
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Nicole Sumida and Alex Yu Interview

Laraib Malik
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Laraib Malik

Artist: Nicole Sumida and Alex Yu

Location: Interview over Google Hangout – Chicago, IL

Date: June 10th, 2019

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203 Section 301: Asian American Arts & Culture during the Spring 2019 Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.



Photo and artist bio provided by Nicole Sumida and Alex Yu (www.riksha.com)

Bio: Nicole Sumida is a co-founder and co-publisher of *Riksha Magazine*, an online magazine featuring creative work by and about Asian Americans. Alex Yu is a co-publisher of *Riksha* and both have been involved in community arts organizing since the 1990s in Chicago.

“*Riksha* provides a space for capturing the Asian American experience through compelling writing, commentary, and artistic expression. We curate an online magazine that presents poetry, fiction, non-fiction, fine arts, and video and audio pieces. We also comment on and curate the bric-a-brac and ephemera of Asian American life.”

Interview Transcript:

Laraib Malik: Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Nicole Sumida: My name is Nicole Sumida and I'm a clinical social worker by profession. I've mostly worked in outpatient mental health but I'm currently working in higher education supporting first generation college students at Loyola University. Over the past few decades, intermittently, I've also been involved in arts organizing. We published a print magazine for several years and we organized readings, performances and art exhibitions featuring Asian American artists and writers. In 2017, we relaunched *Riksha* online.

Alex Yu: Hi! My name is Alex Yu and my background is in finance and economics. I've been involved in the capital markets since the 1990s. I got involved in art because, back in the early 1990's, I did not see art in the context of it being Asian American in the Midwest. It was not happening, so I started sponsoring shows and created an organization that promoted Asian American arts. It was called the Asian American Arts Organization. We did exhibits and activities promoting Asian American arts around the city of Chicago. Growing up in Chicago, I noticed that there was not a lot of activity in the Midwest Asian American art scene. Later, I got involved in *Riksha* and realized that we could just combine organizations.

NS: In the early 1990's, there were lots of people doing different things: theater, performance art, art exhibitions. We were part of a larger community exploring the Asian American experience. Alex and I were working on different projects that intersected at times. We came together with *Riksha* in the late 1990s.

LM: Do you guys know my professor Laura Kina?

NS: Yes! So Laura was part of our community and we are good friends with her.

AY: The 1990s were an interesting time; a lot of things sparked organically. A lot of us were doing things, headed in the same direction. It was a really exciting time to be Asian American. It feels similar to what is going on now.

LM: If you guys do not mind me asking, how old were you guys during this time?

NS: I was in college and graduated in 1993.

AY: I had just graduated from college. It was around the same time as the L.A riots. Some say the rise in activism happened around that time.

LM: We learned that in our class as well. Around the time of the civil rights movement we also saw a spark in Asian American art and activism. I will now move on with my next question. When, how and why did you first get involved with *Riksha Magazine*? How did this idea for a magazine manifest?

NS: I was finishing my degree in English and I had a final project to create my own magazine. After I went through that process I realized, "Hey, I can do this in real life!" At the same time, I was volunteering with Pintig (Circa Pintig), a Filipinx-American theater company and my friend, Larry Leopoldo, was also interested in starting an Asian American literary/arts magazine. A friend, Patty Cooper, later joined us and we put out our first issue in 1993!

LM: Oh wow, can you tell me a little more about Larry Leopoldo?

NS: Larry was an actor and organizer in Pintig. He was also a writer and had a lot of Japanese American connections (although he was Filipino American). He knew a lot of people who were writing and also felt the need to create a space for them to publish their work. So through our various connections we just realized that we knew enough people in our own network to solicit submissions and publish. There was a lot of synergy happening at that time.

AY: Interesting side note, Larry played Carlos Bulosan in Pintig's production of *America is in the Heart* around the same time.

NS: *America is in the Heart* was written by a Filipino-American named Carlos Bulosan and is a seminal American novel. Bulosan emigrated from the Philippines, was a migrant worker and later became an organizer. He was a contemporary of Che Guevara but he gets very little acknowledgement for the work he did. Pintig's inaugural theater production was a staging of that novel and Larry was the lead.

AY: Penguin Books is actually republishing *America is in the Heart* this year, along with *No-No Boy* by John Okada and a couple others. It's an interesting time with these books being re-published.

LM: Tell me about the meaning behind the word "Riksha" and how it relates to your magazine and vision? Because I am from Pakistan and we have a lot of rickshaw's there so I immediately thought of back home and felt this feeling of familiarity. I imagined a family packed into the back of a rickshaw on their way to school. So I immediately put my name down to interview you guys because the word "Riksha" caught my eye.

NS: Oh that's interesting. Larry and I were in conversation and thought, "what is an image that reflects something iconically Asian?" An image of a rickshaw popped into our heads because most Asian countries have a version of a rickshaw and it's a vehicle that carries you from one place to another, as we hoped our magazine would do metaphorically. We chose the spelling of Riksha because we had seen it referenced as "jin-riksha" in a Japanese text and thought it was unique.

LM: That is such a great metaphor regarding the immigration of Asian's to the West Coast.

NS: I like that it reminds you of home!

[Both laugh]

LM: In your 2007 article "On Being Japanese American" in the *Voices of Chicago by the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society*. You give a detailed account about your life growing up in Chicago in the 70's as one of the few "Asian American's" in the neighborhood. In the article you state, "Times have changed and organizations like *Riksha* are needed less in a world where our artists and writers know how to promote themselves in expedient ways, but we'll keep the dialogue going and see where it takes us...". What are your thoughts about the current political climate of our country and what that means to Asian Americans living here today?

NS: When I was asked to write that piece, we were in transition. At that time, the internet was really taking off and Alex and I (and many of our friends) were noticing how well people were promoting themselves. It was much easier to show your work online, blog about it, and publicize events. So we were ecstatic as we were seeing many more Asian American artists and writers in the media. We were thinking about how print magazines are expensive, labor intensive and not as current. We started thinking, what

direction should we go in? If we were to publish another edition, how would it look? So I think when I wrote that article we were in the midst of a lot change and so I was not sure what we would do.

AY: I also think that there were a lot people doing similar things, a lot of them were professionals, and so we thought we do not really need to be doing this, let the pros handle it. I think now in the Midwest, the East Coast is a little different, but in the Midwest, we are kind of filling a niche again. What we are doing is not happening, so we are filling a void. We may stop again when somebody else comes up and fills that void too.

LM: Yeah that's interesting. I can imagine that being very strenuous. The internet taking over, obviously I was part of the internet age and so that is fascinating for me to think about. Can you tell me more about why *Riksha Magazine* stopped publishing for a few years and why you guys decided to make a comeback?

NS: I think we stopped because we got busy. As Alex said, when we were in our 20s, we felt this urgency because of that void and I think in our mid-30's, we saw a lot of movement in our community so we could just enjoy it, rather than organize it. We could just be audience members which was really nice.

There were a few reasons why we decided to relaunch *Riksha* online (I'll let Alex share his experiences with the Writers Workshop), but for me the biggest reason was the 2016 election. With the results, I felt this strong urgency again to create a space for Asian American voices. The uncertainty about what was going to happen was unsettling and I felt having this space would be a good way to channel that energy. With Ed Eusebio, Chris Ike and Alex, we were able to make it happen within a few short months

LM: I see.

AY: I had already been involved with the Midwest Buddhist Temple with programming. We started a Writers Workshop in 2014 and our focus was to do personal writing and build community. The workshop is five years strong now and we've expanded to screen writing and poetry as well. The workshops are Asian American-led and have Asian American participants mainly. But it is open to all.

LM: This actually leads me to my next question, do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your work? If so, please give a specific example.

AY: That's part of building the community. Right now, we are starting to have people in the group start reading and performing. The lead facilitator is also one of the editors of *Riksha*, Eduardo Eusebio, and he is an award-winning writer. Ed is also writing songs and performing as well.

NS: In our submissions, we see many themes (Alex can share the themes in the Writers Workshop) around identity and belonging. Many people share their migration and displacement and sometimes trauma and loss come up, too. These are themes that are certainly not unique to Asian Americans but I think these are the themes that unite many of us in this country. What you lose and what you gain and kind of revisiting that through your life span. We all do a lot of processing, myself included.

AY: Interestingly enough we have trouble getting material that *is not* Asian American [chuckles]

NS: Something that is not focused on Identity...

AY: Identity, right. Something whimsical or that does not have anything to do with Asian American identity is also welcome.

LM: Yeah! that makes sense, there is so much. Like you said, people processing all these things years later and things are coming back with more clarity and purpose. That is very beautiful and cool. I will transition on to my next question here. 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”?

NS: As artist ourselves? I do not consider myself an artist but rather an arts or cultural organizer.

LM: Let me rephrase that better. Your magazine, the community you guys have built, you guys are leaders in this movement. So, how would you guys categorize your community or your identity? And how does that relate to your magazine.

NS: I see myself as an arts organizer. As a mixed race person, my mother is Japanese American and my father was Caucasian, my identity has evolved over time. It's complex for me because I see the value in identifying as Asian American but also respect everyone's right to identify themselves as they choose. I feel *Riksha* is inclusive and our community is diverse and we welcome conversation about what it means to be Asian American as individuals and in community.

AY It is really by or about Asian Americans. We would like the topics to be related to the Asian American experience though it may be written by someone who is not Asian American. One of our major past exhibits was entitled “Degrees of Influence”. The art that comes from our community has many degrees of influence from our homelands. In some pieces, you cannot tell they are Asian American and then some are fairly obvious, like a more traditional Chinese landscape painting. So there are various degrees of how you are influenced by your culture. [Nicole agrees] I am Chinese-Filipino and I came from a multinational background, so I was never Filipino enough to be Filipino, never Chinese enough to be a part the Chinese group. To some extent, Asian American was a group I gravitated to because it encompassed both.

LM: It is like an umbrella.

NS: Yes. I am third generation Japanese American (sansei) but I identify more with being Japanese-American from Hawai'i as the JA experience is very different there.

LM: Very interesting. So this is a question for both of you: was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Like growing up how did that affect you guys and was it important to you?

NS: I don't think I really understood my identity until I went to college. I grew up with my mother and we visited Hawai'i and I knew I was different because kids made me feel different, here and there. I lived in a white neighborhood in the Chicago suburbs but my high school was mostly black and Latinx so I definitely found myself gravitating towards the brown and black people. But I do not think I really understood myself as an Asian American or Japanese American until college when I started reading African literature, funnily enough. I was an English major but was also interested in history and political science so I took a bunch of courses where I started learning about colonization/decolonization. It was then that I started dissecting my own identity. Being in Pintig really helped put things together for me. So by the time I was 20 or so, I felt firmly rooted in my sense of myself. And I think that has pretty much stayed stable over time.

AY: For me, I grew up in Chicago which was/is a very diverse city. At least the environment that I was in, I went to Chicago public schools. I did not feel the need to identify with being Asian that much. I had

Asian friends but I also had Hispanic friends and African American friends and Caucasian friends. So it was not until college when I went to the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. It was a very homogenic power structure there. It has the biggest Greek fraternity system in the world and as people of color there, you had to assimilate or were super marginalized. So that is where I started being really active in Asian American groups. I realized that we did not have any power in our individual groups so we started to be more cooperative with the other groups. It was a really great thing to see 50 people show up at an event and then a year later, 1000 people would show up and we had to rent Foellinger Auditorium. It was really exciting to experience this and see people come out of their shells and be in an environment that they felt comfortable in.

LM: That is very powerful, wow.

NS: It is interesting that it took you to be in that environment for you to realize, “I need to create a space for myself!” whereas here, you just blended in. There was comfort. There was no comfort there.

AY: Yes, at home I felt there was a community because there was diversity.

LM: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years? I don't think you guys really exhibit work because you guys are a magazine but I thought I would ask anyway.

NS: When we were still in print, we organized a launch party and often had a series of events to celebrate the issue. We had readings, club events and art exhibitions. With the web magazine, we haven't had as many live events but we are considering some opportunities.

LM: What changed?

NS: Time. We have kids now. [chuckles].

LM: [also laughs] I understand.

NS: We had a lot of free time in our twenties and less in our forties with career and family. Also there are more Asian Americans organizing events and performances which is wonderful! There is still room to organize multimedia exhibitions like we used to do, so we are open to it.

AY: There is an annual Asian American multimedia art exhibition that accompanies the FAAIM film festival. They usually feature several artists there. It would be nice to see more exhibitions with a wide variety of work.

NS: Who knows, maybe in the future!?

[Everyone laughs]

LM: Well thank you for answering all my questions so eloquently. My last question is, what are you guys currently working on, what is new with *Riksha Magazine*?

NS: We continue to focus on soliciting new work and publishing online (riksha.com). We had been posting issues with 6-10 new works but a few months ago, we decided to keep the magazine more current by accepting submissions on a rolling basis and publishing individual pieces more frequently.

AY: We continue to try new things with the Writers Workshop, including playwriting and song-writing. Right now, we are starting to get out in the public and it's nice to have readings by the actual writers. That is a gratifying thing and hopefully we will attract more people.

NS: We have also hosted performances with local groups and we will continue to look for more opportunities to build community. *Riksha* social media promotes events and performances by Asian American writers, artists and organizers as well so we will keep expanding those mediums.

LM: Cool! that is awesome. It was really nice to chat with you guys and once again I am sorry for being an amateur at interviewing.

NS: No, you did well! Thank you so much for your time and interest.

LM: My pleasure.

END.