
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Tori Hong Interview

Eliza Lemus
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Eliza Lemus

Artist: Tori Hong

Location: Phone Interview from Chicago and Minneapolis, Minnesota

Date: May 11, 2019



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist at <https://torihong.com/>

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in Art 200/AAS 2013: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2019 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura King, Professor Art, Media, & Design

Artist Bio:

Tori Hong is a self-taught visual artist exploring homelands and homecomings. In order to create meaning out of the often ambiguous, disruptive, and generative spaces they occupy, Hong creates narrative-driven illustrations, portraits, and zines. The people Hong centers in their work are LGBTQ Asian Americans and people with marginalized identities. Hong is based in Minneapolis, MN.

Interview Transcript

Eliza Lemus: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Tori Hong: My name is Tori Hong and I am a queer Hmong and Korean American, and my parents are the ones who came to this country from their homeland. I am an emerging visual artist. I'm pretty much all self-taught and I like to draw things rooted in culture, relationships and finding your higher self, accessing modes of joy and like accountability and self-accountability. Yeah, all that stuff. My work is really vibrant and bold and I do a lot of digital illustrations with hopes to start getting a studio space so I can do more hands on traditional media.

EL: How would you define/categorize your art or yourself?

TH: Um... like using genres or something? So, I didn't go to art school. I don't know anything about how to categorize art but I would say that, like kind of what I was saying earlier, just like digital illustrations, bold, vibrant. Usually my drawings come with a story and it's stories that are rooted really personally in the self and features you know, I center queer Asian Americans in my work. Queer and trans Asian Americans but also queer and trans people of color and our experiences, our identities our stories and our visions, our relationships.

EL: How would you say your background influences your artmaking process?

TH: Hmm, so when I grew up, it was my sister and me in this apartment complex and I met my best childhood friend there and she was the one who actually introduced me to drawing, like anime and stuff, at a young age. There were these online games that we would play that'd be like "oh, it's a drawing game." Kind of like Pictionary but online. My homelife was...like with my parents, they would fight a lot and they ended up getting a divorce when I was 6. And so being able to draw and do art was a way for me to kind of like create a sanctuary for myself, and also just process what was going on. Even though I don't think I was thinking of it that way, that was how I understand it now. I also think that being Hmong-- Hmong American-- means a lot about artmaking because everything felt, especially how Hmong women feel, I feel that it is really rooted in the act of creation whether it's like embroidery and textiles, cooking, storytelling, you know? Like the way we talk even. It's like tonal so it's kind of like music, so I truly think that, that was a strong influence on me being an artist. Even if my mom was like, "Oh yeah, you'll never make a living," she's a Hmong parent. I think it inadvertently seeped through and influenced who I am today.

EL: I see that you have a lot of works like the MPD 150 Zine, and the *Dominoes* illustration, which touches on concepts such as repression and inequality. How important is activism in your work?

TH: My work is pretty much entirely rooted in activism. Thanks for asking that question. This is actually what I tell people that I started out with roots in. Like I drew my whole life, but I didn't consider that as a career I should pursue past a certain age like high school. So I did a lot of student organizing in college and community and political organizing afterwards, and I just kind of got burnt out like just doing that. So I decided to go back to my childhood love which was art. That was my way of being able to still do political work without it having to be something that was draining me. Even if it's not explicitly political anymore-- like not everything I make is explicitly political anymore-- it's still rooted in that lens and those experiences.

EL: Can you tell me how you got involved with The Power of Vision Youth Mural Program for *We are the River* (figure 1)?

TH: Yeah! So I used to work at Ricardo Levins Morales Art Studio and he's this really renowned artist across the United States and in the world, and his daughter Olivia Levins Holden and I met each other through that and just being in a community together. She knew that I was an artist and did work in social justice. She knew that I facilitated and organized different groups, so she asked if I was interested, because she knew I had the skills to do it even though I didn't-- I never painted a mural before. So yeah, that's how I got involved. I did that for two years and I did another one last summer with a group of youth.

EL: How was that experience for you?

TH: It taught me a lot in terms of managing a big art project. It also taught me that I don't like painting murals honestly! [laughs]. Yeah, it was honestly still good for me to try different forms of art. I'm not a painter so it was really fun to work with acrylics and learn how to use them. I definitely grew in my technique and skill between the two years. It was great to work with young people. I've done youth work for a number of jobs and it was really fun and just freeing to do that: provide an experience for high schoolers that I didn't get to have, and to see how powerful it was and to imagine like this is something I would have liked to have had when I was younger, and I got to do it for others.

EL: So you said you don't really work with acrylics or wet mediums like that, you mainly work with digital and ink?

TH: Yeah, digital and pen and ink, markers...yeah, I would love to work with more wet media, but I live in a one bedroom apartment with two cats and having to leave things out to dry just wouldn't work [laughs].

EL: Have you ever been contextualized as Asian/Asian American, or been labeled as Asian/Asian American artist in an exhibition?

TH: Yes. So I have been in two art exhibitions that have been specifically for Asian Americans.

EL: Is it important or yourself to be identified that way?

TH: I think in some ways it is. So it is for me in this moment as an emerging, early career artist, because that is a really specific niche as a visual artist and is a really, really supportive community. The Asian American community is really supportive, so I am really grateful and it is important for my identity in terms of fostering my career as an artist at this stage. It is also important for me to politically contextualize my work. I mean I know that Asian American experience is really vast and huge and you know there is a lot of different experiences under that and my work isn't like, "Oh I'm going to speak for everyone under my experiences!" But more at least to provide a sort of relationship with the audience that I want to speak to -- that's important to me. But I think that as I start and keep developing myself as an artist and my career, I would like to not always have to be branded as such. Yeah that is something that brings attention. I want to be able to create art that is just art. I don't always want it to be healing or solving an issue or speaking to anything figurative. But yeah, there is a lot of pressure on artists of color to do that.

EL: Yeah, like you're not always your history there is more to yourself and your artmaking than...

TH: Just your racial identity right, yeah!

EL: What kind of influence do you aspire to create?

TH: That's such a good question. I want to impact people by sharing ways that we can have complex relationships with ourselves and with each other, with our planet, with our futures selves, past selves, our ancestors. I really, really think that's the key to social change, is being able to have relationships that can withstand a whole lot and being able to do that with integrity. The reason why I said my art feels so personal right now is because it's an artistic exploration of how to have that relationship with myself, so that I can be able to do that with others and share my findings on how does it feel to retrace history, cultural history and think about these items. I'm doing this project on my cultural heritage and like exploring what they mean to me especially

if it's like things I have never used or never seen. And so like what does it mean to be Asian American and feel disconnected with certain parts of your cultural heritage but still get acquainted with that and learn about it as an adult?

Through this personal process of uncovering and learning about family history and family history, how that aligns with my family and how it aligns with me through that process I hope to share that in hopes they can feel some sort of resonance through that journey and that it doesn't always have to feel disconnected forever you know? I feel a lot of shame for being Asian American but not knowing my languages and not knowing what certain things are even called or what they mean and stuff. But to just sort of break that shame and know that I didn't have to learn it as a kid for me to be valid, but it does mean that I have a different relationship with my Asianness than other people might. But that's okay too. So yeah, just trying to impact people that way I guess, through my journey in art.

EL: In your Bio you say that you are "exploring homelands and homecomings" can you explain what this means?

TH: Yeah! When I talk about homelands I mean a lot of different things. I mean our bodies, I mean our spirits, I mean our lands that our ancestors may be from and I also mean the lands that we are in now. Just exploring that relationship of feeling like agency within those spaces and that those spaces also have agency. It's not just like, "Oh I'm here and this is my space!" But it's also, "What is this? What is this place about?" You know? Like, "What is their relationship to me too?" So that's like homelands and homecomings is like that process of coming home. Like the coming into yourself of coming home into this complication.

I think being Asian American makes things so complicated for just that feeling of finally feeling settled when like so much of our history is about being unsettled. Even if it's not about being unsettled, it's about where our families are from -- where our ancestors are from. But still being able to be settled within these other definitions of homelands is important too.

EL: Have you ever felt that there was a need or people that you felt you had to prove yourself to?

TH: I feel like most of my life I have had to prove myself to someone in order to feel worthy of love and connection and that I am a person that deserves to be paid attention to. But I think recently I've been a lot better about that and the only person that I need to prove myself to is myself. And even then it's hard not to be a harsh critic and just try to be better at proving myself. Like "I can do something really well" within a certain time frame and be more about the process of what I do. Like there is a difference between grinding endlessly and working within your own flow, you know? Like your own rhythm, and you can always do a lot more work respecting your

own processes. That's the thing I feel that I need to prove myself *to* myself, like if I'm respecting my own integrity and energy and boundaries... I don't always do it [laughs].

EL: For your self-portrait *On Purpose* (figure 2) why did you choose the specific quote on the border?

TH: I was actually inspired by one of my friends that I met online a few years ago and she's also a queer Asian American artist. Her name is Raychelle Duazo, and she's Filipina American. And so she has this tattoo that has those words on her, and wrote about the meaning of it to her on an Instagram post and I looked up the poem and was really struck by it. Those lines, "I loved you on purpose, I was open on purpose". To me I was imagining a poem to be like, "Wow, this person is really giving their all to someone!". But actually the poem is really about a breakup. This person who is speaking is saying like, "you're no good, you lied, you break my heart, you make promises that you can't keep," and "I'm not here for you 'sorrys' anymore. I'm not here for your bullshit, you can take your 'sorrys' to someone else who will care more about it, but like this whole thing that I went through I still loved you on purpose, I was open on purpose that was not a mistake. The only mistake was you telling me you're sorry and not actually being sorry." And so that was written by Ntozake Shange, who passed away last year. So I drew that piece, coming back to those words and this poem and just being really struck by that and personally feeling regret for loving people, like, "Oh, why did I give my heart away? Why did I try to make this work? Why did I give so much to this person?" So it's both romantic but also familial, or like for friendships too, and that poem was like, "Wow you can hold someone to a certain standard and also say that it wasn't a mistake on my part." And to be open with that, in that love, was something that was really important to me. When I was working on the piece originally I was going to do like a sad face-- a really pained face--, and I took a bunch of selfies to convey that. But then I read the poem again and I was like yeah this doesn't fit. The me that I am drawing is going to be fierce. Looking you in the eyes. Open. And that's what I want to show.

EL: When I first saw the piece, I looked up the poem and I first I thought it was just about a breakup so I was thinking maybe you were going through something at the time but I also felt like there was more to it. I really liked the way you incorporated that because I do understand the message more.

TH: Thank you! Yeah, I was not going through a break up. I drew that when I was in the middle, or more like the beginning of building a home and love with the person I am living with now -- my partner. It was just kind of like a reminder to let go of those loves, and that those loves don't necessarily have to hold me back from loving now. So yeah, it was like an anti-breakup, kind of "I'm going to commit to this!"

EL: Yeah! I felt the empowering aspect.

TH: Yeah. [laughs]

EL: How do you find inspiration for making these pieces.

TH: So the self-portraits...do you know what Inktober is?

EL: Oh yeah!

TH: I don't know if you went that far in my portfolio, but in 2017 for Inktober, I was just doing it with some friends, following this prompt list and was like, "Oh okay 'Mountains' what am I gonna draw? Oh, I'll think about these mountains (figure 3) that mean a lot to me." These mountains are in Hawaii where my grandparents' ashes are, and so I drew these two hands clasped. It was me and my grandpa walking towards a temple meeting my grandma. My idea was that this is me and my grandpa going to visit my grandma for the first time, for me since she had passed. So it was mostly just like prompts that inspired those pieces, and then last year, *Washing Rice* (figure 4) and *On Purpose*, I was invited to do this group show with Hmong artists and farmers and showcasing our work and they wanted to expand their collection and add a couple new pieces and it was about food. So I did the *Washing Rice* piece thinking about what food, maybe I should be cutting onions or I should doing something... and then I was washing rice for dinner when I was like, "Wait! Babe, take a picture!" and now I'm doing like a mini project for myself trying to draw objects from my cultural heritage and everyday life, and learn more about my family and more about these items that I can vaguely recall from the very corner of my memories like, "Oh that was a thing! What is it for? Why is it present, and what does it mean? How did it weave itself into my life and how do I not let it go?" Yeah, most of my personal stuff is really about getting to know who I am and how to show that.

EL: What do you think has changed about your career from the beginning to now?

TH: You know how I told you I did those mural projects? And at first I was like "I want to try everything!" So it was really undirected and it was really like reactive too. So it was like if people offered me opportunities, I would take them, even if they didn't always align with me. And now-- over the last four months actually-- I've been a lot more intentional about what it is that I want to do as an artist. What [are] the things I want to know. And this summer I know there's going to be no murals, except for maybe one but I'm not leading it and that's like with these people that I really, really admire and I'm just thinking about the things that I really want to do and actually going after that instead of just reacting and responding to my situation, but to create a plan for myself both as a paid artist and also just someone who can create contemporary art to be shown.

EL: You said earlier you were currently working on pieces revolving your culture and understanding of yourself, are there any other things you are working on now?

TH: So my daily project is currently just fodder for a larger piece or project that I want to be doing that I want to show, next year, hopefully in my first solo show, fingers crossed! [laughs] I want to do research and art on the North Korean diaspora. My grandparents on my dad's side are both from North Korea and I want to do research on the political and personal choices that lead my family-- and this group of people-- to where they are now. And why is it that I am Korean, Hmong and queer. How do these things all play within the last 60-70 years of this formation of this state of North Korea? Some of my grandparents changed drastically within the matter of a century...and I want to be able to create more large scale pieces with different media. And I've been thinking about it being more collage-y where there would be like photos, drawings, hopefully some paintings and writing in a contemporary art show! [laughs]

The little projects that I'm doing now are like practice for how I would do research and how to convert it into art and a narrative.

EL: I saw one of your works with jewelry on your Instagram, it sounds similar to what you were just saying, is it apart of that?

TH: Yes! It's not going to be a part of the bigger show that I want to do, but that is a part of the process of how I do the research.

EL: Thank you for doing this interview with me !

TH: Yes, thank you for looking through all my stuff...there will be a new (website) coming soon!

End.



Figure 1. *We are the River*, for the Power of Vision youth mural program in partnership with Hope Community and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. 2017.



Figure 2. Tori Hong, *On Purpose*, Ink and marker on paper, 2018.



Figure 3. Tori Hong, *Mountains*, Ink and marker on paper, 2017.



Figure 4. Tori Hong, *Washing Rice*, Ink and marker on paper, 2018.



Tori Hong, *Paug / Xauv*, Digital illustration, 2019.