
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Spring 6-20-2019

Chamindika Wanduragala Interview

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Recommended Citation

To, Vincent. (2019) Chamindika Wanduragala Interview.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/123

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Interviewer: Vincent To

Artist: Chamindika Wanduragala

Location: Via Skype

Date: May 22, 2019



Photo and Bio courtesy of the artist.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2019 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio:

Chamindika is a Sri Lankan American visual artist, cook, DJ (DJ Chamun), puppeteer and stop motion animation filmmaker based in Minneapolis. Her work deals with personal experience through mythic stories. She is also the founder and Director of Monkeybear's Harmolodic Workshop, which supports Native/POC in developing creative and technical skills in contemporary puppetry.

Bio from: <http://chamindika.com/index.html>

Interview Transcript

Vincent Rich To: First of all, I'd like to thank you for taking your time to participate in this interview. I am Vincent To, Freshman at DePaul University. Nice to meet you.

Chamindika Wanduragala: Nice to meet you too.

V: So starting off, First tell me about yourself.

C.K: Sri Lankan American. I came to the U.S when I was six and actually I used to live in Illinois, I was there for the first ten years from 1989 to 1998. Then I came to Minnesota and I've been... you know working on my art professional for since the...late 90s... like the 2000s.

V: Let's see where did you study and how did you get into art?

C.K: I studied at the U of M, The University of Minnesota there at Minneapolis. They're really crappy art department and it was all old white men; professors and it was just... didn't learn anything there. I really liked the library, I would go in check out art books by like artists of color stuff like that so I mean wasn't you know getting anything close to that school and all. So, I just did a lot of... like I would do my art on my own and when I had my BFA show, I would show that work and not the stuff I was doing you know that had to be do for class or whatever. I just felt very disconnected.

V: So, you just-

C.K: I mean I didn't-

V: So, you basically did whatever you wanted right?

C.K: Yeah.Yeah. I hear it's very different right now. It's like you know it got more like different professors now and the programs evolved and everything but it was definitely not like when I was younger. Alright, I was very little in the 90s like a long time ago.

V: How would you define your own art?

C.K: I think...I guess I would...In a way its representational because there are these characters but it's definitely not realistic so I'm really inspired by like comics and like... I grew up reading lots of mythology so a lot of my work is kind of... they look like these characters from another world so kind of combining myth and dream and things like that.

V: Ahh so you said something about mythology, right? So, what's like one of your favorite mythology stories and what inspired you into making like type of characters in mythology and stuff like that?

C.K: I think it's more like... I would read mythology more around the world especially when I was a kid I didn't even know about any other mythology except Greek mythology you know so when I was in high school I started reading stuff from around the world and everything it wasn't so much that there was a specific story that inspired me but it was more just that fantastical element and I really connect to that and I also love animation too so and puppetry, so just kind of giving characters that other worldly element and having them do things that regular humans can't do and so that's why I'm really into animation and puppetry as well.

V: I can see that you have worked in multiple mediums of art such as paints, stop motion, DJ and right now puppetry. So, what have made you worked into these types of fields?

C.K: I actually did only drawing for like only...say around the mid 90s to just like 3 years ago, all I did was draw but I always loved puppetry for like the past 20 years, I saw really amazing puppet performance by these puppet artist from New York that were brought here in like 1996 by the walk of art center and the way..they were so amazing that the way they performed like you totally believed that the characters were alive like you could see that they are alive because it was performed so well. And that was the first I had seen something like of that quality in terms of puppet performance here in the twin city. So, I was like oh my god you know I have to see more of these kind of stuff and then but you know it's super white puppetry here in the U.S so I mean not just here in Minnesota but like all around the country so it was even though I loved puppetry it was really frustrating because it was only like these white puppeteer except for like a couple of PSE puppeteer so I..every few years I would think about trying out puppetry like you know making them my own but I just never did and I started an artist organization in the early 2000s so that took up a lot of my time too but then finally like a couple years ago... I'm like "Okay I will try this out" but you know I didn't want to learn by myself and it just didn't seem to make sense for me to just create an opportunity for myself so that's why I started Monkey Bears Harmolodic Workshop was to create a space for other native POC artists to learn puppetry and so that's everything that has to do with that too but it's informal to my own artwork as well so that's how I got into stop motion was because I was creating a puppet piece and I made these shadow puppets but I didn't really like manipulating them on the overhead projector and so I decided I would do an animation instead so that's how I started doing stop motion and I just loved it because that's another form that I love for many years and never thought I would try either of them so yeah so now I really wanna keep experimenting with that.

V: So, like you wanna experiment more with stop motion or on puppetry? Or like both?

C.K: Yeah definitely both, I realized that I actually don't like performing the puppets like I... I'm not really into performing in part of the cult. I discovered that by doing my own piece that I'm realizing that oh my god I don't know if this is right for me. But what I discovered is that I still want to be involved in like puppetry because I love making them I love seeing them come to life so I'm actually going to do start directing my own piece rather just hire other artists to perform in them.

V: So just going back to some of the past creations that you did like a series of paintings from what I can assume like a character of a sun baby and other various characters encountering many obstacles can you tell me more about the history of the series and what you were thinking about when you made these?

C.K: I kind of saw these characters in this other world as that the sun baby was kind of like their hope for their... kind of their hope for the future and so it figured a lot in a lot of the pieces. A lot of the drawings back then were mainly about the...the tiny characters were more like the inner thoughts of the main character usually so was kind of more like the inner world.

V: So, would you connect the sun baby to any of the mythology stories? Or some sort like that?

C.K: No, you know, I actually wasn't thinking about stories from mythology when I was doing the drawings it's more like I was just like inspired when I was younger. I think it set the tone of like the kind of style I wanted to do in terms of just having these characters with extraordinary abilities and just...you know... I don't know how to explain it, it's less about thinking about specific stories that I have read about it sort of gave me a lens how I wanted to move forward with the style of storytelling I wanted to do.

V: Have you ever been in an exhibition that contextualized as Asian or Asian American? Or have you ever been labeled as an Asian American artist?

C.K: Yeah there was one at the Asian Arts Initiative. Have you heard of that space?

V: Kind of heard the name of it yeah.

C.K: Yeah you should check out their website, they're an awesome artist organization in Philly in Philadelphia and they do a ton of exhibition that they also do performances and things like that so I had a piece in that one time and there was one diverse work like a long ago so yeah definitely and I have... I have supported other Asian American artists too in their work and different like organizing event that I have done as well.

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

C.K: I kind of have a weird experience because I had my first daughter in 2008 so I took...I ended up staying at home watching them until they went to school so I ended up not doing my artwork for a long time and then I started back up again in 2016 so that's like 8 years where I didn't pursue my art career so I have two kids. So what I have noticed coming back into the arts community is that there is way more native POC artists who are organizing their own arts events and shows where as when I was starting out it was super white in the original art world here in the twin city and there weren't as many alternative art spaces and yeah there was definitely like gate keeping in terms of you know who could show work and stuff like that and that is still happening but there's just more folks organizing in the arts community so there is different opportunities to show your work now. Although I haven't been like pursuing showing my visual arts so much because I have been so busy with the puppetry thing and stop motion but it's been cool to seeing how it has changed back when I started in the early 2000s.

V: You mentioned a lot of things white community in the past of artists how would say it changed now considering there are many different artists coming from many different backgrounds?

C.K: I think artists from different backgrounds were around then too it's more like they weren't just given the opportunities in terms of fundings to do more and so or to organize more. Knows there's just some funders have gotten better about making their funding more accessible to and so there's just...within some funding communities there's just more awareness about how it needs to change so there's definitely more native POC artists getting grants when I started in early 2000s when there was just like all white artists that would get it. So, there is like a few funding organizations that really try to make their panels have more native POC artists on it too. So just try to make it more equitable.

V: So, considering like now there is multiple various artists now is there like a specific artist that inspired you to create more art?

C.K: Oh yeah, I'm always looking for puppetry. I'm always looking at YouTube videos of different puppet artists and puppet companies that work around nationally and internationally so I love checking out and seeing like that's kind of how I kept up over these years because there wasn't really anything here that I liked seeing so I was always looking at YouTube videos of people's performances so there's actually an amazing puppet artist who moved to Chicago just a couple years ago, his name is Tom Lee. And his work is amazing so if you ever go check out I think he does I know he performs at like links hall and like... what's the other place... I could email it to you once I remember but so he was inspiring and I watched a lot of stop motion short

films by different artist then there's visual artist whose work. There's this one Chinese visual artist, his name is Son Chun? I'm not sure if I'm mispronouncing his name but umm...

V: You could just email it to me once you find the name of it because I'm pretty interested in stop motion and all.

C.K: His work is amazing because what he does is, he creates these woodcuts but each woodcut is a still for animation so there's this tremendous amount of work that goes into creating this animation because each frame is a separate wood cut and he has a whole, he's got all these artists that work for him to create these animations and anyway they're really amazing looking. So, I'm always trying to check out other visual artists who moved into animation too just to see like you know what folks are doing and so yeah, I like to pick up on what's happening in the arts world.

V: So, we're almost at the end of the interview cause I'm almost running out of questions - chuckles- so what are you currently working on?

C.K: Right now I'm working on expanding a short puppet theatre piece that I created there might be a picture on my website of the original piece but after I did that really short piece I have been working on expanding it but then I realized I don't really want to perform so I've... so there's a few different folks have gone through the puppetry training in our organization that I run, Monkey Bears so they're going to be performing in it so now I am devising more for it so creating more scenes because it is changing now that there is more people involved so working on that but also. My main thing is like combining not just doing like a traditional puppet theatre performance but I really want to involve so I'm including stop motion in it also and after directing people I'm really interested in combining live action with stop motion for short films.

V: Would that be like a future plan or something or not?

C.K: Yeah, it's definitely like I would say in the coming year that something I want to experiment with is having real people in my short films but also including animation stop motion animation so I'm looking to try to get a grant to get a cinema camera so I can do. I really want it to look cinematic the... When I do the live action stuff so yeah, I'm excited I feel like that's everything that I love can. I'll be in this thing I want to do because I love music too you know so I'll be hiring sound artists to create music for it and everything so I think what I love about film is that I can incorporate all the things I love to do into that medium.

V: Yeah, I kind of understand that cause right now I am majoring right now in film right now because I really like to working around with a camera I just like experimenting around lots of stuff cause I'm more into editing and all that stuff.

C.K: Okay, editing is a skill man, yeah, I mean once I was in a panel for a film festival when I was watching all the samples I was like “aw man a lot of these people really need to learn about editing you know because that was really making the piece look not so good.” you know.

V: Right

C.K: And so yeah, I really admire like folks who could edit and I mean it’s an art in itself.

V: At this point, I want to thank you for having an interview with me because we are about to conclude the interview so thank you for your time, you’ve really helped me out in my own project.

C.K: Okay well good luck with everything.

V: Thank you, and good luck with your own show project puppetry.

C.K: Thank you, bye bye

V: Bye

End.



Sun baby comes to her Aid

Oil pastel on paper, Collage

Photocopied real poppy seed pods from garden, scarf, and face.

One of the Paintings From: <http://chamindika.com/portfolio.html>