be able to stand alone. It has to be able to encourage the reader to go out and get the next issue, has to set up something that's going to happen four to five issues down the road. You don't have to write all four or five issues at once but you have to kind of have an idea of where the plot is going. Sometimes these comics, such as Superman, has hit issue 1000 and you think, like did someone actually think that this was going to hit issue 1000 when there at issue 17? Probably not. So it's just an ever-evolving storyline that does not end. You just have to potentially let it keep on growing or close it off and have a nice short story.

SS: What would you say influences you the most from pop culture, comics, anime, and fantasy?

TM: Right now, I would have to say just with the plethora of comic movies that are out. Comics probably hit me the most. You're just sitting there watching Infinity Wars and they have a scene of thirty-two super heroes coming to life on the screen jumping out and you're just like what! So that probably has a lot of influence and inspiration seeing how they translate something that was only seen in only 2-D and sort of being real on the screen so to speak with reimagining. Because let's say with Iron Man and his armor, in the comics you have to draw twenty-two pages of iron man a month. And so it is nearly impossible to draw iron man as complex as he actually is in the movie consistently page after page after page. All the details and extra little minor moving parts you just can't get to it because we have to simplify it because we have to draw it so many times so frequently. And so seeing how they made things so complex or added textures to Black

Panther's suit, you know, because Black Panther's suit is basically just a latex suit in the comics. So all that stuff is very inspiring.

SS: The complexity of detail in movies definitely gives it a completely different effect. Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity themes, or histories in your artwork?

TM: Yeah, I'm proud of my Asian identity and so I always sign at the very least, I sign my signature, which is an Asian stamp that I have and I'll stamp that on my pieces or I write my last name in Chinese. Some of the things I try to do as well, I have done artwork for a little while of some of the three kingdoms or sketches like that and try to take some of those mythologies and put them in. It's not too often but those are themes that I do want to explore and are interested in exploring.

SS: Thinking back to the very start of your career, what has changed the most in your work as well as your career?

TM: The most I've changed in my career, I can talk on that a little easier. This last four or five years getting into comics again, getting published again, picking up water color and everything else like that, this is sort of my second chapter with art. I tried it initially after college but was a little unsuccessful. I should say I was unsuccessful. I did get some color stuff, I wasn't aware of how to continue pushing that bolder forward, what it meant to be an artist in the day of the Internet and making connections, and how to promote oneself. What changed from that first chapter one to current chapter two was taking time away, started my own company doing the website stuff and started a little studio and that required me to take on many roles and to learn more, a little with a business degree as well, but what it meant to be a sales person, how to market, how to present a website design to a client and even though it may not be the best website design, but how to sell it to the client so they accept it and they're like "oh okay" and then they pay you. All these little nuances and confidence in being able to go into a cold call with a client and I'm speaking to a CEO of a Fortune 500 company to try and sell something, you know that's a little daunting at first, but if I can do that; I can talk to a comic book editor, I can talk to a talent agent and go to a convention and talk to people that just come up and want to chat and be able to incorporate that business side.

So for me, on that personal side of things, that growth in business acumen, in marketing knowledge, in comfort in confidence in speaking helped a lot with looking at the various tools you have, whether its social media, making these decisions and not getting stuck in a "what do I do when I can't sell my art." Now I can say let's put a plan together, lets take some steps, lets experiment and see what's going on. That's a big part, a big tool set for artist. I gave a talk to a high school art class. And they asked me like oh "I'm going to art school, what should I say," my response was like well if you're going to art school; you already have a passion for art. Most people are going to figure it out themselves some way or another, yes they benefit from taking some of these classes and assisting that learning but that progression, that evolution of an artist, it's going to happen if you're passionate about it. The other part, the accounting classes, the finance classes, the

marketing classes, the real business, like you know what, if you're a confident artist already, go get a business degree, go get something like that. And not just the practicality of it but...

SS: To advance you in being successful

TM: Right. I have become an artist. You have become your own brand, your own identity, your own business. You are your own business. Twenty, thirty years ago before the internet, you had to find a publisher, you had to make those connections with another company or a creative director to get that job because there was no way to push it yourself. But now you can.

SS: Now, you can do everything yourself.

TM: Now you can do everything, literally. But its hard, its time consuming, and its also like what's next? So that's sort of the personal side of my evolution. The art, I touched on it briefly, there's going to be times where...you have to be ready for the growth in art. When I look back on myself and what I was doing, I was holding myself off to growth. I was only a black and white artist or I only want to do this. There's value in focusing on a certain aspect of art and improving those technical skills—controlling the brush, the values with shading with a pencil. Like today if I thought to myself why I didn't start this watercolor thing earlier, I know I just wasn't ready. I wasn't prepared to fail, to try so many times with watercolor, fail, and continue to learn from it and do these little mini experiments and remember the lessons you learned from it. I wasn't ready. If you were to stuck me in an art class after college, I was probably a little too conceited or proud or "I already know this stuff, why do I need to take it." I just wasn't ready. So I think that today, on a creative level, I'm much more open to taking in new knowledge or new concepts and try to think, "oh that's a cool way of doing it, how can I incorporate that," not looking at a tutorial on YouTube on how to paint flowers and go "well I'm never going to paint flowers that's too girly I want to paint Spiderman, Batman, and cool things so how is that YouTube lesson on painting flowers going to help me?" But now I can. Now I can look at that and think it's an interesting technique and I'll remember that for that effect not for the fact that that's a tutorial about painting flowers. Those sorts of mental changes and mental acceptance have been the biggest changes in my path.

SS: Do you learn techniques from other things like YouTube?

TM: Yeah. In short I usually tell people I graduated from the school of YouTube.

SS: I personally love YouTube; some people who don't watch YouTube can't understand why I'm obsessed with YouTube.

TM: Well the world is on there. Looking at how other artist or other creators work and the behind the scenes of it all. It's almost constantly playing if I'm painting and my computer is next to my art table and it's on something, either hearing a podcast or

someone talking about things about art. That also has probably been the biggest reasons for accepting watercolor and being able to learn watercolor.

SS: I saw on your website, your works have been published in X-files, Dungeons and Dragons, amongst many others, can you explain a little more on those projects and how they came about?

TM: Pretty much, every project, you never know. That's all I can say. Those projects came out because I went out, I made connections, and I talked to people. Sometimes not even knowing or being aware of it. So there's this certain genuine approach that can be done no matter what field you are in. I see it sometimes in people at conventions approaching me is that you can try to make connections for the sake of making connections. Like okay if I make this connection, maybe they'll give something back to me. "Oh this is an editor, I should make this connection so he can give me a job" and I realized while that can work just having those basic connections, really it was the opposite. It's more like; let me make this connection because maybe there is something I can do for you, sort of flipping that around and genuinely believing that. Like doing something for another artist or helping them out when they're in a timeline crunch or deadline crunch or saying "hey can I help you with anything" and truly meaning it. There's this weird kind of karma circle where they're like "hey this artist wasn't able to finish or we were going to do this extra story in the back of this book, do you have time to take it," and then so now they're asking you, there not necessarily like "well we have this opportunity, we can give it to you if you want it." It's just a different relationship that falls out of those. And every single one of those published opportunities that I've got was always something that stems from a "how can I help you" and that's how that happened.

SS: That is always the best way to market yourself is saying what can I do for you instead of the other way around.

TM: Yeah exactly. And those were the lessons. You learned that lesson a lot earlier than I did. It took me a few years to really believe in those lessons. And that's my approach now; it's not a competitive thing anymore for me. Before I would see other artist and think I'm better than him, I don't know why he got the job. Now its like, oh that's really cool and genuinely being happy for other people instead of being jealous at the opportunities that the person got.

SS: Are there any future projects or goals you would like to share?

TM: Yeah, currently I'm working on a comic book called *The Mainstream*. It's a five issue mini series. Issue 1 came out about a month ago so Issue 2 should be coming out soon. I am currently working on Issue 4. Its about an interconventional police force that protects our reality from invaders from other timeline. And the main character is a Chicago police detective who has an ability to detect to see when something in our reality is actually from another timeline or another reality and tries to piece together the puzzle. That's a current project and I'll be working on that for the next few months. I'll probably have some kick-starters. I'm also working on my own story of piecing that together

hopefully I'll be kick starting that before the end of the year. It's a fantasy magic and science concept that I'm trying to figure out and there's also another book that I'm working on with an old friend who's a writer and that's more of a mythology in the modern day story. So yeah few stories on that, lots of conventions around the US. I'm hoping to get into some international comic conventions and to travel a bit more. That'll probably be one of the next milestones to have, getting paid to travel or being like oh I'm in Denmark and coming back and being able to say I traveled and made money, made new fans, increased my social media presence.

END.

