
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Giau Minh Truong Interview

Gin To
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Gin To

Artist: Truong Minh Giau

Location: In Person, DePaul University Lincoln Park Campus

Date: May 2nd, 2018



Photo taken from <http://www.axislab.org/aboutus/>

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

Bio: Giau Minh Truong is a company member of A-Squared Theatre Workshop and an at-large artist for various performing arts companies in the Chicago area. For A-Squared, he directed *Ching Chong Chinaman*, *The Other Shore*, and short plays for *My Asian Mom*, acted in *Trial By Water*, and designed lights for *The Wind Cries Mary*. Giau's other directorial credits include *Downward Facing*, *Lights Out*, *Everybody*, and *Theatre of Women* for Dream Theatre Company. He directed *Sister Outlaw*, *Mr. and Mrs. LaQuesta Go Dancing*, *My Name is Flor*, *Contemplacion*, and *I Dream Electric* for CIRCA-Pintig, Chicago's long-running Filipino

American theatre company for which he served as artistic director from 2007 through 2012. Giau has also directed plays for James Downing Theatre Company and Theatre for a Change. He serves as a teaching artist and program manager for Storycatchers, stage manages with Chamber Opera Chicago and various other companies and is a resident technical director for Links Hall.

(Bio taken from <https://halcyontheatre.org/people/giautruong>)

Interview Transcript:

The interview started in The Quad at DePaul University. But then it started raining so we moved into the John T. Richardson Library hallway. The artist brought his son in a baby carriage and referred to him throughout the interview.

Gin To: Tell me about yourself! Your background and the work that you do.

Truong Minh Giau: My name is Giàu, Truong Minh. I was born in Vietnam.

GT: Oh so is it Truong Minh Giàu?

TMG: Yes. I was born in Vietnam. In a little town called Rạch Giá. Ở nhà [at home], my family basically escaped from Vietnam when I was about 3 years old. Boat people. I came here to the U.S. when I was 5 years old. So I grew up basically, most of my life, in Chicago.

GT: Did you settle straight into Chicago?

TMG: We went to Indonesia first. We were refugees there for 2 years before we got sponsored to come here. And after that, I live here ever since. I grew up like any other immigrant, confused and learning how to balance multiple cultures. Because you know I'm of Vietnamese descent- My family from Vietnam but my grandparents were from China. So there's a mixture of cultures too: the Chinese culture in the Vietnamese culture. And then there is the American culture here: which is a collection of multiple cultures. Cause I went to an all- Puerto Rican elementary school so I learned a lot of Puerto Rican culture and mannerism from there.

I was born in 1976, growing up in the 80s, I grew up here, wanting to be an astronaut [laughs]. Cause I love science. So that was one of my main focus, to go into science, to join the navy, and then become an astronaut, or join NASA after that.

GT: Did you end up doing any of that?

TMG: I did not. Cause by high school, I was in ROTC and was already in the Math and Science department at Lincoln Park high school. I ended up joining a nonprofit called Music- Theatre workshop. They're called Storycatchers now at the Field Museum. And they wrote plays for the exhibits that would come through there. And so I became a part of the playwrights, a part of the acting, singing, and all the performance. I started doing that my Junior year of high school. And when I was about to graduate from high school, Meade Palidofsky, the artistic director there came up to me, knowing that my plan was to join the military. But she was very anti-military. So she said to me: "hey, if I give you a full-time job with us, would you reconsider joining the military?" And so, I thought: "You know what, I could work for a year or 2 and see if I'd change my plan". And after that it just worked out. Ever since then!

[Both laugh]

I worked at the company for about 15 years. We worked with kids in the detention center, Roosevelt and Damen detention centers for boys. And we also worked with the Warrensville center for girls. And so my cultural experience opened up a lot more. I learned a lot about Chicago and the segregation in Chicago, and the underserved communities in Chicago too. And I saw the method of theatre, musical theatre itself, as a great vehicle for these kids to be more positive in their life or to change. So I saw small steps here and there.

After I left the company, I taught on my own for a while. I went to school, studying photography and film. So that's the other thing. I decided to stay in the arts. And got into film. So I went to Columbia College, did the cinematography degree. I did film here and there, got bored with it. It wasn't as exciting as I wanted it to be and wasn't as community-based. It always felt like getting the technical side of it done. There was a lack of community there for me. So I decided to go into teaching again. I taught on my own for a bit.

GT: Teaching theatre?

TMG: I taught at my own theatre process. And teaching art as well. I dabbled in all sorts of art. I'm an interdisciplinary artist now. I used to paint murals as well too. I've done a spectrum in theatre. Now I'm also a technical director and lighting designer for Links Hall. I take all of my learning and put it into my art work. My artwork usually focuses on my own observation of my behavior? And my environment? And then my behavior and environment with other people.

One of my projects that I've been working on for 8 years now is that I raise quails at home. And I've been observing their behavior changes over generations.

It started raining so we decided to move indoors.

GT: So we were talking about your work in theatre. The way I learned about you from Laura Kina was through your involvement with A-Squared theatre. Do you want to talk a bit about that?

TMG: It is, I would say, one of the few Asian American Theatre organizations here in Chicago. Growing up, going through multiple cultures, and then learning about my own culture: my Vietnamese culture too. There is a lack of resources, lack of opportunities, to experience anything that is personal or connected to my history. I got involved with the Asian American community at a very young age too in high school. Everything in my life is sort of serendipitous in a way. It just happens. And I just sort of flow with it. I ended meeting some Asian Americans at my summer job and we became really good friends. We formed a bunch of organizations. In high school and then through to college that would focus on and give Asian American opportunities to explore the culture and ourselves. And from there, connecting that with theater, I ran into A-Squared, which was known as Two East (?) back then; they'd gone through several transformations since the beginning and is still a very small organization. I am a company member. But I've also directed shows with them. I've done lighting design, acting, etc. During that time, I was also an artistic director of a Filipino theatre company called [...]. And that was where I got most of my experience in theater. Being able to experiment and figure out how to tell a story using Asian American story. For [...], it was mostly about Filipino culture. So I know a lot about Filipino culture as well as my own [laughs]. My wife is actually half Filipino and half Thai. But she grew up with mostly Thai culture. My mother in law who lives with us is fluent in Tagalog. So at home, we speak to him* in Chinese, Vietnamese, English, Thai and Tagalog. So let's see what he picks up!

GT: Was there any project that was specifically Vietnamese? Cause it [A-Squared] seems pan-Asian.

TMG: Yes it is very pan-Asian. We'd done one show that was Vietnamese. The playwright was Qui Nguyen. And he's pretty known in the Asian American circle. He wrote this show called *Trial by Water*. It was basically a boat story. And the people on the boat. Their engine broke and they ended up in the ocean for over a month or so. And they ended up eating each other. That was kind of gruesome. It was a gruesome story [laugh].

GT: That must have been very interesting! Working on that.

[Both laugh]

TMG: It was! It's interesting. At the same time, even within Asian American organizations. I still feel there is still a lack of knowledge of the specific culture that we're representing sometimes. We try our best. We brought in people who knew about these things. I mean *I* had

experience. But I was only three years old. This was the story of my family. But I wasn't an expert on it. So just going off of human emotion. And the things that I would empathize with. Because like I said, I acted in that piece as well as light design. [Laughs] In a small company, you'd have to wear multiple hats.

But it was very eye-opening. I realized that research and-

Giau's son started to cry so we paused the interview to give him some crackers.

TMG: But yeah. And now when I make work, I do a lot of research. And I try to get an understanding of my subjects through time and also through experience.

GT: Besides theater, you said that you do other types of art. Do you see yourself combining knowledge from different art fields? Or is it just putting on different hats and changing gears?

TMG: My art practice is life. Everything I do I put my art practice in it. Doesn't matter what it is. If I'm doing light design in theatre. My art practice is then a performance art piece. My performance art piece is the interaction that I have with the people around me. So, I sort of put on a persona [laughs]

GT: Oh no! [laughs] Hmm. What do you mean by that?

TMG: It is a very neutral "character". I'd be very helpful and I'd solve everyone's problems. And so people tend to gravitate towards me and they feel safe with me. It's also my exploration on how I develop relationship with people. Without giving them the misconception of anything else other than a professional relationship. And also a very friendly relationship. Something where you can trust each other without expecting anything else from each other. It's hard. It's very hard. For example, I'd have people who think I'm being flirty with them or there are people who think that I want something from them. So I take these observations and keep it to myself. Even for people who are really mean to me, I have the ability to sort of [*snap fingers] take that and put that behind my head. And then look at every moment with them as a "me" moment. Giving them chances to see the better side of them. So even people who might have mistrusted me at the beginning or were angry at me at the beginning ended up warming up to me in the end. I think it comes from my experience working with the kids in prison, having to have this persona with them. Because I have to be a little bit more open with them too because they are so closed up. And so my life is a performance, is an art practice. So community is my material in a way. I've been sort of transitioning more into curating events, using my art practice to sort of give an experience of culture.

Recently, with Axis Lab, I'm not sure if you came across that.

GT: Yes I saw your bio on their website.

TMG: Axis Lab is a newer organization with Patricia Nguyen and Hac Tran. I mean we're all sort of co-founders of it. But they were the ones who came together and said "maybe we should create something together!" and then contacted me a bunch other people and all formed this group called Axis Lab. Which is committed to creating community with art, food, design, education, theater. And so this idea of "accessing" all that. But also focusing on communities of color and communities of immigrants.

GT: So it seems that you engage a lot with "Asian American" as an identity. Do you ever see yourself doing art separate from that identity? Or is it something that is always present?

TMG: No, I mean- Yes, my quail project. My identity is always me, no matter what it is. My quail project isn't about me being Asian American. My quail project is about me being human, through my observations of quails.

GT: What exactly is that project? Could you talk a bit about that?

TMG: The project itself is called: "The Quail Project: [...] observations". It's based on a scientific paper I read long time ago where there were female quails. When they're in an environment lacking of food and there's danger, they'll inject a little of testosterone into their eggs. And so when the babies are hatched, they are a little bit aggressive and a little bit flighty, so they won't stay in the area. It affects their behavior. But if the mother is in the environment where she feels safe and there's plenty of food, she'll inject a little of estrogen into the eggs so that the babies are a little more friendly with each other and they help each other survive in that environment.

And so, I started this project by rescuing a bunch of quails from a [...] shop so they were all in these tight quarters stacked on top of each other. The females had all their feathers on the head plucked out because it's a part of their mating ritual. Cause they had males in there too. And I brought them home. And I built a habitat for them. And over the years, I sort of developed this habitat, and observing the changes and documenting it as well too. And my first generation was all frightened, angry birds. They would attack each other, attack my hand when I put it in there. Or they'd run off, you know, hide. And it wasn't until the third generation where I started to notice a change in their behavior where they came out and they started to do sunbathing. And you know, they started to trust me a little bit more, where they became a bit more domesticated in a way. I tried to keep my distance from them as much as I can. I was trying to create a system in there where I wouldn't have to visit them except for like maybe once a week. Just like to have them live in there by themselves with very little human interaction.

GT: So it that an on-going project? As in, where do you see the project going? Is it just going to... keep going?

TMG: It is going to just keep going! I use it as my fuel to sort of live in the moment? Because I've got the many deaths with them as well too? I've learned to accept that in many ways. You know? The process of death. The process of grieving. The excitement of birth as well too. When they incubate their eggs and the babies being born. It's a very exciting moment! It's just exciting to see the miracle of life. And their life span is only 2-5 years. It's a great opportunity to see changes happening quickly.

GT: Oh my god. That sounds really interesting.

TMG: Yeah so that, as I said, isn't connected to my Asian American identity. It's just connected to my own surrounding and who I am, connecting with other people. And another project that I've been working on is that I'm trying to make a first-aid kit. For gunshots. It's an artist book that I've been creating. At the moment, it's at the research stage still. Looking and reading. Taking classes, as well too, on EMT (Emergency Training). Actually I can show you some of that work.

Giau brought out his iPad to show me his working process.

TMG: It's on my iPad. I do everything mostly digital now. Because I try to cut back on carrying too many things in my life and having things hold me down [Laughs] That might also be from my refugee experience. Of not having anything?

[Both laugh]

GT: Travel light?

TMG: Yeah travel light with nothing. Or you lose everything. So I'm glad that the cloud is invented now.

[Pic]

It's harder to talk or show on audio recording. So this is my research at the moment. So studying brains. What happens when you get shot in certain sections of the brain. Like I said, it's still in the research stage of things.

GT: And where did you get the inspiration for this project? How did it start?

TMG: It's been at the back of my head for a while.

GT: Is that your drawing?

TMG: Yes that is my drawing. It's actually my interpretation of what he'd look like when he's older. Cause I want to have this idea that it's something personal. It's something precious. Life is precious. But a bullet can just take it away really quick [snap fingers]. Like I said, I've had the idea for a while. But it wasn't until one day where I was sitting in my car, I heard some gunshots.

GT: In Chicago?

TMG: In Chicago, yeah. And I saw a guy running past me. And he had his hand in his pocket. And I knew that he had a gun in there. Because it was bulky. And so I ducked. I was on the phone. I told them that I needed to hang up and call the police real quick. So I hung up. Called the police. Told them where I was at. And after a while, I came out of my car and looked and I saw a guy on the street, laying down on the ground. And I saw a woman running out of the house and she was screaming. And so I ran over there. Cause I had already started this project and learned a bit about what to do. The only thing I knew to do at that moment was to stop the blood from coming out of the exit wound. To stop the bleeding in the front. I told the woman to take some cloth and hold it down right here. And I was trying to calm him down as well too. But I already saw in his eyes that "death was near"? Because I see it with my quails. Like I said with my quails, I was able to slow the moment down cause of my experience with deaths of quails? I was able to slow that moment down and sort of try to keep the woman calm. And keep the guy awake and alert. But then his eyes started darting and his breath was very shallow. It was about 5 to 10 minutes before the ambulance finally came. The ambulance came and separated all of us. And eventually he died. And that was when I knew I had to continue the project and finish it somehow. After that, I went to work. And then at work, I already knew the process of what I was going to go through the grieving of violence. And so I told my coworker, this was at Links Hall. I was lighting and designing a show. So I said "Look, this is what I went through today. At the moment I'm calm. At the moment I can talk to you and everything. But in an hour or so I might need a moment to myself. I knew that I needed to grieve at some point. And so as the day went on, I felt it creeping up. I knew that I needed a break. I had to step away and just cry. And so I let it out! I cried and shouted. I did all that. Process of grieving. To me, I didn't even know the guy. And so to imagine his family. Cause I saw his mother too. His mother and brother came out. And I saw them talking and looking at the body. I just couldn't imagine what they were going through. For me, my moment with that is gone. Is done. But they have to go on with that. You know? And I felt like if I had something there, a tool box. Or a tool. To be able to help. I would have been able to do something. Or at least to do something more. That's why I wanted to create this artist book. My idea is that the next time violence occurs, someone gets shot or something,

that I could commemorate by having an event with food and drinks. And at the end of the day, they'll leave with this artist book on how to dress certain gunshot wounds.

GT: Wow. Yeah.

TMG: So yeah. That's the most recent project I've been working on. In between many other projects.

GT: Are you the person to keep busy with many different things going on?

TMG: Yeah. I mean things constantly come towards me. So I take them on as well too. And also I have my own personal project that I work on.

GT: So are you a full-time artist? Do you have another job?

TMG: No I do not. I'm a freelancer and I freelance a lot. I keep myself busy. In many ways. If it's educational. If it's visual. Whatever it is, I try to diversify in my fields of knowledge. Because I believe in diversity. Not only in people. But in mindsets and experience. Cause I think I come across things where I couldn't solve the problem if I didn't have experience as a lighting designer or an experience as a carpenter or an experience as a teacher, you know? Like I said, I try to learn as many things as possible in life. And to use those as tools to help my community, myself, and my family.

GT: So there probably isn't an artistic practice you see yourself primarily defined by?

TMG: No. There isn't one.

GT: That is very interesting. So speaking of the art industry and the theatre industry, how do you see it changing since you first started working compared to how it is now?

TMG: I feel, for Asian American theatre scene, it's still a small wave. I mean, with A squared, we are going into our third year of a festival that I help curate with Links Hall. I connected the two of them and we would create this festival, this performance, this art festival that brings in dancers, performance artists, visual artists, into 1 space to be able to perform for a week. And I feel like you create this one thing, it just ends there. As people get busier. The movement isn't as strong as I'd like it to be? I'd always hear of things, you know, people trying to start all these Asian American theatre companies. But I never really see anything happening after that. And I'd love to get more involved. And so, I feel like maybe I am a part of the problem [laugh]. Is that my focus is so everywhere. Cause I did focus on doing theatre. I focused on doing theatre for a

long time. But my passion just fizzled out. Because I felt more meaning in my life when I am connected to a community. When I do theatre, it is still community- based.

GT: Are you still connected to Vietnam in certain ways? Like do you still travel back? Are you still connected to the communities there?

TMG: Yeah. I have a lot of artist friends out there. I've worked with a couple of artists too out there. One of my primary art practice partners is Ly Hoang Ly. She is one of the first contemporary woman artists in Vietnam.

GT: I'm not familiar with her. What kind of art is she engaged in?

TMG: She does contemporary art. So, she has done performance art. She's also an interdisciplinary artist. We worked on a documentary together 2 years ago that we're still working on. Up in Hai Yen, the mountain by the border of China and Vietnam. We did this documentary following this rock, this honey rock. And where it came from. Cause the legend is that it was built by the indigenous people. Cause we know the history of the mountain that there were groups of indigenous people living there. And the legend tells that the indigenous medicine man created this because it had a lot of healing factors. He collected them in the mountains where bees make 'em. But we couldn't find anyone to take us into these mountains and there were all these stories that they're fake ones out there. Mixed with the real ones too. People are duplicating it. We had the same rock and gave it to different people. Some said that yeah this is the real one. And others said that no this is a fake one. You know? And no one knew the answer at all. But we think it came from China. And that it was manufactured as a legend to sell.

It's just in the mountains. And you see the indigenous people selling it everywhere up there. But the documentary is more focused on a couple of ideas of the generic culture and false culture? Because the indigenous people have become so commercialized cause there are so many tourists up there right now. And so they started to all wear these generic outfits, so everybody now looks the same, even though they're from different tribes. Because it attracts the tourism. And it's easier too. Because we actually filmed this one woman who ... got into her traditional gear and outfit. And oh my god it was so many layers and wraps. It's such a long process.

GT: So *she's* doing a performance art piece!

TMG: Yeah [laugh]. But yeah we worked on that. She got her MFA at SAIC. That's where I met her. And we did a couple of projects. She did one where she interviewed my dad and collected the story of us escaping/ coming here to the US. She's done a couple of exhibits out there. We have an artist book of the story as well too. It's been translated into Spanish, German, Vietnamese, and I think Japanese.

Is it published in Vietnam?

It's an artist's book. So yeah. Someone did purchase it. Someone purchased it for a certain large amount of money that I can't talk about.

[Laugh]

So that's my connection to Vietnam. I still go back there. And I still have family members back there too. I go back either every year or every other year.

GT: Is it primarily for work? Or just to visit people? Or?

TMG: The last time I went was for my honeymoon. Before that was for work. Before that was for work too. And then next time I'll go back will be for vacation/ work.

GT: So one last question. What do you see the point of theatre in Vietnam? Cause it's almost non-existent right? So I guess, what's your thought on art and theatre and things of that nature in Vietnam?

TMG: Well, I can't specifically talk about the culture of theatre in Vietnam. Because I have very little experience in it. I can talk about the culture of arts in Vietnam and censorship in Vietnam. And a lot of the dangers, I guess, are lurking. [Laugh]. Cause I feel the paranoia of the artist and the people out there. Because of their experience with the government? And the government's interaction with art? And not understanding art as well too. And the silencing and the censorship of artists as well too.

GT: Do you know specifically of people who try to push those boundaries?

TMG: Yeah. I know a few. I guess sometimes their paranoia sort of gets to me too. And so, I thought maybe I shouldn't be talking to you. [laugh]. Maybe you're trying to get information out of me. You know?

GT: Hah. Oh I don't think you said anything too incriminating. You're fine. *I was joking

[Both laugh]

GT: So then I guess it's a lot of self-censorship too right? Like you said.

TMG: Yeah. Self-censorship. Well but that's the great thing about the arts. That you can bypass censorship through other forms.

GT: That's right.

TMG: But the only problem with that is that it's a trickle-down I feel. You know? As in, the academic scholar would understand it first. And then that somehow needs to get down to the people. And the people, you know, they come in and they don't understand the art piece? And so they don't get anything from it either. Then what's the point of it? Sometimes. I don't know. It's something I'm still exploring.

GT: Definitely.

TMG: Like, how do you make art for the public? As well as for yourself? Yeah. I don't know. Yeah.

GT: Right.

TMG: I just do it because I love it. It's not- well.

GT: For sure. It is a tough question. And sometimes I guess it feels like guerilla warfare. Because you try to do that one thing. And then, back off.

TMG: Yeah.

GT: I guess that's all the questions I have prepared. Thank you so much!