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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Spring 6-20-2019

## Kelvin Burzon Interview

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### Recommended Citation

Boustany, Maya. (2019) Kelvin Burzon Interview.  
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**Interviewer: Maya Boustany**

**Artist: Kelvin Burzon**

**Location: FaceTime audio interview, Bloomington, IN/Chicago, IL**

**Date: 5-23-19**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & 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.*

**About the Artist:**



<http://www.kelvinburzon.com/about>

Kelvin Burzon is a Filipino-American artist whose work explores intersections of sexuality, race, gender and religion. He was born on March 26, 1989, in Bataan, Philippines. As a child growing up in a Filipino culture, Burzon's initial ambition was to become a Catholic Priest. "I have always been interested in the religion's role in culture and familial relationships and have been drawn to the religion's traditions, imagery, theatricality, and its psychological vestige." His work is inspired by cerebral influences growing up in and around the church. "My cultural and familial identity, my memories as a child, cannot be separated from the church. It was an integral part of what it means to be Filipino."

Burzon recently received MFA degree from Indiana University's School of Art + Design where he developed his most recent bodies of work. There, he is a performing member of the African American Dance Company where he flourishes in a collaborative performance outlet. This outlet blossomed interests in critical race theory, photography's role in people's social identities, story-telling, archival gaps and performance. He received his bachelor's from Wabash College where he studied studio art and music. There, he became versed in painting, sculpture, ceramics and photography. He studied music history, violin and piano performance, vocal performance, as well as years of ethnomusicology. He was a musician and dancer in Wamidan World Music Ensemble in Crawfordsville, IN. He studied abroad in Florence Italy where he was exposed to a variety of religious works by Renaissance masters as well as studying oil painting techniques.

Kelvin Burzon continues to push his work with inspirations from the past, recontextualized narratives and imagery of religion, paired with the never-ending stimulation and inspiration from the LGBTQ+ community. Burzon seeks to push the limits of his work by visually redefining and creating a new narrative for himself and those like him.

Taken from: <http://www.kelvinburzon.com/about>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Maya Boustany:** Hello. Thank you so much for doing this interview.

**Kevin Burzon:** You're welcome.

**MB:** So, I am just going to ask you a few questions regarding some of your projects and some other stuff.

**KB:** Okay.

**MB:** Tell me a little bit about yourself. When and where were you born? Where did you grow up? Where did you attend school?

**KB:** All right. So first My name is Kelvin Burzon and I was born in the Philippines on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1989. My entire youth has been planned for immigration ever since my mom was young, she knew that she was going to be moving to the US and so as her family grew, you know, paperwork became a little bit more complicated and eventually, my entire family moved here to Fort Wayne Indiana. And so, fast forward a little bit. I attended Wabash College all school for men where I started taking my pre-med courses because I'm supposed to be a doctor. And that's just what Asian parents instill in you, or a lawyer. One of those, and I stumbled in to a photography class. I knew I always wanted to do art on the side and I've always been kind of good at drawing and painting and that stuff but I never saw photography as an art form that I could really get into especially because there was an 8 a.m. 3 hour course but I needed something outside of the sciences that I was taking. Eventually I loved it so much that I changed my major to studio art, minor in music, so no more science classes. I Didn't tell my parents about it and they didn't find out until graduation day when they announced that I have a degree in art. I took two years off just thinking about, you know what it is that I can do, and I really just missed the art world and the community that the academia kind of provided for art. And so, I went back to school and I attended Indiana University's Master of Fine Arts program in photography and here I am now.

**MB:** How do you define your art as well as yourself?

**KB:** OK. So, when I first started, I would say the beginning of my studies, serious studies in art, I know this was a big struggle and I assume that this is the thing that all artists kind of go through, I was definitely interested in creating self-portraiture, but I wanted to take myself away from it for some reason. I was afraid to address all the things that, you know, make up who I am. At some point, I started to make work that really talked about defining aspects of my identity which is being Filipino being Asian American being an immigrant and being queer as well as being Catholic. Right. Like all these intersections that happened to make up who I am as a person started to show up in my artwork. So, I guess that's how I define who I am and what my art is about, just like the intersections of everything that has brought me here.

**MB:** Awesome. So then when did you start photography? I think you kind of covered that already in the first question though.

**KB:** I mean I could talk more about it if you'd like. So like stumbling into that class my first-year undergraduate at Wabash, I had always been drawing and painting and all that stuff, but something about photography had brought out something different in me as an artist. It felt a lot more immediate than a paint brush to canvas. I felt a direct connection to the medium. It felt a little bit more serious. I could talk about more serious things. It also took me away from aesthetic concerns that I had with, you know, other mediums where I was concerned about the prettiness of the color or how the composition works and how attracted I am to it. But photography was just a different experience for me, and I could talk about things that were a little bit [grimmer], and when I picked up a camera, that's where I started. It was kind of just like serious and maybe because it was black and white. But that is still true to today, that my connection to photography is just a little bit more immediate than any other mediums.

**MB:** I don't know if I will be able to pronounce this correctly, but I wanted to talk about the meaning and what inspired you to do "Noli Me Tangere."

**KB:** So, it's from the Philippines. It's pronounced Noli Me Tangere. It's in Latin. I mean I guess it's pronounced that way. That's how I've pronounced it. The series that's named after it has biblical relations obviously, but also it is a tie to my nationality. It is a novel written by one of our national heroes in the Philippines and it's something that is bred, you know, in high school in every school by every student that in the Philippines. So, it's something that is recognizable and the story kind of talks about the vision, but also the relationship between the church and politics, which brings me to why I started the series. I mentioned earlier that when I started my studies, I was creating self-portraiture that I kind of wanted to take myself right out of. How far can I take a representation of my body without really talking about my identity. And I tell everybody that it's impossible that, you know like, my body will always have these things attached to it no matter what. And I started to address that because of a political occurrence that is happening. It's called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, blanking on the date when it was passed, but it was passed in Indiana. I was never really a political person. I never really paid attention to the news, you know, I live in this like positive bubble because it's always so negative, but this I could not escape it. I was like, well you know, I never really related politics to something that could affect me. And so, this kind of combination of politics and sexuality and religion kind of just hit home for me and it's affecting people that I literally love and care for and my family and my community. And so, I had to make work about it. The beginning of this series, I created to kind of just grapple with this conflict that started to bubble up inside, that's supported by everything that's going on politically and talking to queer people in my community. It was never meant to be like this big series. Then I was going to keep working on it monthly, keep working on it for the rest of my life. That's the origins of it.

**MB:** I also want to hear about "Living Bible."

**KB:** Oh yeah. "The Living Bible." So, when I first started "No Me Tangere," it felt kind of awful to make. It felt like I was disrespecting my upbringing and my religion that I still practice. Or you know voicing my opinions on politics or the queer community that like I don't really feel comfortable putting out there as artwork and as a distinct opinion. And so, I started doing projects outside of it to kind of support it. One example is that I made it a point to go to confession as part of my artistic practice and not just as part of religion right. I went to confessions and I told the priest that I was gay, and I told them that I was making this work that felt really disrespectful for me to make. And so, this was kind of the Living Bible. It's an outside project that supported the larger goal. I found this Bible at the Salvation Army. I tried to buy it, but Bibles can't be bought at the Salvation Army I guess. They're a religious affiliated organization. I went there because I knew that I wanted to get a Bible from them and that there's this conflict of the LGBTQ+ community. I have to tell my mom like don't put money in the Salvation Army bucket for Christmas because they hate the gays.

**MB:** Oh wow, I did not know that.

**KB:** But I went there because I knew that there was that conflict and I wanted to keep investigating this existing conflict that's inside of me and so I got this Bible and it was beautiful. It's something that seems cherished by someone. It was annotated by whoever owned it last. There was a dedication from somebody that gave it to a younger person. There was a photograph that's inserted of this young girl, and I assume her Bible. And so, I wanted to, you know, insert myself into this narrative and into this story that I don't see myself in anymore. And so, I started sewing pages shut. It was hard for me to get into this Bible. You know you don't write books; you don't puncture, you don't alter it. And so, I started to think of it as a ritual or a punishment right. And so, I started writing phrases that felt like a punishment to me, like as if I was in school and somebody made me rewrite this sentence 50 times over and over. I think what I wrote is being gay is a great sin against God or something like that over and over for pages and eventually it started feeling less and less awful but are also more and more awful to be doing so. And then it evolved into me inserting photographs in there of family members that I have not come out to. So, images of my brother my sister my mom and dad and people that have passed away, and having a conversation with them about how I feel about religion and who I turned out to be, who I am developing into. And so, the Living Bible was this precious object to me that allowed me to open the floodgates, like creating the kind of work that I do now.

**MB:** I'm glad I asked about that one because I was, I was going to ask about a different one. How do you address Asian or Asian American identity themes or histories in your artwork?

**KB:** So, I always struggled with inserting Asian themes into the current body of work that I've been working on. The Filipino culture and the region that I grew up in was mainly very Spanish and very religious. There is that the kind of image that I grew up with like going to church. And it was so hard to separate the difference between like religion and culture and familial memories. And then I struggled to make it more Oriental or make it more Filipino, but to be Filipino feels like religion or that like Roman Catholic Spanish visuals. In the larger scheme of things, as an artist I think I am growing into addressing that more. So, after Trump was elected into office, my entire family applied for naturalization. We always knew that it was going to happen, but it was like, oh you know we'll put it off. It's going to cost so much money to do [because] the applications are so expensive. It's not a necessity. Well out of pride, eventually we'll be Americans. We've lived here for so long. But you know again, that political push embedded a fear of like, oh we're not Americans we're probably targets right. And so that process began, and I started to really think about my identity as an immigrant and what this means to denounce my citizenship as a Filipino and [to] become an American. And I think this process just brought me in to thinking of that more, and really creating outbreaks about it.

**MB:** Awesome. And going off that, is identifying as Asian American something that is important to you personally? Why or why not?

**KB:** Yes. I think it's very important because that's the identity that my body holds. I can't shake it off. And that's kind of my defining thing, not my most obvious defining thing but one of the things that defines me that creates this intersection of where I exist that I address in all of my artwork. I found out with the beginning of my study that it's impossible for me to exist as something else. And I think that's one of the first few words on my bio is that I am an Asian-American artist. And I mean I guess in writing and speaking that's one of the first things that like I might type well just part of my identity you know. Yeah. But like in person. Like when you see me that like definitely won't be one of the first things that you'll know.

**MB:** What drew you to painting and sculpture because I know you kind of started out with photography.

**KB:** I guess because I grew up in like a church studying or like going to museums or galleries and all that kind of stuff. What you see are paintings and sculptures. I mentioned earlier that going into photography or the first photography class that I took, I was tested because I didn't see it as an art form that I could get into. It didn't seem, quote unquote, high art for me. You know I felt [like] the way people see photography is that anybody could do it, anybody with a camera. Based off the history of photography and what it has become today, I had that preconceived notion of what photography was. And so, I figured out how I can make it work for me, how I can use what I know from painting and sculpture to the immediacy that photographs can have.

**MB:** Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian-American?

**KB:** Yes, actually several.

**MB:** What was your experience with those versus other ones?

**KB:** Yeah. Okay. That's a good question. So, one recent exhibition that I was just part of that's very specific in that Asian American culture. I was exhibiting like last month at the Philippine Center. So, in New York City you know where the consulate is and it's all Asian American and Filipino artists that are exhibiting at the time. And I guess the big difference is that it feels more of a tighter community than like Oh you know here I am in a show about love here I am in a show about I don't know something else. And like being built upon a community and culture makes it feel more important work that we're like that we were doing together. So, we have things in common outside of our just our conceptual concerns or our aesthetic looks. It was more of an individual connection to the artist and not just the artwork.

**MB:** So, my last question is are you working on anything at the moment?

**KB:** So, "Noli Me Tangere," or the religious imagery I think will be going on for the rest of my life. There's just so much inspiration coming from religion and the parallels that could be built between that and the queer community and I think it's just a struggle that everybody in the queer community goes through. Or any religious people, I don't want to isolate just my community. I talk to everyone about it and I think that project will definitely [go] on and take different forms throughout my career. But currently, I am working on more about immigration and my familial identity. And so, I'm using textiles to create garments with imagery of paperwork from the immigration process, the naturalization process, and photographs that I have sourced and are making. They're all hand embroidered and sewn.

**End.**