



6-5-2018

Jeffrey Augustine Songco Interview

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Recommended Citation

Cruz, Yara, "Jeffrey Augustine Songco Interview" (2018). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. 109.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/109

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Interview: Yara Cruz

Artist: Jeffrey Augustine Songco

Location: Phone interview conducted from Chicago and Grand Rapids.

Date: May 9, 2018



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist. <http://www.songco.org/>

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: Jeffrey Augustine Songco (b. 1983) is a multi-media artist. Born and raised in New Jersey to devout Catholic Filipino immigrants, his artistic identity developed at a young age with training in classical ballet, voice, and musical theater. He holds a BFA from Carnegie Mellon University and an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute. His artwork has been exhibited throughout the USA including the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids. In 2017, he was featured in the publication *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, and he was the Installation Category Juried Award winner at ArtPrize Nine. His writings have appeared in *Art21 Blog*, *Bad at Sports*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Hyperallergic*. After living in Pittsburgh, Bushwick, and San Francisco, he currently lives and works in Grand Rapids, Michigan and would like to be the US representative to the 2023 Venice Biennale.

Yara Cruz: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Jeffrey Augustine Songco: Sure, my name's Jeffrey Augustine Songco, I was born and raised in New Jersey, I got my undergrad at Carnegie Mellon University, my BFA, and I got my MFA at San Francisco Art Institute, and I'm currently living in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

YC: How would you define or categorize your art?

JAS: Oh sure, so I would say that I'm a conceptual artist. I have a really strong idea right now which is primarily the brotherhood known as the *Society of 23*, and so then I translate that artwork into a variety of media. My favorite is installation. I love that immersive environment, I actually grew up doing a lot of musical theatre, so the production of theatre has always been really important in my life. So, in my installations are also sculptures, and costumes, and ready-made materials. I do a lot of photography as well. I do a lot of performance work, so performance is another media. I normally document the performances with photography, sometimes video, and I use a lot of Photoshop in my photography, so I multiply myself, because in the *Society of 23*, I play all 23 brothers. So, it's a lot of self portrait photography, and I'm the only photographer, so I'm running back and forth between the camera and posing in front of it. And then I'll print those photographs out and then sometimes I'll be at the installation. And you know that performance is also kept up on social media channels, so the *Society of 23* has an Instagram account. I'll do some mixed media work as well, some more traditional artwork, like flat work that hangs on the wall, like collage and drawings, the one medium I don't really use is painting, maybe I'll paint a sculpture, like with spray paint and things like that, but that's the one medium I don't really go for, because I think there's this history of painting that I never really got into, and when I got into grad school there was definitely a separation from the people who were like, really big painters, and the new genres—new genre kids, if you will. So there's this long history of painting that I'm not super clear about, and I don't use that very often, so I don't have practice in that, but otherwise, performance, installation, photography, and sculpture.

YC: When did you first become an artist?

JAS: Great question. I'd say the pivotal moment was when I stopped becoming a performer, in the performing arts. So, I grew up doing ballet, which then translated, which moved onto, musical theatre, and being in a chorus, and plays, and I played the viola, so I did a lot of the performing arts, but I stopped growing in middle school. So, I stayed at 5' 4", and then my voice dropped really low, so I was not going to be able to play an adult on stage, and there aren't very many roles for Asian Americans. So, sometime in high school, I was always interested in art, but in high school I really pivoted to doing digital artwork, and actually graphic design, I really wanted to be a graphic designer. So, you know, I was in the yearbook, I was on the paper group, and I did a lot of graphic design work, and I actually applied to Carnegie Mellon for graphic design, because it's a separate school from the School of Art, but based on my portfolio, I got into the school of art, so freshman year was kind of a weird identity crisis because I was making artwork, but I really wanted to be a designer. So, you know, in design work you have a client,

and I always knew I wanted to listen to a client. Well, when you're doing artwork, I guess I translated a client to being myself. So, by sophomore year I kind of really got into the world of art and identifying more as an artist rather than a designer, but I guess to this day I still, I created a brotherhood that I'm like a client, and I make artwork for them.

YC: That's really interesting, I feel like a lot of people don't really understand that there's a difference between art and design.

JAS: Yeah, the cliché is like, don't send your kids to art school, because they won't get a job. So I mean there's definitely the financial, sort of professional mode that is the clear difference, but when you're applying for jobs, as an art student you might think "well maybe I can do this design work" and a lot of people, I'm sure, can. I'm sure if you know the different software, programs, and in fact if you can like, illustrate, or draw, like I can draw representationally, but when it comes to sort of more, illustration work, or just kind of whimsical or comical things, I never had that kind of handle with my drawing, so I just never was able to do that kind of design work. And working with typography was my favorite thing and I think a lot of art students don't necessarily reference typography, so I knew what area I wanted to work in, but yeah, as soon as I got to art school, I saw the big switch.

YC: Can you tell me about the concept behind your *OMG* series?

JAS: Sure, so *OMG*, or Oh My God, was the exhibition title for my thesis show at San Francisco Art Institute, so when I grouped them all together, they are just kind of under this title of *OMG*. I had been doing a lot of research on brotherhoods. In undergrad, around 2004 or 2005, I created this spy character, and this spy character was me and I did a photographic series called *Emerge* and it's a five-panel photograph and the spy breaks into this laboratory, and in this laboratory are these clones of him, and he goes to them and he starts crying, that's like kind of the five panels. When I made this character, I realized I wanted to give this character more history, more of a biography, so then I found out that the CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency here in America, was kind of founded on the Skull and Bones group at Yale, the secret brotherhood, like back in, I guess the 40s or 50s, and I thought, "okay, I'm going to give my spy character this background" and so I created this secret brotherhood called the *Society of 23* just to give him some background. And then I was like, "well what is this brotherhood? What do they do?" So, then I started making artwork that informed what the brotherhood was. So, I was in a fraternity in college, and so I made a composite, which is kind of like a class picture, of all the brothers. And then I was like "I need a ritual robe" because I love ceremonies, I love performance, so I want this brotherhood to have this secret meeting and doing my research I realized that in Spain the Catholic Church has these groups, these brotherhoods, where they wear this very specific ritual robe, which looks exactly like a KKK robe. So I created these pieces, I made the robe in grad school, for my thesis, while making all these other works that all sort of related to each other, and they were about America, about being gay, a lot of rainbow colors, about being devout Catholic, as I grew up devout Catholic, as every Filipino does. So, I made this kind of a suite of artwork, all revolving around my own personal identity, and so when I grouped them together, I realized that, that rainbow Klan robe was very controversial, and so I decided to name the whole suite *OMG*.

YC: When I was going through Professor [Laura] Kina's book, *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, when I stumbled across your "GayGayGay Robe" piece, I definitely had a reaction to it. Do you think it was meant to cause reactions like that?

JAS: No, that wasn't the original intention. In fact, when I had that discovery moment, that eureka moment, it just felt so natural because I had been doing all this research based on Catholicism and brotherhoods and, of course when I was little I watched Discovery Channel, and everything on Discovery Channel at that time was about the KKK, so it all just kind of fell into place, and it felt so natural to combine rainbow-striped fabric with a Klan robe. And so, for me, because I'd done all that research on the capirote, or that sort of conical hat and robe of these brotherhoods, it didn't have that same shock value to me as perhaps someone who sees it for the first time does, particularly someone based in America. Even in Spain, along these parade routes, or these processions of the brotherhoods wearing all of these cone hats and robes, there are gift shops that have little capirote figurines and it says "no KKK" under it, because I think there's such an American presence of tourism that, they have to inform people like "hey this isn't supposed to be about racism". So originally that controversy was never the initial intent, but I know that it's packed in there and that's kind of the occupational hazard you get with using symbols that don't really have an owner.

YC: Absolutely, definitely just that cone-head figure, anyone can relate that to the KKK when they don't realize that there's a religious history behind that. Do you ever address Asian, or Asian-American identity themes or histories in your artwork?

JAS: Great question, because I do self-portrait photography, I feel like I'm automatically addressing it no matter what. But, I know that I focus on American history when I am creating work. So, I know that the *Society of 23*, to me, is sort of this compressed, condensed version of American history. So, actually, in that text, it was so fascinating for me to read a lot of the critical analysis that Jan had done, he was the interviewer, and just kind of the way that he processed, sort of my childhood, alone. I'm aware that there aren't very many roles for Asian-American characters, so while I'm not processing a history, I definitely feel like I'm processing a current state of Asian-American identity. There are moments where I feel like I am talking a little bit about colonialism, and sort of the American occupation of the Philippines, but I don't think my research is that strong. So, maybe if my artwork is referencing it, it's never completely intentional. So, I think that comes from a background where I did grow up in a privileged, white suburban town in America, and I was born in America, and my parents spoke to me in Tagalog, but I didn't learn it. So, there was definitely a little bit of a separation there. So, maybe going forward, as I start doing more research on this condensed version of America, I think those implications of colonialism will definitely play a part in the brotherhood.

YC: When you were speaking, I found myself relating a lot because I'm also Filipino, and sort of thinking about being a Filipino in America and how that history has sort of been wiped away. Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian-American? Or, have you ever been labeled as an Asian or Asian-American artist?

JAS: I usually write my own bios, and I think because my website specifically states, "he's an American artist." I think it continues to play that way when the media, or even a curator, shares

my work. With that said, I have been in a show about it. I was in a show called *Proximities* at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in January 2013, I believe, and the curator had created 3—it was a 3-part exhibition, and I was in the last part, and the work was about the proximity of Asia, which is a large concept to definitely address, and the proximity to, I think America, and Western identity. And, of course, it's taking place in the Asian Art Museum, so I was contextualized as part of a group of artists who were using Asian identity, in terms of color, as well as where things originated from, so there was an artist next to me named Imin Yeh, she works a lot with paper, and so she actually created several shopping bags. Very plain, white, shopping bags, but she wanted to go through this process that is done overseas, in China, and these are really ten cent bags, maybe like five cent bags, but she took the time to weave the rope that is used on the handle, I think she made the paper to make the bags, and fold them and glue them properly, like they all looked, like, very normal boutique shopping bags. And then my work specifically was called "Blissed Out" and it was a video which originally was supposed to be a self-portrait, instead I used a white person, and it was a video portrait of a man sitting cross-legged, against a white background, taking a deep breath, and that deep breath was looped over and over and over so it basically looked like a breathing Buddha, a contemporary Buddha, if you will, because he was wearing an Abercrombie & Fitch shirt, and like orange shorts from American Eagle or something. So originally it was supposed to be me dressed in all white, and I have this Baghead character that I call it, where I dress in all white, and I have a white bag on my head, that is a shopping bag, actually, but it's my version of playing a white person, but in the end I ended up using a white person, rather than playing one, and so it became this piece about the ideas of yoga, and who owns it, and why it's such a big commodity here in America.

YC: Was identifying as Asian or Asian American something that is important to you personally?

JAS: Great question. I don't know. I feel like it is, the way I describe it always, is that, I'm an American gay man, born to devout Catholic Filipino parents. So, I try to suggest my heritage there, but I think beyond the surface in terms of what you see in a photograph, if it's a self-portrait photograph, you'll see an Asian man, but I think I'm just trying to complicate identity and place, because I didn't get educated in the same kind of identity as I think maybe an actual Asian American person did, or as an actual Asian person did, I feel like it was always quite separated, and it wasn't until later, maybe even in grad school, that I started understanding "oh, like, we construct these different identities, not that they're placed on us," so being able to be dynamic and go through those things, but, you know, in high school I was teased all the time because I didn't fit in with Asian kids, or I didn't fit in with the white kids, so there's always been that kind of complications, but I guess I just never really processed it because I was always acting on stage, or being in a performance, so I understood that I could perform a role, and that was more important to me than just like, reality.

YC: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

JAS: The opportunities have changed recently. At first, you sort of do local things with friends outside of college, and then I moved to New York, and nothing was being exhibited, so then I decided to go back to my grad school, and I jumped into a different network, and because of grad school I had the dream of getting picked up by a gallery, and showing a solo exhibition in a

gallery in San Francisco, and then I had more opportunities like being in that museum, and being in a couple other group shows around the state, and then it all slowed down again, but there's this one kind of pivotal thing that has happened which is participating in this competition called ArtPrize, which is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and it's the biggest cash prize awarded in the world, one of them, and because of my participation in that, I controlled what I was going to show, it wasn't necessarily like an exhibition with a curator, even though there are curators involved. It's like, I'm entering this work of art to win this competition. And I didn't win. But I kept entering it, and because of that, I could control the size of the exhibition space, the size of the work I wanted to submit, and it's not as competitive in this art competition, so there's a lot of the work you would see at an arts festival, like landscape paintings, and portraits, and black and white photography of things, so, I was kind of the oddball there, and I just had been working my way around the different popular venues, and I ended up at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts here, and that was a really big exhibition for me, because I had a really large-scale installation that had video in it, and it was so much fun.

And after that, I moved to Grand Rapids, so I changed my life because nothing was happening in San Francisco, and then when I moved here, I met my boyfriend, and suddenly that changed to where I was talking about my artwork with someone who was close to me in a different capacity than just sharing it with a friend, and I made a giant installation around the "GayGayGay Robe," and then that won an award, and then that went to New York, and then that got seen by a lot of curators, so now all these things are just quickly happening, where I have exhibition opportunities for the artwork that I pushed really hard for myself, and now people are inviting me to show that work. It's kind of cool, it's like something I never thought would happen, but I guess we're also living in a political and cultural climate where my work is kind of interesting.

YC: I definitely think it is very relevant to everything that's going politically right now. What are you currently working on?

JAS: I've got actually a proposal that I'm working on with a curator-friend of mine, for Denver. She wants to submit my artwork as a solo exhibition for a contemporary arts center there, and it's called the "Society of 23's Tea Dance Hoedown." So, like the "Society of 23's Locker Dressing Room," which I created last year, this is kind of another large-scale installation that's immersive, that the audience can kind of walk into and feel suddenly transported into the narrative of the brotherhood, and so it's a mashup of a tea dance and a country western hoedown, so a tea dance is kind of like an event that is really popular with gay men. It was bigger in the 80s and 90s, so now it's not so much, but it was this kind of a safe space for gay men to come together and be with each other dancing, when there were laws against two men dancing in the 20th century. So, a tea dance is also kind of where that current, popular form of dancing comes from, where you're in a club and everyone's kind of dancing alone, because of laws making it illegal for men to dance with each other. There was this thing were "okay, let's just kind of dance next to each other," so now you go to a club, everyone's just kind of dancing next to each other, but not holding each other or touching each other. So, there's the gay element, and then there's suddenly this country-western element, which when I was living in San Francisco, I did same-sex country-western two-stepping for the first time and it changed my life. I loved it, it was so cool. So instead of male and female partners, it's leader and followers. And it was awesome, and so

because I had this opportunity to make a proposal for a Denver institution, I was like “oh my gosh, I should incorporate this country-western dancing thing that I learned.”

So yeah, it’s this immersive installation that’s technically supposed to represent the *Society of 23’s* Dance Hall, and in the space I’m proposing that there would be videos, so I’d actually be in the space recording myself dancing the two-step with someone, and then videos of just like a brotherhood doing a line dance, and then maybe another tutorial video, and then on the perimeter, on the walls, are banners, that each brother makes for the event, and photographs of the brothers, and previous tea dance hoedowns, and maybe costumes. The element I bring in now that I—so you asked before about sort of that controversy and shock—I actually and bringing my kind of controversial element into it, which is a gun check station. And so, like any awesome country western place, people are going to have guns, so I want the brothers who carry guns to check them at the door, so I’m going to have this cool, long sculpture, kind of like one of those saw horses, and so there will be hooks on it for each brother to check their gun at. I don’t think there will be any guns on it, but it’s the suggestion that the brothers carry guns. And they’ll have their individual station with their name on it, that says like, “put your gun here.” Because this then references back to one: The Pulse nightclub shooting. That was the biggest mass shooting in America at a gay nightclub, where 49 people died, which then got surpassed by a shooting in Las Vegas at a country western festival. So, there’s this idea of shootings, mass shootings, being so prevalent, in these kinds of events that I wanted to reference. And because of other work that I’ve done, like I know that my work is also a memorial to American culture, so this can kind of be a memorial to the victims of the Pulse, and, I think it’s called Route 91, Harvest Festival, something like that.

YC: I definitely look forward to seeing that!

JAS: I hope so, yeah, let’s put good vibes out there. I will no matter what make the banners, and the photographs, it’s just a matter of, will they be exhibited? But I’m always trying to make the narrative of brotherhood grow, and so any small prop or element or costume or set design, or whatever. Anything I make will be part of that brotherhood and I can just put them in storage until a sunny day comes along.

YC: It was really really nice talking to you. Those are all the questions that I have. I heard you’re coming to DePaul on the 14th, so we’ll be there. Really excited for your presentation!¹

JAS: Me too, I can’t wait to share. Thank you so much for this interview, I really appreciate it.

End.

¹ Songco was a visiting speaker in Professor Laura Kina’s Asian American Art course at DePaul University on May 14, 2018.



GayGayGay robe, 2011. Cotton and paper on dress form. 20" x 30" x 80"



Man's best friend (puppy piñata) with McDowell bat and blindfold in locked case, 2011.



Society of 23's Locker Dressing Room, 2017; Mixed-media installation

IF YOU HAD TO
CHOOSE
BETWEEN
ENDING
WORLD
HUNGER OR
CREATING
WORLD PEACE
WHICH WOULD
YOU CHOOSE
AND WHY?



God Bless (Miss) America, 2012. Diptych of giclée prints, 40" x 63'



Blissed Out, 2013. Looping HD Video.