
Asian American Art Oral History Project


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Dinesh Sabu Interview

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Interviewer: Mitch Buangsuwon

Artist: Dinesh Sabu

Location: Interview over Google Hangout – Chicago, IL/Stanford, CA

Date: May 15th, 2018

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



Bio and Image taken from kartemquin.com

Bio: Dinesh Sabu made his first feature documentary *Unbroken Glass* with Kartemquin Film. It played at numerous film festivals and was broadcast on *America ReFramed's* 5th Season in May 2017. Dinesh was awarded “Best Director” at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival in 2017 for his debut feature. Before *Unbroken Glass*, Dinesh shot parts of *American Arab* and *The Homestretch* with Kartemquin filmmakers. He also shot and is co-producing the forthcoming *How to Build a School in Haiti* with director Jack C. Newell. He is currently attending Stanford University’s Documentary Film and Video MFA program.

Interview Transcript:

Mitch Buangsuwon: Tell me a little bit about yourself. What's your name? Tell me a little bit about your upbringing.

Dinesh Sabu: Oh man, we could be here all day with that one. My name is Dinesh Sabu. I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I grew up in Louisiana for about twelve years and then I moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico where I lived for about five years and then I moved to Chicago for my undergrad at the University of Chicago. I stuck around in Chicago for about a decade afterwards. I only recently left, last fall, to move to California for grad school. I like to tell people I'm from Chicago. I've lived there longer than I've lived anywhere else. I've lived there my entire adult life. It feels like home even though I technically don't have any family there. I don't know if you saw the documentary that I made, *Unbroken Glass*?

MB: I saw the trailer for it, but I have not seen the whole thing.

DS: It really addresses that question. It was a very strange thing that happened. I lost both of my parents when I was pretty young. So, I was raised by my older sister. I am the youngest of five and we actually kind of raised ourselves. It's the kind of thing that didn't seem weird until I got older and I realized just how abnormal that was. I didn't feel particularly connected to a sense of South Asian Identity or Indian Identity or Asian Identity. Being in the south was also pretty different. Race is such a huge thing but it's kind of bi-polar, very black and white, especially in the nineties when I was coming up. It's a lot more different now. I think there are large minority communities outside of the African American community, places where people can fit in but we were pretty isolated. That played a huge role in just how I saw myself. I would say I didn't really reconcile my "South Asianness" until well into adulthood, probably my twenties. Actually, you see a little bit of that happening in the film, *Unbroken Glass*; coming to terms with the man I see in the mirror.

MB: How would you define/categorize your art and yourself?

DS: I make documentaries. I am a filmmaker but I am really only interested in documentary. Some filmmakers make fiction film and doc. For me, right now, I am only interested in documentary. I feel like the way documentary is made suits my personality, suits the way I like to work. It's much more outward focused, empirical. It's less about sitting around and kind of making something up. I did dabble in narrative filmmaking as an undergrad and a little bit after college and I felt like I would go on these sets and you would kind of be inside of this little world created by usually like a white dude. It just didn't comport with A) what I thought the world was and B) just what I was interested in doing, even on a day-to-day basis. There's an incredible amount of sitting around in narrative filmmaking. I made the mistake of one day bringing a magazine to set because I was like, "if I'm going to sit around, I might as well read the New Yorker." Apparently, that's a huge taboo. You're supposed to act like it's the greatest thing in the world to be on one of these sets. So, I quickly realized that the act of making a narrative film didn't

really suit me. Like I said, documentary is empirical, it's outward focused. I can focus on communities and stories that I find more interesting, that I find worthy of telling, that are relevant of telling. Those kinds of experiences. The interesting thing about this question is that if you asked me about a year ago, I would have had a very specific interest even within documentary.

MB: What would that be?

DS: I spent a decade working at an organization called Kartemquin Films in Chicago making social issue films at the intersection of social issue and observational filmmaking. I still really love that kind of film. I think one of the really exciting things about being in grad school is opening up my understanding of what a documentary is, what a documentary can do, and even questioning the category of documentary. Here I've made experimental archival films, I've made short narratives, and I've made more philosophic, observational films. Actually, this quarter I'm working on something that coheres more like a traditional social issue short documentary. But even [with] that, I'm trying to approach it from a slightly different way. I think my understanding of what a documentary is and can do is expanding quite a bit. It's the kind of thing I hope will expand throughout my career.

MB: When did you get into documentary film and what was your initial draw to it?

DS: I started undergrad thinking I was going to be a physics major, but I kind of knew in the back of my mind that I was really interested in film. Actually, one of the reasons I chose [the University of] Chicago was that it had this film studies program but it also had a really active club with a lot of video equipment where students were making films, where you had access to production gear and expertise. But I thought that as an Indian I should try to major in Physics or Math. I thought that was the kind of thing that I was just supposed to do. Even though I didn't have parents, that's kind of what they would have wanted. But I quickly realized, first quarter I took a physics class and everyday I was falling asleep in class. And I was like, "you know what I'm going to do? I should just sit in the very front row and I'll just have this direct line of sight to the professor and I would be too mortified to fall asleep." I went and sat in the front row for a couple of weeks and I just fell asleep everyday, literally right in front of the professor. I didn't do poorly, I got a B in the class, but I was thinking clearly, "I'm falling asleep everyday in the class, maybe this isn't for me." I figured I should probably try something different.

I noodled around with looking at math but film really drew me in. Originally, I was interested in these European auteur films, which I still really love but one thing that happened in Chicago was I got really interested in social science and social inquiry. One of the really exciting things about doc is that it can meld cinematic storytelling and social inquiry and social engagement and political engagement in a really beautiful way. I graduated and then within a couple of years I interned at Kartemquin, which was a very different organization at the time. It was much smaller. It was sort of this scrappy band of filmmakers. I just really fell in love with it. I think it was just the day-to-day practice.

Even though it can be quite a struggle. It can be a real struggle. It was just something that really captivated me.

MB: [laughs] I feel like you already know these questions and you're just going of a script. The next question I have is how did you get involved with Kartemquin?

DS: I started there as an intern in 2008. Again, it was a very different organization back then. They knew that they needed to adapt to become a sustainable non-profit so there was a lot of institutional change happening around then. I was brought in as staff on a part-time basis to help out as the assistant to the artistic director, Gordon Quinn, which was really an incredible opportunity. Seeing him at work up close was really eye-opening and seeing this guy who at this point [had] been making documentaries for over fifty years. He's really an accomplished, brilliant guy. But just seeing him work up close was incredibly eye opening. I stayed at Kartemquin on staff for several years. I bounced around. I was his assistant. I was doing technical stuff. I was doing administrative stuff. At the same time, I was developing the project that would become *Unbroken Glass*. At some point, it made more sense for me to go and produce and direct that film as an independent in association with Kartemquin and just leave these staff responsibilities behind but it was still very much a Kartemquin Film. I am still very much a part of that community.

MB: How was working on *American Arab* (Kartemquin Film, 2013)? What political significance do you believe that project carries?

DS: *American Arab* was a ton of fun because Usama Alshaibi [the director of *American Arab*] is an incredible filmmaker. He has a really distinct personality and style both as a person and as a filmmaker. We became really good friends while we were making it. I was shooting it. I was shooting him. It was a personal film that he was making. You know, just observing him, meeting his family, seeing his life unfold over the course of several years. It was really exhilarating. Usama took a really big risk in working with me because I was not the most experienced cinematographer but I think he felt that being an Indian American, I could think and talk about a lot of the issues that he was hoping to address in the film. That, to him, I think was an important part of why he wanted to work with me.

I think I really learned a lot just observing him make a personal film because I was working on/ thinking about *Unbroken Glass*. I was thinking about how do you get a film to embody your voice? How do you comport yourself in front of the camera? How do you separate yourself as a filmmaker and a film subject? So being able to ask all of those questions was really important. Unfortunately, this is a film that's as relevant, if not more relevant today, than it was when it was made [2013]. I think it's the kind of film that its meaning will change depending on the political and cultural context that we live in. I'm pretty old. I was like sixteen when 9/11 happened and this idea of needed stories to somehow humanize Arab Americans or humanize Muslims was just not a thing that we thought about. And actually, George W. Bush, for all of his many many flaws, made clear that Islam is not the enemy of America. Somehow, we forgot this. It somehow became...

Maybe we never knew it and it was just a really grand thing that we wanted to believe after 9/11. I mean I was definitely bullied after it. Usama had a lot of experiences after 9/11 as well. I think maybe we never really learned that lesson and the experience between 2001 and 2013.

When that film came out, I was really realizing just how bad things could get for the Muslim American community. I think, unfortunately, it's only gotten worse. It's actually gotten much worse between 2013 and now. Back then, making that film and putting it into the world and having it air on *America ReFramed*, I feel like there was this tremendous sense of optimism. These stories can impact how we understand the world, how we engage people and really change peoples' minds. But unfortunately, it's a kind of film that is still incredibly significant and necessary. If you're ever interested in how a documentary can feel like a person, like how a person's personality can be imbued in the documentary form, I think this film is a great example. Even down to the music and the titles and just the whole aesthetic of the film is very much Usama Alshaibi.

MB: Have you ever been included in a film festival that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you been labeled as an Asian American Artist?

DS: Yes and Yes. The film festival world, these days, is really really challenging. It's very difficult for everybody. You talk to any filmmaker and they will probably tell you just how difficult it is to get a film into a premiere festival and even then, just how rough that life is. With *Unbroken Glass*, there was this period of about a year where we hit every branch of the rejection tree on the way down. We would get so close. I remember we got short-listed at IDFA [International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam]. I got a really wonderful note from a programmer at Sundance and that continued to happen with the film until we went around the top tier documentary block and then we started applying to South Asian and Asian American film festivals. That's where this film had its most success was in that space. I think ultimately, we played at about ten festivals and probably eight of them were Asian American or South Asian specific.

In addition to that, we did a lot of community screenings. We did about fifty community screenings with a variety of different organizations. Many of them were South Asian and Asian American specific. Many were not. Many were just colleges and universities. We did a theatrical run in Chicago but it wasn't until the film came to the Asian film festival circuit that it really found its audience. It was like I didn't need to explain to the South Asian film programmers why this film was important. They just kind of got it. Like, "okay, yeah. Mental illness in the Asian American community, this is a huge problem that nobody talks about." I think it has a lot of Asian American themes about parents and the respect we have for parents, generational displacement--just a lot of themes that spoke to the Asian American condition. With those mainstream festivals, I was constantly needed to explain, "oh, well this is important because..." but then I would show up to these other festivals and they would get it right away. We were actually able to get a really large audience and have some really incredible discussions with them. (Referring to second part of the questions) I would say, absolutely.

I see the world through the lens of my own experience and a big part of that experience is growing up, looking like this in the South, and not having parents. And really learning how to observe the world, really learning how to comport myself, how the world looks inside of that subject position. If it's useful to call that subject, I celebrate that. A big part of what I've done and what I want to continue to do throughout my career is really explore what that means and to add those stories to a large canon of documentary work. Because I think right now, in the mainstream media, there's a very limited understanding of what it means to be Asian American. Things have gotten a lot better. I remember growing up and we had "Apu" on the Simpsons [in reference to representation]. Growing up, looking at the media and the idea of what it meant to be South Asian or Asian American was really really constrained. Things have gotten a lot better but what I want to do with the work I make is to continue to enrich and complicate what it means to be Asian American.

I'm going to steal an anecdote from Usama. He was making *American Arab* and in that film, he follows a Syrian American punk rocker and people would look at him and be like, "no no no, you should talk to my cousin, he's a dentist." You know? You don't want to tell this story about this punk kid if you're going to represent. There's so much complexity and respectability politics and how we are represented. People would do the same thing to me. I was making a film about a South Asian family that basically fell apart due to really pervasive mental illness. A lot of folks, as I was putting it together, in the South Asian community were really suspicious and skeptical. It makes sense. There's this fear, "why are you representing us like this? It makes us look so bad. It makes us look so backwards." I get those concerns and I try to assuage them in the film [*Unbroken Glass*], but I think it's my job as an artist to continue to bring those stories to the surface, bring that material to the surface to complicate and enrich our understanding of what it is to be Asian American. That being said, I don't think it's an exclusively Asian American thing. I think in order for it to be good work, there has to be an element of universality. I figure there will be work that has nothing to do with the Asian American experience that I will create. At the same time, I will be drawing upon my experiences as an Asian American in order to create that work.

MB: What filmmakers have influenced your work?

DS: I was lucky, I actually had known about the folks at Kartemquin even before I went to college. I saw a film called *Stevie* (2002) right before I went to undergrad. I didn't know about Kartemquin, I didn't know that it was in Chicago. I just remember seeing this documentary and being really "wowed" by it. I've been lucky in that I've been able to be mentored by and befriend directly a number of really incredible filmmakers. I think Gordon Quinn and Usama Alshaibi are two really big influences, especially in my early career. I think one of the really sad things is that there's not a lot of Asian American documentary filmmakers that I can point to as role models. I think Renee Tajima is a great example though.

MB: As you stated, *Unbroken Glass* is a very personal project. When did you realize that it was a story that needed to be told and was it received?

DS: To be honest, I started making this film almost as an excuse to just have this conversation with my siblings and extended family. Basically, I made it to young adulthood without a really clear sense of who my parents were and that story. It's a really hard thing to describe to people to have that kind of absence in your life. That story we tell ourselves about how we got to here, to this moment, to Chicago, to wherever, I think we take that for granted and I was growing up with this giant gap where that story should have been. The weight of that just got heavier and heavier with each passing year until finally I was just like, "I just need to go on this journey and figure this out for myself." I started gathering material from my siblings, from my aunt, and started piecing stuff together.

I was exploring my mother's mental illness and surviving suicide loss. She committed suicide and the five of us had to deal with that trauma. I would talk to people about it and they share very similar versions of the story or have some kind of point of entry. As I was putting it together, I realized that the film is more than about just my family. We were talking earlier about this idea of universality. It's not just about my family and I. It's about grief and loss. I've had some really great conversations in the South Asian community and the Asian American community but also with the general public where people really respond to those larger themes and can really connect to that. Also, a big part of it is just reconciling identity and understanding what it means to be South Asian American. Not necessarily knowing a ton about your past. I realized there were all these points of entry and at that point, it was a film. It was larger than just my family and me. It might be about my family but there's a way to make it with universality. What was the second part of your question? How was it received?

MB: Yes, that's correct.

DS: I talked a little bit about this before. We had a really difficult time getting it into film festivals but then once we started applying to South Asian and Asian American film festivals, all of a sudden, it just kind of blew up. We got into a lot of those but at the same time we were pursuing community screenings with colleges and universities and non-profit organizations. There was this eight-month period where I was just constantly travelling, showing the film, and talking about it. It was exhilarating. We had screenings that were completely sold out with people standing in the back of the room. We also had screenings where like two people showed up. Every filmmaker needs to experience that when there's more filmmakers in the audience than there are audience members. I was shocked. Especially after that year, I had such a jaundiced feeling about it. Making the film was incredibly emotionally intense and exhausting. It took way longer than I thought. It took about seven years. I was ready to move on but then to have it explode like that was a really exhilarating experience and it reminded me again why I decided to make it and why I became a filmmaker. Ultimately, we got it on a program called *America ReFramed*, which is a PBS program through the World Channel. It's been broadcast there about three times. Even after I'm personally done with it and I've moved on to graduate school and other projects, the film still has a life, it's still finding an audience, and it's still starting these discussions.

MB: How was your move from Chicago to Northern California? How did that influence/change your work? Why exactly did you make the move?

DS: That's a really great question and I think I'm still grappling with answers. As you probably know, it's really difficult to have a sustainable career as an artist, as a filmmaker. I really love Chicago. Chicago has been really good to me but I was having difficulty really making ends-meet as a filmmaker there. While I was making *Unbroken Glass*, I was freelancing. I was working on other peoples' projects like Usama's. I was doing corporate gigs. I was doing random doc gigs. I was cobbling together an existence. I'm not going to lie; it was pretty tough. The idea of getting an MFA opened up a whole world of being able to teach. You can probably tell, I really love talking, so the idea of teaching really excited me and even a year into grad school, I'm very excited to teach. Some people describe it as a necessary evil but I don't think that at all. I love communicating and teaching. That was one reason.

The other reason was I'd finished this film [*Unbroken Glass*] and the idea of just taking a couple of years away from what I found familiar and rediscovering who I was. Rethinking an artistic practice seemed like the right thing to do. I can tell you that that's happened and at times its been an almost painful process but one that's been very fruitful. Really asking a lot of very tough questions about my practice. We talked about social issue films. There was a period at the beginning of this process where I was really into not that and making "art" films. In the fall quarter, I made a couple of experimental projects, which was good to experiment with the kind of filmmaker I want to be. I should say I was never formally trained as a filmmaker. I never went to film school per say. So, having this experience has been pretty exhilarating.

I had lived in Chicago for fifteen years. I had never intended to live in Chicago that long. Even though I love it, I had this feeling of "let's try something new. Let's challenge myself in a different way." Just between you, me, and the archive, I'm really struck at how... maybe its just Stanford, because I go visit my brother in Oakland and I'm always struck at what a wonderful, diverse community it is. I'm having real problems in graduate school, or maybe its just what institutions of higher learning are, but being a filmmaker of color unfortunately has not been any easier in California as it was in Chicago. In some ways, it's a lot harder in the context I'm in, which is a graduate art department. It doesn't necessarily stress or value things like diversity. There's no one here that really encourages me to explore what being of filmmaker of color actually is and that's been a real disappointment. It's one that I probably should have anticipated and it's not necessarily the fault of the faculty or the program here. It's just the reality of being an artist of color, even in 2018. If you look at faculty at most institutions and you're probably not going to see someone who looks like you. There are a couple people here I can have that conversation with but it took a really long time to figure that out. The Midwest is far from perfect as well. Maybe I just had a greater expectation of Northern California. There is a huge Asian American community here and its great. In Chicago, there's neighborhoods where you walk down the street and you're the only one that looks like you. That's never happened [to me] in California.

MB: I grew up in Southern California so moving from there to Chicago I knew that I was moving to a whiter city. So, I'm curious, I know a lot of my friends here have this mystique surrounding California, thinking that it's a liberal diverse heaven or something. Did you have a similar perception of it and then moving here, did you realize it's not quite like that?

DS: Yeah, absolutely. Even the first few months I was living here, I was like "oh, I'm in California. I'm surrounded by all this liberal progressivism." You probably lived this experience and realized just how limited that is, right? It was so refreshing, coming from the Midwest, not having to account for myself. The guy on the sidewalk doesn't need to know why I'm here. But there's limits of that. People's attitudes of non-Asian minorities I think are still really retrograde. It's not the kind of utopia of inclusion and "wokeness," however problematic that word is, that I was hoping it to be. The rude awakening is I was expecting that but found the number of times I was reminded of my "otherness." There was a period of time when it was really weighing on me and I think I've found ways of coping. I do have a pretty good community here that I've cultivated. I don't know how to put those limitations into words. Some people are just liberal enough. They kind of just go through the motions and that excuses them to think, say, and do whatever they want. It's a kind of white privilege. It's a kind of entitlement that is politically more tenable. At the end of the day, I'd rather hang out with them than hang out with Trump supporters but that's not saying a ton. Was that your experience in Southern California?

MB: I grew up in Los Angeles in a very diverse part of the city. Growing up, I figured the entire United States was like that.

DS: [Laughs]

MB: I remember as a kid, I never gave it a second thought. I felt that in some ways LA was a bubble and I was very comfortable in that bubble. I realized I didn't have a realistic view of what the rest of the U.S. felt like so I wanted to move away. I knew that it was going to be a different experience. With all of my white, liberal friends in the Midwest, they present very friendly and it's something I never really experienced until moving to Chicago. They aren't as "in tune" with issues of identity and such as with my friends of color back home. It's a very different dynamic.

DS: I didn't hesitate to be the friend that would educate people when I was in the Midwest. Even in the film community, I would often be the only person of color in the room. Part of coming to California was like, "I can actually embrace some complexity in my own life and I don't have to be that guy." Ultimately, I had to become that guy again in this very small, rarified arts environment. This isn't to damn the entire of Northern California. But just the experience of being at a very elite institution like Stanford, it's stunted from the rest of the world.

MB: Last question here. What are you currently working on and what are your upcoming projects?

DS: The way this program works is that for the first year you make a film every quarter and the second year you make a thesis film. Making a good documentary in ten weeks is a crazy thing. I'm actually really excited about the film I'm making this quarter. It's about this community in Louisiana, about forty-five minutes from New Orleans, there's a chemical plant that makes neoprene. The community and the one square mile radius around this plant has an incidence of cancer that's eight-hundred times higher than the national average for cancer caused by air pollution. It's a predominantly African American, lower and middle class community. I was actually there last week, filming. It's almost numbing how many people in this community have died from cancer or have some sort of respiratory illness. People just kind of rattle off lists of people they know who have suffered from cancer and it's mind-boggling. It's more of a conventional social issue film but I went in this very arts, experimental direction.

Another film I'm making for another class is an experimental archival piece. There's an actor from the 1930s and 40s whose name is Sabu [Dastagir]. He's a really interesting figure in film history because he's in these incredibly orientalist productions. These are British and American productions. He's most well-known for [*The Thief of Baghdad*]--a lavish, Technicolor version of the jungle book that came out in the 40s and he plays this brown guy running around in a loin-cloth. I look at his work and I remember thinking, "God, this is so awful," but I look at his work and he's so charismatic and he's so human that there's this incredible tension in his work. Yes, it's this classically orientalist text where it's the western gaze creating this idea of a docile, almost animalistic Indian or animalistic other... and I feel such a personal connection to him because of the name and some other biographical facts, but he's so present and human. His first film is a film called *Elephant Boy* [laughs]. I took the film and I recut it and the idea was can you break this orientalist text. Can you use the text itself to break what it's trying to do. It's a very strange, verging on incoherent film.

I'm in another class this quarter called "Diaspora and Migration in American Art." It's more of an art history class. We're looking at a lot of paintings and photography, so it's kind of out of my milieu. The professor's letting me do a creative project for the final. I'm going to make the second installment of my recut of the Sabu films for this class. I have no idea what my thesis is going to be about, which is probably a problem but I'm starting to research it. In the work I've done so far [at Stanford] with the exception of the Sabu films, I've stayed away from Asian American and South Asian identity but I'm hoping to address that in the thesis film. Hopefully finding a community story. The great thing about California is that it's so rich. There's so many incredible Asian American stories. That is one thing I'm really hoping to get acquainted with again for my thesis project.

Fin.