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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Jennifer Tshab Her

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**Interviewer: Allison Bautista**

**Artist: Jennifer Tshab Her**

**Location: DePaul Schmitt Academic Center**

**Date: May 7th, 2019**



Photo 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:** My work demonstrates and complicates the politics of displacement through my experience as a second-generation Hmong-American woman. As a nation-less ethnic minority from Southeast Asia, I fear cultural extinction. I create work that reveals the diaspora of the Hmong, questioning the roles of site and place, and instead looking in-between. My work engages political and cultural space through multidisciplinary practices such as embroidery, installation, and social practice. I use color as a dialogue—a tool for bringing attention to space, claiming space and recognizing how spaces are claimed. I interpret the question of ownership, whether land or body, through the use of Hmong textile, language, material placement, and color mixtures. This work is part of the larger question of what it means to belong, and how I join the conversation about the history of political refugees in America. Art is a form that allows me to position my body and other bodies in relation to the Hmong diaspora, and to investigate the generative spaces between visibility and invisibility.

Bio from: <https://www.tshabher.com/about>

**Interview Transcript:**

**Allison Bautista:** Tell me about where you grew up and how did it affect you?

**Jennifer Tshab Her:** I was born in July of 1991, so I am currently 27 years old. I was born in Winfield, Illinois at Central DuPage Hospital. I grew up in the suburb of West Chicago until I was in third grade, where I then moved to North Aurora. My parents still live there, and I was there until I moved to Chicago about five years ago. The way that I grew up, in a sense, was very sheltered. I grew up Christian and my parents are refugees from the secret war. So, when I was growing up I felt that I was living that dual life. My parents know English, but I was constantly translating for them, which a lot of immigrant kids end up doing. So, growing up I felt that I grew up color blind, in a sense, because of being so sheltered.

Although I did have my Hmong community at church, I felt that in school I had a separate colloquial identity. So, having my first name Jennifer that I went by at school while being addressed by middle name Tshab at home and everywhere else. So, I grew up with the duality of my identity, which I feel that I am now reconciling in my art. I knew that I was Hmong Asian and I knew that I was white in a sense, but I was still in my own headspace about figuring out who. There were things that happened to me as a person of color. But, I don't think that it impacted me as much because I feel like I didn't have the agency to recognize.

I do remember growing up kids asking me if I was Chinese or Japanese, and my response of "Oh, you'll never guess because nobody knows Hmong people are." It wasn't until I actually moved to Chicago where I was out of my parents' home where I started to reflect on my identity as a Hmong American woman. My childhood was pretty chill, I wasn't rebellious, I listened to my parents, and I was the oldest daughter out of six children. I have an older half-brother, two older brothers, and two younger sisters. So, I am the middle child, but I am the oldest daughter. I guess that it was pretty traditional with gender roles in my family. So, the girls helped with the housework and also as the oldest daughter I helped my mom cook and those types of roles.

**AB:** How would you define or categorize yourself within your art or with art in general?

**JTB:** In terms of medium, I started as a painter, I always kind of liked art as a kid, but it wasn't really pushed for or encouraged. I remember drawing my stuffed animals as a kid, but that wasn't really going anywhere. My parents were like "just be a pharmacist," like ok sure, but then it didn't happen. I took an art class my senior year of high school. I always thought that I liked art, but I never did anything, so finally I took an art class and it totally changed everything. I loved it. I was in band class, but I used to play the trombone, but I quit band for art. I don't know if all high schools are the same, but my high school you got two electives. So, my electives were band and Spanish. So, I didn't have anything else. I took three years of Spanish because that was

the requirement. My last year, I had a free elective, so I was like “Oh, why don’t I take art?” I liked it the first semester, so then the second semester, I just quit band and took two extra art classes. I went to community college, Waubensee community college for two and a half years and then got my associates in art. I did mostly painting that year.

At the end of my community college, I worked more on sculptural work and installation, but it wasn’t until I transferred to UIC, where I started doing more installation and textile, pretty much everything. Before I was making work, just making random stuff like about my hair. I didn’t really know. I was always cautious about space and how to manipulate space and kind of thinking of spaces. That plugs into my work about my identity as a Hmong person and Hmong people in general. I started to get these textiles from my mom like traditional Hmong clothing. So, I started to incorporate the Hmong pattern in my work. I’ve painted on walls, and now I’m doing more work. I guess in school I focus on themes of space and the displacement of Hmong people. I was thinking of more general claims as a Hmong identity for all. So, I was making flags because we don’t have an official flag. I was marking spaces, I made a sticker called #Hmongspace. Just tagging places, it was more of getting us known. But after my thesis, I was just so overwhelmed with making big claims. I felt alone, and I gave myself this big responsibility, but really it wasn’t my responsibility. So, I took a year off and finally I started to think about my personal life more.

What sparked my project I did after my senior year was my parents went back to Laos since the last time they immigrated to the States. My dad came in the late ’70s, my mom came in the ’80s. So, it has been 30-40 years since they had been back to Laos. I started thinking about what that meant of visiting the country they grew up in, but now they’re pretty much tourists because it has changed so much. I was thinking about that and so there are these traditional Hmong textiles called paj ntaub which is called a story cloth. Most of them display the migration of the Hmong people from Laos, to the Thai refugee camps, to the U.S. I made a piece with my parents going back titled *Returning* having it in the same style of the story cloth, thinking about what does it mean of my parents going back? Things like my personal story.

Lately, I’ve been doing things like my name thinking about my duality of my identity of being an American and a Hmong person. What does it mean when I’m now telling people my name is Tshab? But when they read it like “Oh that’s not how you say it.” Yeah, there’s a lot of themes of space, I don’t know, visibility, making me known because I feel like I am always repeating myself. There’s a lot of repetition in my work, not just sewing repetition, but also always having to tell this five-minute history that I have mastered over the years of like, “Oh you know the Hmong people?” Me personally, I just feel obligated to tell them because who else is going to tell them? Whoever doesn’t know who the Hmong are. So, I feel like my work in general, to understand it you would need to know the history of the Hmong to understand what I am trying to say. I’ve been thinking about that lately in general. I remember my friend said “Well you’re

making these claims of making spaces for Hmong, so the next step, now that we know that you're here. What else do you have to say?”. So, I’ve been thinking about that a lot. Not just Hmong, but my identity in general. As a woman, as a Christian, as a music lover, fashion, just stuff like that.

**AB:** In terms of identity, have you been included in exhibitions that have been contextualized as Asian or Asian-American? Or have you been labeled as Asian or as an Asian American artist? How do you feel about that?

**JTH:** I haven’t been in an overall Asian American themed exhibition. I was specifically in a Hmong American, so that’s pretty specific. I was in a show earlier year with another Hmong Artist, Victoria Kue. She’s from the east coast, we did a show together at Lawrence University, in Appleton Wisconsin. So, that was cool. It was kind of just a working conversation of with one another about our Hmong American identity. Also, just the work that we make. So, that was good. I think I would go back with Asian American because I do receive, I accept it, but I know it is a pretty broad term. I know that Asian Americans have totally different experiences depending on like where you are, culturally, economically, in general. Lately, I’ve been liking to identify more with South East Asian to be more specific. I think, that I am ok with being labeled Asian American. It is interesting with all these labels, but it like Asian American specifically, South-East Asian American, and Hmong American.

**AB:** Do you remember the first time that you really felt involved with your work? Or the first time you were inspired to be into art?

**JTH:** I always like art, but before I found making art about my identity. It was kind of just like, I liked it, but I didn’t really have a direction, so then I didn’t really know. I think I’m not sure if it was my freshman or sophomore year, it might’ve been my sophomore year taking a class which my teacher was a fabric artist, so of course, she was going to bring in pieces of muslin to work on. That was my first-time using fabric in my artwork, for some reason I connected it to Hmong textiles. With the muslin, I started working with more words of the Hmong language, and that sprung into more of just using color. Muslin is just a beige color, so then I started using black ink on it. After thinking about that, I started thinking about, so what does it mean to be Hmong? My first project talked a lot about the Hmong language. The popular Hmong tonal languages, there’s two in the U.S. It’s the Hmong green and the Hmong white. The Hmong white is more popular, but the Hmong green is not as much. I’m Hmong green.

I was thinking about language in term of its tonal language and using the alphabet. And someone confusing my not name not as Tshab (Cha), but T-chab because of how its spelled. I think I’ve always thought about that, but once feeling the material fabric somehow connected to me which sparked an endless thought about my identity. Before I was making work about my body, and for

some reason doing stuff about my hair. I thought a lot about the hairstyles I had. I have always been conscious and know who I am a person, but having these outlets helped me to discover who I am, so now what? It's an endless journey, but also learning the language and talk about it, also reading things and researching things.

**AB:** In your artist statement there's a quote from General Vang Pao, "*The United States has forgotten about the Hmong people and what they did. We helped the Americans. We died for the Americans—and we still are, long after the war has ended. And isn't it ironic that most Americans don't even know who we are.*" Who do you think is American in your terms, and do you think your work is helping to develop what society thinks as the "traditional" American?

**JTH:** Yeah, I like that quote because I feel that it really resonates with the work I am doing. General Vang Pao, he was the main general for the secret war for the Hmong people. He was the one that the CIA recruited to recruit other Hmong men and boys and some women to fight for the war. I thought it was interesting coming from a Hmong leader. Also, already knowing that they moved to America it's like I guess now technically they're American too. I think it's interesting because when we think of Americans, we think of the white man. Just because of the history of how America has become it seems like it's us versus them mentality in a sense because we're always being "othered". I think before the American was this white guy, but I think now America has become more vocal like "Oh we also live here." So, an American isn't some blond hair blue eyed guy, I'm American because I was born here. It's a huge conversation. I think because there has always been the push back of who belongs in this country.

I'm always having to voice because of 1. People don't know who the Hmong are and 2. I do, I guess belong here because I was born here. [Laughs] It's such a complicated question. That's a good question! I've never really deeply contextualized what it means to be American. Constitutionally if you were born here then you're American, but if you look a certain way then you're different.

Media plays such a big role in that too, I'm sure you can relate, seeing white people on the screen. I think that's what you think Americans are because even all over the world their showing "Oh, these are Americans, white people who live in the suburbs" Even with that, when I would read books the characters I would imagine would be white people. I don't know, that's what I saw so automatically. Even now, I'm trying to knock down those walls of whiteness that I built, and that's an ongoing process. That's such a great question to think about, it's such a national thing with borders and everything is so intertwined nowadays.

**AB:** To end this interview, I wanted to ask what are you currently working on?

**JTH:** Right now, I have a lot of ideas that need to come into fruition. But right now, I'm wanting to work on the returning things that I did on my parents, but I wanted to do with my own life. I wanted to do what signifies my own life, I wanted to put in my job logos, I don't know other things. I would probably make it bigger. I've been thinking about that. I also wanted to do a research project about Hmong people in Chicago. I found this *Chicago Tribune* article talking about this Hmong textile group in uptown. There were names in there I was looking up, and I was looking at how I could get in contact with them. I've just been interested in the movement of Hmong in Chicago. I'm a Hmong in Chicago, so I've been looking to do more research of the history about Hmong in Chicago, and Hmong that live here now. We're a small community, but we're still here. I've been thinking about that, that's a long project. I've been also thinking about more experience type of art I guess, so I have some friends that have some group show in the fall. One of my friends was like "You're always telling people about the Hmong people, and voicing these things, but how would it look if you brought the culture to a space."

I've been thinking about that, and the gathering of Hmong people is always around food. That's a lot of cultures in general, but this past weekend at my parent's house we had two big eating gatherings on Friday and Sunday because my aunt and uncle from France were in town. The gathering of food is beautiful. I just thought about this yesterday. I read something online that said food is the easiest way to get into the culture. I've been thinking about What would it look like if I created a space where people gather together around a table of Hmong food and what would I put in the space to ignite that it is Hmong space. I've been thinking about the logistics of that, I'm kind of all over the place.

I've been working on things on my name, on social media I have #ItspronouncedCha. I've been thinking about my identity, being Jennifer and Tshab. Also, slowing deleting Jennifer out of my life, but also using it as a privilege too because Jennifer is easy. But I prefer Tshab, so why not just call me Tshab. Yeah, just different things, I have ideas of making installations with beaded stuff because traditional Hmong clothing has beads. I don't know, it's all over the place, but I think half of it is like not having space or time to make it, but we'll see what happens. I'm excited about the things I'm thinking about or the conversations I'm having. I've been also wanted to create a collective of South East Asians in the city. But I just want to find the space with people of the same experiences. It could be artists, it could be not. I have friends in Minnesota that have a cool collective their way. I have friends and we would do art in school, but how would it look to come together to facilitate conversations. It's like putting yourself out there, and I think that these types of things happen organically. Also, just finding the right people to get it started, which I wanted to work on more collaborative work, but I've been trying to space to do that. I think a lot of things happen more organically when you are collaborating with other people and everyone is using their own skill set. Yeah, it's all over the place, but it's been good.

**End.**