
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Mitsu Salmon Interview

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Interviewer: David Yonamine

Artist: Mitsu Salmon

Location: Phone Interview, Chicago to Taiwan

Date: April 30th, 2018



Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2018 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.

Artist Bio:

Mitsu Salmon creates original performance and visual works, which fuse multiple disciplines. She was born in the melting pot of Los Angeles to a Japanese mother and American father. Her creation in different mediums, the translation of one medium to another, is connected to the translation of differing cultures and languages.

Salmon received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. In 2005 she graduated from NYU where she majored in Experimental Theater, studying theater and visual arts. She has lived in India, England, Germany, Amsterdam, Japan, and Bali.

She has performed solo work at places such Performance Space 122, Dance Theater Workshop, Highways Performance Space and internationally at Hebbel Am Uffer, the Berlin Performance Art Festival, London Performance Art Festival and Urbanguild in Kyoto, Japan.

She has collaborated with England based theatre group, the Solvents, John Jesurun and extensively with Open Gate Theater. She has been awarded Los Angeles Getty Multicultural Internship Grant, Tisch Scholarship, SAIC MFA Grant and artist residencies at Earthdance in Massachusetts and at Villa Pandan Harum in Bali, Indonesia.

Photos and biography provided by Mitsu Salmon. <http://www.mitsusalmon.com/>

Interview Transcript:

David Yonamine: So which of your parents is Japanese?

Mitsu Salmon: My mom is Japanese she was born in Tokyo and came over here to California.

DY: Did she speak Japanese around you?

MS: No, when she came to the states there was still some lingering racism. Her teacher came to her parent's place and told them that her kids were speaking Japanese and they shouldn't speak Japanese to their kids. So, her parents started speaking English at home and she didn't have anyone to speak it to. So, she pretty much lost it except she can comprehend a lot, like when she came to visit me in Japan she could actually understand some, but she hasn't spoken it in like 50 years, so she wasn't confident enough to speak it.

DY: My father would tell me stories he had been told by my grandmother when she was in the camps. Did you grow up with similar stories?

MS: My mom's father was born in the states, he's Japanese American, but he was born in Hawaii, so he didn't go to a camp, and my mother was still in Japan during the war. They met afterwards cause he occupied Japan as a Japanese American soldier after the war and that's how they met. Because he was a veteran through, a lot of his friends were interned in California. As a kid I grew up with those stories, but it was my grandfather's friends who told them when I was a kid. It just seemed like normal, but then I realized wait that was a really specific historical time. It wasn't until much later I realized the impact of it.

DY: Anything else you can tell me about yourself?

MS: I grew up in LA, my mom is from Japan, my dad was born in Saint Louis and is European mixed descent. They grew up Mormon. They met in Utah and they split up when I was four. I primarily lived with my father, he was an artist, a music teacher and in theater. So I started being interested in the arts because of that as a kid. My mom was working full time doing business so it made more sense to be with him most of the time and see my mom on the weekends. I went to an arts/theater high school, but then realized that I was more interested in experimental theater and less interest in traditional theater. I started getting to reading a lot and getting into French philosophy and more avant garde movement. So, then I studied at NYU (New York University) doing experimental theater. After that, I move to Germany for a year thinking I would do more experimental theater but ended up doing performance art. While I was there I started studying this dance form called Butoh, are you familiar with Butoh?

DY: No, I'm not familiar with Butoh.

MS: It's a Japanese contemporary dance form that emerged right after World War II and often is known for performers that are painted white and moving slowly. But the idea is dealing with some of the trauma of the war and creating these dances from a much more emotional place, rather than a dance like ballet where it's more about form. So, I started studying it in Germany of all places, but it was very popular in Berlin, probably because they have this post war trauma. But then I decided I really want to go to Japan to study it. So that's why I went to Kyoto, to study Butoh, and to support myself during that time I taught English. I was also involved in a dance company during that time for three years. Then I moved to Bali, Indonesia, for a painting residency. It was after the tsunami happened in Fukushima, and at that time an art collector that I met a year ago in Bali who collected some of my paintings was kind of worried about me and asked if I wanted to be an artist and resident. I was also just nervous during that time, being in the Japan, because of what happened in Fukushima, so I went to Bali. I was supposed to be there for only a few months, but the next artist ended up coming later so I stayed there for a year doing a painting residency. I applied to grad school during that time and got into school during that time in Chicago, and that's how I ended up in Chicago was through graduate school.

DY: When did you start traveling and living abroad?

MS: I started living abroad right after my undergraduate, so about twelve years ago. Then I came back to Chicago about six years ago. I spent pretty much all of my 20's traveling. My mom always kind of had this dream of traveling. She had a little pin of all the places she wanted to travel. So, she took me to France when I was little and Mexico and Costa Rica and I studied abroad in undergraduate in India. All of that kind of got me into traveling and in my 20's that became my main goal, just to travel and not worry about a career or a relationship. It was just being really interested in exploring these places. Since then, I've been more focused on building a career, but still traveling a lot, very interested in travel.

DY: Were you traveling with the intention of art? Or did you just really want to travel because of your experiences with your mother, and art just happened and picked up along the way?

MS: I think traveling with the intention of art, for example, I was in New York and New York is very expensive, I was working a lot. I was doing children's theater. I was commuting and working all the time and had very little time to make my own art. Then I got these emails from my friend in Berlin and Berlin is so cheap. She was hardly working and she was doing performances and art all the time. Then my job said that they didn't need me for three months and I thought, "oh I'll just go for three months" and then I ended up staying for a year. But it was this feeling of feeling stuck in my life, but also feeling like I had no time to make any art and

here I was getting these amazing emails from my friend who was able to just make her work and live very cheaply.

So I ended up being there for a year, and then I got really interested in Butoh and I thought maybe I should go to Japan. So each thing kind of lead to another and I just ended up traveling. So usually there's like a reason that I'm traveling somewhere. So like right now I'm in Taiwan, and I'm in Taiwan because my great grandfather--my mother's mother's father, who was born in Japan (he's Japanese)--when Japan was occupying Taiwan he was a well known botanist during that time. So he studied all these plants and imported all these plants. So when I found out about him, I've been wanting to go to Taiwan and see his research so I applied to these residencies last year and got it again this year, about doing research about him. So I didn't just come to Taiwan just because they funded art, although I think that's a good enough reason. They have these government sponsored residencies that they found where they give you free space and daily living expenses. So that's why I've been coming to Taiwan these last few years for three months and I hope I get another residency again next year so I can continue it.

DY: Are paid residencies common?

MS: They are very competitive, and there are a lot of residencies that are less competitive that don't pay you or charge you. I feel like especially in the States, that's a lot more common. But there are a lot more residencies that you have to pay for, than residencies that will pay you.

DY: I really want to go to Japan since my father is Japanese, did you feel a similar pull before you went to Japan?

MS: My mom is from Japan so there's some of the culture that I grew up with and some of it that also I didn't grow up with like the language and meeting up with Japanese friends and feeling a little excluded when they would talk in Japanese amongst themselves. Just that feeling of, that's part of your community, oh wait it's not because I don't have the language. So that's something that really draws me to travel there or to research my family history to understand why I lost the language and getting interested in certain questions like if I had grown up that way, how it'd be a very different experience. I totally relate to feeling how people identify you both in Japan and in the states, as being Japanese and wondering what does that really mean? And trying to make my own understanding of it and not really feeling that I fit into that mold, but others see me that way.

DY: So when you were growing up, and even now, did you feel like you identified as Japanese American, or was it something that you felt was put on you?

MS: I think when I was a kid it felt like it was more put on me. Like when I was around other kids and the things that they'd say. One of the worst things, like when I was in high school, and why I kind of shied away from traditional theater was I was asked to be the Chinese waitress in the school play. So that's kind of the more negative sense of experiencing racism in that sense with people stereotyping you and again after college why I didn't pursue professional theater, was getting asked to audition for those kinds of roles. The more positive sense might be meeting my grandparent's friends who are Japanese American, and talking to me in Japanese, that being a more positive thing in terms of being identified as Japanese American. But I do feel like after I went to Japan I feel like I can more claim that now, instead of it feeling like it was put upon me like when I was a kid. Especially since when I was a kid I was raised primarily by my dad and my step mom who were both white, so people were asking if I was adopted and having to explain it to them. But now after coming from Japan I understand the language a little bit, and I understand the culture. Now I can see how I identify myself as Japanese American or don't identify myself as Japanese American. So yeah, I feel like when I was little it was more put upon me but now I feel like I can own it a little bit more. So what was your experience?

DY: I had a very similar experience growing up, having stereotypes put on me by other kids and having to live with that. Also like you said being able to meet my other Japanese American relatives. Then like you said later in life I felt like I was able to claim it more as my own. So is your Asian or Asian American identity something that you address in your artwork? Or is there a specific piece that stands out in that sense?

MS: Yes, it was interesting because a little bit in undergrad--I was making some work about that, but it's been a big part of my work, like even in Japan talking about being a foreigner and when I came to Chicago though--recently family histories have become a big thing because when I graduated from grad school, I was waitressing. I started thinking about my great grandfather who came from Okinawa to Hawaii and how his dream was to become a waiter. So I started looking at his story being connected to mine. Then through researching him and creating this piece, I started interviewing family and all this stuff, that's why family history has become such a big part of my work. It was his piece, then my grandmother's piece about being nature in Fukuoka, then this piece about my great grandfather in Taiwan, so since I've graduated a lot of my work has been about family history, then I also did this piece about Kristi Yamaguchi, the Japanese American figure skater. But in graduate school I was more interested in doing paintings and performance work and personal stories, but they weren't always about being Japanese American, so just kind of recently it's been more so.

DY: I really found your *Highways* piece very interesting, could you tell me more about it?



Mitsu Salmon *Highways*. Presented at the IMPACT PERFORMANCE FESTIVAL at the School for the Art Institute of Chicago, April 2014.

MS: That piece was about multiple things, one of them being grieving, and one of the people that passed away was my grandmother. So it connected in that way because I'm looking at her story of coming from Japan and me going to Japan and understanding my relationship with her. And then also a friend of mine who had passed away. So that was an aspect of it, but overall it was more about combining different disciplines and different ways of storytelling. Looking at grief as one, making grief comedic and entertaining in some sense. So it was an aspect but not one of the major aspects of that piece.

DY: Could you tell me more about the paintings you've done?

MS: Yeah sure, sometimes I wish I was more organized for time management sake. There are two, maybe three, ways I've approached it. So I've painted since I was young, but I really got into full on painting when I was in Indonesia, in Bali. I was pursuing two things, one was abstract expressionism, where I was working with an abstract painter and working with

landscapes or really being inspired by being in that environment of being in nature and also thinking about the gesture of painting. So there's performative gestural paintings and drawings and then there's these intricate watercolor or ink drawings that I've done for a while dealing with Japanese prints, ukiyo-e. After coming back from Japan it might have been that sort of nostalgia that I felt. It actually wasn't in Japan when I did these but actually after I left it that I started wanting to do these drawings all the time. So I'm still figuring out how to do it and how to combine them, or also sometimes they're separate. So sometimes it's an ink drawing for some pieces and for others it's an abstract one for other pieces. And depending on what kind of place I'm in.

DY: So you kind of started with the Bali ones and then did more after your trip to Japan?

MS: Yeah, well I've always been interested in faces and people, but I think it was kind of like, In undergrad I was also doing lots of faces, but the ukiyo-e drawings and Bali didn't come out until I came back from Japan.

DY: 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"? How did that make you feel?

MS: Yeah, I have. I think in the art context I've been fine with it. So I was a part of the Asian American Performance Festival, and I actually really enjoyed that because Asians are running it. So there's a Vietnamese American artist, a Japanese American artist, and that's how I got connected in a sense to some of the Japanese American community because they came and they saw the show. So that was like actually, in terms of the art community, something I've enjoyed, being labeled as that in the art community. Like I said before, in theater I really didn't enjoy that because when I graduated from undergrad these were literally some of the roles I was recommended for, I got a Korean stripper, a karate kid, and these were the only things that people were interested in me doing and so that's very different because I feel like it's someone else's voice on me. But maybe I've had lucky experiences in Chicago and maybe it would be different if I was in LA and the person running it was white. So that was one of the exhibitions I was in, the other one is Alpha Wood, and that was to have an Asian American artist as part of their program, but again it was a really good experience because I got to meet more people in Chicago. But yeah in the art world I've had good experiences with that. But I'm sure maybe one day, knock on wood, but hopefully I don't.

DY: So your experiences with being Asian American have been positive in the art world, but not so much in traditional theater?

MS: Yeah, and I've heard from a few of my friends that have stayed in that, I know there's been a big change now in terms of trying to really cast nontraditionally. So I've had friends who are in Shakespeare now and not just these Asian roles any more. But for me ten years ago it was very frustrating. But yes, as an artist, because I have more control over my own representation it's much more fulfilling. After I graduated that's what I was struggling with, do I audition for these shitty roles but maybe make a living? Or do I make my own pieces and figure out how to make a living? So I chose to do my own thing at the time.

DY: If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally?

MS: Kind of yes and no? I don't know! Sometimes I want to be identified as Asian American in this situation, but in others I don't want to be thought of in that way.

DY: Another piece that stood out to me was the *Out/Inaka* piece, could you tell me more about that piece?

MS: That was about my grandmother in Japan during WWII. To simplify it, she was kicked out of her home because she had a western style home and there's all these stories about her home and her going to the countryside. So I built this structure out of branches and was thinking about her in that space. Also, this idea of shelter and vulnerability, thinking about her story and how I'm connected to that story. So I performed it three times one was a video on nature, another in Chicago, and another in Oklahoma. It's one that I'd love to keep performing but with all the branches it's hard to have a space. In Oklahoma they were kind enough to hook me up with a caretaker who had branches for me which was amazing.

DY: So on your website you have two performances playing next to each other at the same time. What was the idea behind that?

MS: That was this idea of memory, and how things are a little different when one plays it back in their own head. It can be interpreted in many different ways, but that's what I thought in terms of when you replay something it's a little different. That's something I've found doing all this research about my family history. It's been frustrating but also really illuminating to human nature, to how with these stories sometimes they change through telling, since the people telling these stories are getting older and how my memory of the stories change too. So it's like it's the same thing, but with slight variances is why it's repeated.

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

MS: Because I travel different things come up, depending where I am, what stage I'm in, and what comes up. For example, two different things in Japan I was part of a dance company and I was performing with this accordion player so I was performing all the time and it felt like every weekend I was needing new pieces because sometimes we have the same audience and we were traveling around Japan. So I constantly had to be coming up with new work. Then in Bali I was primarily a painter, just showing paintings and sometimes performing. It was very different performing every week to every three months but making tons of paintings. Now I feel like I'm doing both, often with an idea, and building work longer over time with an idea. So since I graduated college, it's less like Japan where I'll produce a new work every week because it's kind of exhausting to do that. I also want to structure the work more, and because I spent so much time on the work I want to perform it more and keep developing it. But in terms of painting I'm still painting but it's not like in Bali where I was primarily a painter. It's one aspect of my practice.

DY: With all these art forms that you cover do you usually go into these phases of mainly painting, then mainly performing, or do you usually mix them all together?

MS: It's always changing, sometimes I want to do it all but feel overwhelmed. Like right now we have an exhibition in a few weeks here in Taiwan as a group show and we can use any medium. So last time we did a performance, and this time we're going to do a sculpture video work, but I'm going to choreograph stuff, meanwhile I'm also doing video work with performance, so when I come back from Chicago I'm showing large drawings and video. So it depends on the opportunities, but I also seek out opportunities. So for a while I was doing performance in Chicago and then I started seeking out opportunities to show off my paintings and now there's more opportunities to do that in Chicago now. But it varies from project to project and whatever makes most sense for that project. But it's hard in terms of times management. Like right now I'm working on paintings, video performances, and it can be challenging. I'm wondering how other artists can juggle it all and what they're doing.

DY: What are you currently working on?

MS: So I have the previous works that I love reperforming if I'm given the chance to which takes a few weeks to redo them. But in terms of new work it's all based on my great grandfather and his botanical work and looking at these ideas of plants and colonization. In terms of how we think of plants and how they're so pure, but also how they can be used to build up an image for a place. Looking at his records and doing video work here and bring it back to Chicago, as well as some large watercolor. We're also doing a sound installation in the Lincoln Park Conservatory and comparing those histories. In Chicago the conservatories were built around the same time as the Columbian Expo, so this idea that these conservatories were a display of wealth and three of them have closed down. But still looking at these plants and how people think it's like, oh wow

look at these plants we need to preserve them, but it's actually a display of wealth. So looking at that, but also enjoying the plants and learning how they grow and process. This is a big project that is becoming multiple projects for me but with the same source material. So it's here, but it's also going to be in Indianapolis, so it's one project with multiple mediums.

DY: Is working with plants something new for you?

MS: Yeah, it's something new, so I got into all this research and I started learning how plants grow, how you categorize plants, how you preserve plants, and the different families of plants. I didn't study this in college so it's all self-taught stuff. I've never worked with plants before so it's interesting to be involved with that, then there's also the conversation with the art community and the environmental community so it's been interesting to be a part of that conversation.

DY: Do you find yourself doing a lot of research for all of your pieces, or is this one an exception?

MS: This one is the most intensive, with all of them I do some form of research. Like with the piece about my other great grandfather, Tsuchi, I was asking family. Then the one about my grandmother during the war I was reading about the war and learning about that time period and the history of Japan. So I always like to read and learn things about my work whether it's historical, philosophical, or theory.



Tsuchi performed at the Studebaker Theater May 29th, 2016.

DY: Are most of your pieces story based, and there's a person behind the performance or piece?

MS: Of course, works are different so I am interested in stories, even if they can be fictional. But I like fractured narrative, where I don't tell a story from beginning to end, which is also why I use so many different mediums. So it's like here's this one story of plants, how can I tell the same story through movement, or video, or drawing, or how can I tell you a part of the story and you leave the rest to your imagination. This way of telling a story but not in a traditional manner, like a puzzle and tell it in these different ways so the audience can get their own thing from it whether it's what I'm trying to express or not.

End.