
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Devyn Mañibo Interview

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Interviewer: Daniel Bugliarello-Wondrich

Artist: Devyn Mañibo, Joined by a Friend

Location: Interview in person, Spinning J Cafe – Chicago, IL

Date: May 9th, 2019

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: 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 credit Tony Favarola. 2017

Bio: Devyn Lorelei Mañibo is a Brooklyn-based maker, feeder, organizer, and educator. Through poems, art objects, and gesture, she thinks intimately about the language and texture of death & desire, fullness & loss. Mañibo has had video, performance, installation, and academic work shown, published, and presented internationally in festivals, museums, and conferences including the MIX Queer Experimental Film Festival, the National Queer Arts Festival, the Berlin Porn Festival, the Queens Museum, and the Allied Media Conference. Mañibo is a 2013 Princess Grace Foundation Undergraduate Film Award Recipient, an alum of Cycle III of the Innovative Cultural Advocacy Fellowship with the Caribbean Cultural Center in Harlem, and a 2018 [Multitude] Artist in Residence at The Overlook Palace. She received her BA in New Media and Queer Studies at Hampshire College, and an MFA in performance & performance studies at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. She serves on the publishing review committee at Candor Arts and works at a big pink bookstore.

Bio Taken from <https://devynmanibo.com/about>

Interview Transcript:

Daniel B-W: So, how do you like studying at the Art Institute?

Devyn Mañibo: (laugh) Please don't use this to blackmail me. It's a complicated feeling. I'm in the performance and performance studies department. I think that a MFA is really what you make it so if what you hoped for isn't exactly what you anticipated or what you wanted then you're going to have to find your focus elsewhere. I think that I've gotten what I need.

DBW: I know someone who went to the Art Institute, and they said that it's a ton of work.

DM: Eh, it depends on what kind of course load you're taking. I think if you're like really intentional about the classes you're taking and you're not taking all nine to four classes then you'll be ok.

DBW: So another thing I wanted to ask is about your background. Where were you born?

DM: Sure, I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey.

DBW: Ok, I'm actually from there too.

DM: You're from Jersey City, New Jersey?

DBW: Not Jersey City, New Jersey, but from New Jersey.

DM: Where In New Jersey are you from?

DBW: Wayne.

DM: Oh, that's not so far from me. Yeah, most of my friends did their drivers test in Union. Which is not far from you (both laugh). Uh yeah, I'm from Jersey City. Most of my families also from New Jersey and Queens. My mom was born in the Philippines and my dad was born in Queens.

DBW: Ok, so I want to ask, when and how did you first get involved with different art mediums? I know you do a lot of with poetry and installation art.

DM: I've always been creative. I started... I was always interested in visual art when I was a kid. I started writing poetry in a way that felt real when I was eleven, and I was also doing other things. I started doing experimental jazz when I was 13, did a little bit of weird painting in

middle school, started doing photography by the time I was like 15. Photography and experimental jazz kind of became my two main mediums for quite a bit, and that's kind of what I thought I was going to go to undergrad for, and that really quickly changed when I started working in moving image. My undergraduate education was at Hampshire College, which we don't have any grades or majors or anything. So really like, you do whatever the fuck you want (laugh). Yeah, and it was a really easy transition to move from photography to moving image, and then starting to build environments. So working a lot in installation. I was working with a bunch of mentors in varying mediums so it was really conducive to that kind of work.

DBW: So, how would you define or categorize your art or yourself as an artist?

DM: That's tough. I'm not a performance artist despite being in the performance department. I've often been lumped as like a queer artist. I think that also isn't something that can encompass my work. Like there's nothing inherently queer about my work except for me being a queer person. Also in terms of being a Filipino artist that also doesn't feel like it encompasses my work really.

DBW: So not much straight up defines it.

DM: I primarily do installation work and I make poems and books.

DBW: Sounds like you've done it all though pretty much.

DM: Yeah (laugh).

DBW: We went to the art museum, yesterday actually. I had no idea you had a display there.

DM: At the Sullivan Galleries, yeah.

DBW: I read online about the F(E)AST display so that was awesome. I wanted to ask, what was the inspiration behind that?

DM: I mean a lot of the work that I've been doing has been sort of centered around both abundance and loss. Thinking about the process of mourning and grieving around close family members. A lot of the work that I've done in grad school has been centered around the death of my mother, and that at first was the incentive in thinking about what loss looks like in work, and the way your loneliest self can become a physical object. A lot of the work that I do is meticulous handcraft. So things that you are sitting and doing for hours and hours. Like one certain motion. For this project I made 45 pieces of paper and then embroidered each one with gold thread. But this was a three part project right? So it actually started with a meal that I

cooked for... how many people were there? Like 27 people or something like that. And that was to be shared with the hands and that was a meal of mostly seafood and vegetables served on banana leaves. And then I carried the motif of the banana leaves into this second part of the project right? So like thinking about loss that you can't prevent and also being ok with something you can preserve. So thinking about the pieces of paper because they're made out of drafts of the poems that I've been writing.

DBW: Yeah, I saw the little letters. I thought that was very cool.

DM: So that was literally recycled paper made of drafts and then also rice water, and then the banana leaves I hung in front and then let them curl in on themselves so that you could see what was behind them. And then the third part of the project will be taking the pieces of paper down and using them as front and back covers for two books of forty poems.

DBW: I saw that you had an upcoming poetry collection that's exciting.

DM: Yeah, so that'll be in the book.

DBW: We kind of already touched on this, but I was wondering, so on the pieces of paper there's gold writing. Was there any significance to the placement of the order?

DM: So they originally started as pairs. So the pairs were sometimes really obvious like feast and fast going together, or now and here going together. And then the incentive in moving them around was that they could be kind of read in any direction. Not necessarily like full thoughts or sentences but there are like certain groupings that felt good together. Like up and down or side to side or backwards, and sort of playing with the expectations of where words might go. So the words that were paired were now separated.

DBW: So here's another one. How has your art impacted your own life and how would you say that you've seen it impact other people's lives?

DM: That's a big question.

DBW: Yeah, sorry (both laugh).

DM: I mean it's impacted my own life in that the work that I do... I don't want to call it cathartic or therapeutic in anyway, but it's been an outlet for me to place these kind of visceral feelings right? Like for me to work with my hands is to take something outside of myself. So like something that has impacted me like the death of my mother, to make that physical.

DBW: Yeah, so like to take an emotion and-

DM: Right, and to have the work hold it instead of me and to release that into the world is to release it from your body. That in itself is almost like a performance bi product. Like, what does it mean to finish with something and it's no longer part of your physical being anymore, but it becomes its own body.

DBW: Sort of turns into closure maybe?

DM: I wouldn't call it closure, but definitely it becoming its own body takes it out of you. And then it puts that feeling into a different form. How its impacted others? I don't know I'd have to ask other people (laugh). I really-

DBW: I mean I thought it was cool (laugh).

DM: Yeah, the work that I do, I mean, I see it as mostly for myself really. You know like if I do something over and over and over again in a solitary state it's not for anyone else except for me, and also the people that I'm invoking in the work.

DBW: So a change of subject here. Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes, or history in your artwork?

DM: I think it comes up kind of in the materiality of the work, and also in a lot of the subject matter of my poems. Like I'm often talking about my mother or my lola or lineages right? So, I'm thinking about lineages of women and then also kind of the histories that were not passed down through that lineage of women. So the way that I learned to do things like cooking was never through someone telling me how to do a thing but through almost observational history. Not even oral history, but through what I watched over the years from my family. Yeah I mean, I never say the word Asian right, in my work.

DBW: So it's not too big of a focus for you.

DM: Yeah, I mean thinking the materiality of the work like banana leaves-

DBW: Kind of like naturally-

DM: Like happens right? Banana leaves were something that my family uses. To use it in work in a way that isn't used like in the way my family would use it necessarily is almost like, I hate the word reclamation but it's a revisioning of a material. Which is why this three part project felt

really important. To use the banana leaves in a way that my family would use them and then re-envision them in a different space which is what you're seeing in the gallery.

DBW: So, have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American-

DM: Yes (both laugh).

DBW: Or have you ever been labeled as Asian or Asian American artist?

DM: Yeah, actually in the latest addition of the Filipino American artist directory I'm inside of. Which, the print publication came out last month. I'm also listed on their website and directory. It's an archive of Filipino American artists..... that's one thing. I've also been included in various film screenings that were labeled Asian American. So, the last one that I think was explicit was through the National Queer Art Festival through an organization called Queer Rebels, and they were specifically putting together a performance night and a film screening which was to highlight Asian American artists who also have a background in activism and organizing so any kind of work with political leanings. So ya, I was part of that kind of showcase twice with two different works with collaborators. It's not like any kind of reluctance to be part of those spaces, but I do end up in them often, and it is a space I feel comfortable in. Especially if it's curated by people I trust. Who aren't just leaning on one kind of Asian right? Like there needs to be a full representation of what an Asian American encloses - artist looks like. It's not just East Asians right? I've also obviously submitted things to Asian American Artist Workshop and been in spaces like that. Yeah, it's like spaces that are meant to feel comfortable but aren't always right? You kind of have to find your people.

DBW: So is that something really important to you or just kind of a natural part of work, that I guess you just sort of accept?

DM: I think it sort of happens, and I'm kind of just ok with it. But, it's not - I don't actively seek out these spaces to be part of. Only because so often they're focusing on an Asian American identity that isn't me.

DBW: So what type of exhibition opportunities have stayed the same for you over the years?

DM: I haven't been part of that many shows. Um, but definitely I - so when I first started getting my work out on the festival circuit or like within group shows and stuff. I was definitely leaning more on this is a group of peer artists, this is a group of Asian American artists. Actually leaning on where my identity politics were, and now I'm less concerned with that now. I'm more interested in the materiality of people's work or what kind of subject matters they're touching on

that can overlap with me. Regardless of where you grew up or where your families from or whether or not you're even queer. I don't give a shit as long as your work is resonating with me in some way I'd be happy to associate with it.

DBW: So, do you have any things you're working on right now?

DM: Yeah, so the third part of the project right? The poems are all still in the works and I'll be binding all those books by hand this summer. I'm also working on some other projects on the down low. A lot of what I'm thinking about right now is food. Like that I feel comes really naturally in my work. You would ask me two years ago what your work is about I would have been like... snacks.

DBW: (laugh) Yeah.

DM: And it still is about snacks (laugh). But I have a little one off event happening in Ukrainian Village in June. And that'll be, I don't want to call it a pop up but it will be a food event with a collaborator and then I also intend on doing other kinds of food events probably in New York in three months. Yeah, those are the main things I'm working on. Also like writing writing writing and writing some more, and then maybe also working on an anthology of food poems.

DBW: How much time so you put into writing the poems?

DM: (laugh) I try to give myself a little bit of creative time every day. Whether that's writing a couple of words in my phone, that counts as something right? If I'm walking down the street and observe something. That's one thing that I think has been really important about going to grad school is that it's made me really perceptive to things that I wouldn't necessary notice before. So, it can be the weirdest things like a wire coming out of the wall and the entire thing is painted gray. That's something I see every day on this very particular wall on my walk to the train and it's an odd thing, it looks odd, but it's an observation I've made that I can't shake now.

DBW: So you're like noticing the artistic significance-

DM: Not even the artistic significance, but the possibilities of touch on the street (both laugh) is really interesting to me. Things like that or - so I work across the street and we had this little step that was breaking, and every day I would have to kick it back into place, and that idea of this thing that was dislodged by itself and then I would kick it back into place every day .

DBW: So does that translate to your poetry?

DM: Not necessarily, but it's like these small things that I notice that can sometimes turn into

language.

DBW: So like creative ideas.

DM: Yeah. So I saw this truck that was blowing blue smoke out the top and I thought it was really strange, and I wrote about-

DBW: Where does this blue smoke come from?

DM: Why is it blue right (laugh)? But yeah, it's like this imagery that sometimes will pop up in really small ways.

DBW: So, are you planning to publish these poems in a book or online?

DM: The poems that I'm going to bind into a book is a collection of the 40 pages I wrote over the course of the Lenten Season. That'll be hand bound into an edition of 20 using the paper from my installation It'll be a really small edition, and then hopefully that'll grow into a full length collection that I'll finish next year.

DBW: Ok, yeah cool. So this is going to be a big question. Let's say ten years down the road do you have any big projects?

DM: (laugh)

DBW: Waiting ideas?

DM: Um, I mean I just want to be secure in ten years. I don't want to feel like I'm struggling to make it work. That's the big thing right. Ten years from now I want to feel like I have a really firm work life balance. I don't want to feel like I am disproportionately giving my energy to just paying bills with like a nine to five and not having anytime for personal practice. Like I want my personal practice and my professional practice to be really closely intertwined. I would love it for my art to pay for me to live.

DBW: Well you seem like you're on the right track.

DM: I hope so. Yeah, but then it's also like trying to strike this balance between when you graduate from a MFA and when you're somebody who makes art as a profession. It's like do you work in the art field right? Before I moved to Chicago I was working at an arts non profit and that took up all of my time, and I was like what's the use of putting all my effort and energy into

this organization that's not actually feeding me, and not having any time to make anything for myself. So-

DBW: It's kind of like a balance sort of?

DM: Yeah, it would be ideal. I mean maybe I'll be teaching in ten years or something. That seems kind of the trajectory for artists a lot of the time, like artists with degrees. They'll all teach at a college level and then make their shit on the side to be a practicing artist.

DBW: I always think it's cool that - I feel like artists do take that leap. Kind of give up that security. Sort of to do what you want to do.

DM: Yeah it's not a secure thing. It's not a secure lifestyle to be an artist really. You know?

DBW: It's a risk. Would you say that your family has been supportive?

DM: Yeah, I think so.

DBW: So, I know your poems cover a wide array of topics. Are there any poems that you would feel a bit uncomfortable having them read?

DM: There's one - you've read it (to friend). The inventory poem that I have, that's about the way that - thinking about the scarcity mentality within an immigrant family and the way that my grandparents count everything right? Everything is labeled with a number in our home, and then it's also about death. Like the way that bodies become material objects is just like a really scary thing to witness.

DBW: What do you mean by bodies become materialistic objects?

DM: Death is sometimes nothing more than what life insurance policy they had, then that person becomes reduced to a bank account divided amongst five people. It's jarring.

DBW: Kind of gets away from the soul of a person.

DM: Yeah...

DBW: Well that's pretty much all I have to ask great interview.

DM: Yeah, thank you for reaching out.

Fin.