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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## YoungSun Choi Interview

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**Interviewer:** Adam Martinez

**Artist:** YoungSun Choi

**Location:** In Person, TrueNorth Cafe/ Chicago

**Date:** May 31, 2019

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Asian American Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2019 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media & Design.*

**Artist Bio:** YoungSun Choi was born in Seoul, South Korea and is currently living in Chicago, IL. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 2018 and her Bachelor of Arts from San Francisco State University majoring in Studio Art with an emphasis in Photography in 2015 where she was awarded the Strauss Scholarship for Photography as well as the Sher-Right Art Scholarship.

**Interview Transcript:**

**YoungSun Choi:** It's my first time being interviewed. I'm so stressed.

**Adam Martinez:** Well, it's my first time giving an interview so we'll be on pretty even ground here. First off, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself.

**YSC:** My name is YoungSun Choi, but in America I go by Sunny because a lot of people have hard times pronouncing my name. They only call me "Young" and that's it or "YoungSoon." Just call me Sunny. I'm born in Korea, I came to San Francisco for a bachelor's degree for fine arts, and then was at SF State; graduated there and then I did some non-profit work for some organizations, Asian American art communities. There's two or three places, one was called Asian American Women Artists Association, one was Kearny Street Workshop, which is really famous in San Francisco, and the other one was APICC which is like Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center where I was more like a coordinator. Then I came here for a MFA at School of the Art Institute of Chicago in a photography department. I graduated last year. I'm just living as a freelancer, Laura Kina's studio assistant, personal artist I guess. That's about it.

**AM:** How would you define or categorize your art?

**YSC:** Basically, it's really photography, but lately I've been changing my direction of photography, not as "take picture, hang on wall," but more interactive. I've always been interested in digital photography versus "what we see and touch" physical photography, so interactive photography, I guess. But I'm trying to get away from photography recently because...it's difficult to say. A lot of people say photography is just a medium, but I say photography is a practice, a meditation. So interactive work.

**AM:** I think I saw a bit of this on your website through a bit of your work. Like with your piece you did for the MFA exhibit, *I Want \_\_\_\_ to Receive This* and *Walking Through the Memories of \_\_\_\_*. Can you tell me how you came up with these?

**YSC:** It was a really big pressure because the MFA show is like, I'm supposed to be proving I did something for the last 2 years in my graduate school. And then it's like I feel like I have to show something different than what I did for my practice and then most of the department people were doing that and a lot of the other students were doing that and I wanted to do something different. But then it felt like I was faking myself. Then I was talking to my advisor and was like, I don't feel this is right. I like what I want to do, but the thing is, it's not really suited for an exhibition because it's not make and show, it's more interacting and personal stories. And my advisor is like, "Just do whatever it is you want to do." And I'm just like, screw everything. So I

go to Ikea and get the table and print out a bunch of pictures I had that I'd shot from 2015 to like 2018. It was almost like a hundred pictures, but I printed a thousand of them with rice paper. I felt texture was pretty important also compared to this regular piece of white paper, versus like a napkin, it's a different texture and you'll remember by texture. That's why I chose rice paper also, which is a mention of my cultural identity as a Korean, because rice paper is also known in Korea. It was more like I wanted to show people that I consider a lot about interactivity, communication by physical. So that's how I came up with the project. It was really simple because my previous projects were really like, I write the mail art and send it and my question was: how can I make other people do the mail art not by me directly. So it's like, have an open space, have a few pens, and a simple instruction. Write a mail address, example family, friends, anybody you know and want to send to, and then have pictures and papers open freely, made accessible to anybody. I was hoping it would work, and it did work really well which I was happy about.

**AM:** What was the general response you saw during the exhibit?

**YSC:** People were like, you have to stay away and look from far behind, that's the art and human distance. What I always wanted to do was like art and human life melded together. I was hoping it would work out well because people are afraid to approach and interact. I was really glad people were going and participating a lot. Because of that I had to go and refill the pictures. I think it's also because people understand contemporary art is not only standing and watching. There's a lot of video art, there is performance art, there is other interactive art. Also, I think it's because my piece was in between other interactive art and people were like, "Oh, that's interactive, so this is interactive." It was the location mostly. People participated, they had a lot of fun. A lot of people not only wrote their mail address, but around maybe 40% even wrote a letter on this small, 3x3 piece of paper. "Hey mom, I'm here in Chicago," or like "Miss you dad." It was really a lot to families or really close friends that are far distances away. I think when people were writing down, they were thinking of them with a...sincere heart? I don't really know how to tell this in English but, you know, communicating through a digital device is a different feeling. People knew that and were really acting on it and I really like that response.

**AM:** Alrighty. Okay, how do you think you first got involved in the art scene or just in photography if you think that's easier?

**YSC:** Ha ha, it's really random. I always wanted to be more of a theatre related job, like a theatre director or running theatres and building stuff, but, you know, typical East Asian parents stereotypes. You don't do anything art related, you go doctor or teacher or go give up. But one of my hobbies continuing from high school to now is taking pictures with one of those compact cameras. My dad realizes this, "You want to do something related with pictures?" And I was a pretty rebellious kid, I was like, "I'm not going to study anymore." My dad was being generous

and my parents allowed me to do photography education. So I went to a six month academy and then we were looking for a school that were photography related. We had to look for a school that didn't need a portfolio because I didn't have much time to prepare, so it became SF State. I was thinking I'd continue to go into commercial photography because that's what I was learning at the time, but the thing is, when I was going to SF state because I didn't know what 'fine art' meant, the school was starting to teach black and white fine art photography and I was like, what about my commercial photography? But I started to fall in love with black and white photography which is basically film photography. It feels like it's a step up in making a meditation in ways. Taking a picture, not like in digital where you can just spam and delete whatever you want, compared to that film photography has you consider what you frame and what you want to put in. It take time and developing takes time and printing a picture takes time and spinning the film itself takes time. I started falling in love with those processes because, these days, everything goes too fast. Like if you don't catch up you'll lose in a way. And I felt like doing those process was like I'm cheering myself. That's it's okay, I'm not doing the latest stuff.

**AM:** You're a recent graduate, you said just graduated a year ago, how do you think critique or examination of your work has affected you up until this point and into the future?

**YSC:** It's a very different experience from SF State to SAIC. Especially in art concentrated institutions. Everyone thinks they're an artist, everyone thinks they're the best. If the subject matter doesn't interest you, you're kind of ignored and abandoned. As an Asian woman in a private institution, it was very difficult to get a good critique that was helpful. Because of prejudice and of my style, everyone called my style old style. The way the image style is just regular street photography, "snapshot photography" as people would say, rather than contemporary photography thinking of social issues or political issues or making abstract. I'm none of that so a lot of my critique was telling me to think more of those issues when my interest is in personal communication and relationship but showing that in a different way. And I was kind of showing some of the East Asian philosophy like Confucius and Buddhist. Do you have the idea?

**AM:** A little bit, I'm a bit familiar with that.

**YSC:** I was trying to input some of the elements, not directly but indirectly. Not a lot of people recognized those contents. It was really difficult because it's hard to explain everything during a critique. You need to critique the work, but when you get sidetracked talking about those ideas and philosophies, the critique will flow that way instead of focusing on the work. The work isn't complete without that critique. The critique at SF State was different. It wasn't an art concentrated school, it was a regular 4 year school like DePaul so people with different ideas and different perspectives were coming in. And California is just pretty different from Chicago. The

only thing I wish I heard more from SAIC would be that they viewed work from their perspective, a western perspective, but wider at the same time. So to see who am I, what cultural background I have, and then understand what kind of cultural background and cultural philosophy is going on, and talk about that more.

**AM:** I feel like you just answered my next question a bit there.

**YSC:** Oh, ha ha.

**AM:** It was do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork?

**YSC:** Well, obviously. I use a lot of rice paper to imply my Korean culture. There's one collaborative work I did with my friend who is from Hong Kong but she stayed in America for a long time. I was always interested because I've only been in America for almost 7 years. There's this weird gab about international students who've been out of their country for a long time about returning to their country and having this reverse culture shock. While staying here, you develop the culture and observe the culture and adapt to it, so it's like you have both cultures at the same time. It also works with language, you're used to one language and now you're used to another and you begin to lose some of the first and get things mixed together. You were born and raised here right?

**AM:** I was.

**YSC:** So your parent's generation were immigrants?

**AM:** More like the generation before my parents.

**YSC:** Okay, if you ever ask them if they ever confused Tagalog and English, or have a mixture of any kind, if they do, that's the language mixture that's happening. I have that a lot of times and my friends had that a lot of times. I think certain vocabularies have their own vibe. For example, "The wind is cool" literally means a cool feeling but the thing is, if you say it in a different language, cool means more than just cold cool. So I wanted to dig into those weird vocabulary vibes with my friend. She understood what I was saying because English can't really express certain emotions of the vocabulary like what Korean has or what Chinese has. So we made this book about past memories and instance reactions emotions and then writing it down in a different language. So (in the book) the outside is the image and we write the phrases inside so you can't really see it. We made the pages transparent so you can slightly see it but not really see it. We wanted to make it feel like what it's like to those who can't read Korean or Chinese. To make the feeling of, I want to see this but I can't see this. Because that's sometimes how we feel

about bilingual people and the mixture of language. There's an artist, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who's a good example for that. Other than that, a recent curation I did at the Gene Siskel Film Center. I was thinking about a lot of race issue related art works. I wanted to look for art works that talked about identity as an Asian American through everyday life, objects, or everyday life habits, or everyday life languages. If you see early 1960s or 1970s Asian American artist stuff, it's really in your face using their bodies and talking about my heritage and this is what I am getting treated by. I wanted to step away from that and then show everyday life things. We're the same, we're not invisible, we're still here.

**AM:** And I guess that's why it's titled *Visible*.

**YSC:** Yeah. There's a lot of stuff to talk about, but in general I try to keep on including the idea that, as I said before, the Buddhist idea of meditation and the use of rice paper and using the language to show how English is dominating over other languages in linguistic imperialism. Is that the right word?

**AM:** I guess that works. I don't really know. 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"?

**YSC:** Not really. I don't really know. It's more recent that I realized I was using those more of those cultural contextualization. It was really more recent, like right before I graduated, that it started to come out. Before, I was just wasn't thinking at all, and if I was, it was more behind the scenes supporting those artists who did. I'm not really the type to confront and face, I'm more like behind and telling other people to believe and that they can do it. I really enjoy doing that. I really wish there was a community or an organization that is here in Chicago for young Asian American artist, not only for fine art, but music, theatre, poetry, other things. But no, I was not in any show.

**AM:** What type of exhibitions have you been in?

**YSC:** Just like group shows really. Like, as I said, my work isn't really suited for white cube spaces because they end up going out in the world. They get stamped by, ruined by people and become a personal thing. I try to think that I should be participating in shows like that, but it's really hard for me to make one just for installation because that makes another distance between you and looking at the work. It's another gap. Like the group exhibition is just like, I make one and give it to them to show. The thing I really keep on doing is mailing printed photography and found materials.

**AM:** Do you think this is a medium you're going to stick in? Well, you just said you wanted to get away from photography, but in what way?

**YSC:** Recently, well, I'm a game girl so I'm into a lot of different games. I want to try learning 3D stuff because ultimately what I want to do is take the image and make it into 3D and make it more like an object. The common thing in the images I take are daydreaming. I take pictures of are like daydreaming where you just stare at one place.

**AM:** Yes, and you get lost in them.

**YSC:** Yes, so it's kind of like you get lost in a stop and I take those kind of pictures, and if possible I want to take that and make them in 3D. Another one is... does it have to be art related?

**AM:** It can be anything.

**YSC:** It can be anything? I've been searching about early, meaning like from 1890s to 1950s, there's a lot of Chinese American, Japanese American artists but then I wonder, what about Korean American? At the time there was the Japanese colonization and I knew at the time a lot of Koreans didn't have time or money to make art, but through researching a little bit I found two finally. So that's something I'm digging into recently. So, as you know, there's a lot of famous Korean artists after 1960 like Nam June Paik and Do Ho Suh and I just want to research the early Korean American artists for photography like the Japanese photography of the early 1900s. They were treated more like Japanese because they were under Japanese colonization and I just wanted to see if anyone tried to make something different. I just think it's pretty important for my people.

**AM:** It sounds pretty important. The last question I have on here is: Are you working on anything currently?

**YSC:** Well, I'm on and off on researching the early Korean American artists. I'm still doing it but there's just so little information, it's really difficult.

**AM:** Oh yeah, I didn't ask what you are going to do with this information.

**YSC:** Oh, I don't know. Well, the thing is, maybe if I can get supported by the Korean American association, because there's a huge one in New York, I can ask and it can have a show about it. I really just have the work to write a book, but I'm not good at writing so maybe like a catalogue or a record. I just want the people who didn't know to know for in the future. It's good to write history down. Maybe that's my goal. Aside from that, just learning how to make 3D and maybe successfully making a piece of artwork.



**AM:** By 3D do you mean sculptural work or like CG software?

**YSC:** Like a sculpture, I guess. Like a paper sculpture.

**AM:** I see.

**YSC:** I don't know what's up with the paper but I really like paper. There's like plastic board, steel board, wood, but I really want to stick with paper, especially rice paper. The rice paper has weird warmth in it. Not only the tone but if you touch it, it's just warm somehow. But yeah, I've only been researching but I just feel like it's really time to get back to making art. Resting too long is not that good. That's about it. Keep on helping Laura also.

**AM:** Alrighty, well that's all I have.

**YSC:** I hope this was helpful.

**END.**