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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Kai Duc Luong Interview

Stuart Hutson  
*DePaul University*

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**Interviewer: Stuart Hutson**

**Artist: Kai Duc Luong**

**Location: Interview over cell phone-Chicago, IL**

**Date: May 31st, 2019**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203 Section 301: Asian American Arts & Culture during the Spring 2019 Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design*



Photo and Artist bio provided by Kai Duc Luong (<https://www.kaiducluong.com/home>)

**Artist Bio** Born in 1975 in Phnom-Penh, KAI-DUC LUONG fled the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime from Cambodia to Vietnam to France, where his family settled in Paris, in 1978. KAI-DUC operates between Chicago and Paris. His artistic projects include video (art / doc / film), photography, and mixed media installations. His unconventional path as a self-taught outsider artist, trained in digital communication & systems engineering, gives him a unique perspective, at times questioning subject matters through the understanding of transmission and systems (e.g. the primary emotions, the five senses, the stages of grief, the art industry). His works have been showcased at international film festivals, museums and galleries across the world (NY, Paris, LA, Dubai, Hawaii, Moscow or Chicago).

KAI-DUC also operates as a successful award-winning filmmaker - videographer - photographer working on video and film production projects as various as corporate, commercial, editorial, documentary, event and wedding, and live streaming video. He was the recipient of a 2012 PDN Photo Annual award for best video, a PDN Top Knots in 2013 and 2012 for best wedding video, a 2013 AX3 American Aperture Awards Honoree, and a 2014 Silver Award from the Wedding & Portrait Association WPPI, and is the recipient of the 2017/2018 Wedding Wire Couples Choice Award & 2016/2017 People Love Us on Yelp Award.

He is also a board member of the non-for-profit Arts & Cultural Exchange organization Pasfarda and the Chicago International Film Festival Education Advisory Committee.

KAI-DUC is currently working on his second feature film inspired by Dante's Divine Comedy (Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise) which will be an opera film featuring French actor Denis Lavant (The Lovers on the Bridge, Beau Travail, Holy Motors) and musical performances by the medieval ensemble La Camera Delle Lacrime. This movie will be completed by 2020 and will include original texts from Dante's book as well as animation, aerial shots and video-art.

## **Interview Transcript:**

Kai Duc Luong: Hello this is Kai.

Stuart Hutson: Hey, this is Stuart.

K: Hi Stuart, how are you?

S: Pretty good, how are you?

K: Great, great.

S: Alright.

K: Yes, can you hear me?

S: I can hear you loud and clear.

K: Awesome, so ready whenever you are for that interview

S: Yeah, let's start it in a bit, I have to get this dog.

K: oh, ok.

K: So is this being recorded right now?

S: Alright, alright I got the dog. So I got the questions in front of me. Um, are you ready?

K: Yes, maybe you can tell me more about yourself and then you know what you're doing with your teacher?

S: Oh, me? Well, college student I'm currently doing this for an Asian American art study. We're supposed to reach out an Asian American artist and you know, just interview them. Give them these questions that we made up.

K: So what are you studying, Stuart?

S: Uh me? Well, my major is currently is anthropology.

K: Oh, great.

S: So uh, this kind a factors in a little bit like tangentially.

K: Sure, and how old are you?

S: I am a senior and I'm 21 years old.

K: Ok, so you're like ahh, what like not a fourth year but your third year of your undergrad?

S: Yeah.

K: Ok. Great.

K: Yeah, I'm ready so...I can answer your questions.

S: So uh I guess tell me a little bit more about yourself, you know.

K: Sure, My name is Kai Duc Luong. You can call me Kai. I was born in Cambodia at the onset of the Khmer Rouge in 1975. My parents and my entire family were evicted from our home at gun point and sent to the country side to work in the fields during the Cambodian Genocide and so my parents worked the fields at the beginning and we were not given much to eat. I had two brothers who were toddlers. I was just born and they knew it was a dead end at that time and so they decided to escape the village they were working at one night. After my father had survived a sort of near death experience of being reprimanded by a military chief with a rifle that was pointed at his head while he was digging his own grave with a shovel. And my mother used me as a shield and bargaining chip to save my father's life. So from then on we walked about 100 days sort of wandering from places to places for hundreds of miles to find ourselves at the border of Cambodia and Vietnam. And we managed to cross the border and shortly after that my father passed away and my mother was able to re-unite with her side of the family who managed to get to Vietnam's capital city just a month or so before us and that was right around the time when Vietnam won the war against the United States and so then after that we went to France and I lived in Paris from 1978 to the late 90's 97 and I was starting engineering back then and then I

came to the US to finish a master's degree in Chicago at IIT in the south side of Chicago and that's kind of been my journey from South East Asia to the United States.

S: That was some pretty heavy stuff...and that was around when you were a toddler so four, five years old?

K: I was just born. I was just like, when it started it was 1975. I was born in March and it started in April so I was just a few weeks old when it started. And then yeah, when I arrived in Paris I was about three years old. Yeah, it was some definitely crazy things I was very, very lucky thanks to my mother and my father and my family they really tried to protect me. They had the sort of awareness that had they stayed much longer in Cambodia that none of us would have survived so they really tried hard not to stay in those villages which later turned out to be the killing fields.

S: Do you mind if I move on to the next question?

K: Yes, this was a bad story in the beginning but turned out to be a great enabler for us so I'm very sort of mindful of that past.

S: Ok, so, how would you define or categorize your art? Or yourself? Like how people categorize their art like as Muslim art or Filipino art.

K: Oh I see, well I think you know I don't think my art is you know specifically categorized as Asian art from any part of Asian or even you know influenced directly by Asian culture but I definitely do have a lot of my childhood and adulthood and past experiences that inspired my works so, I categorize my works based on content style rather than a sort of ethnic background. I know some do have sort of a categorization to it but I don't not have it. I am more influenced by the experiences that I've had even in my personal work but also my commercial [work]. Just recently I took on a commercial work. I was sent out by a client in France and it was related even to my childhood, basically my grandfather and uncle used to consume the product when I was a kid and I remember it vividly and the kind of cellar were that product was stored at, kind of struck me. So anything that sort of has a memory that resonates with me and my past experiences sort of channels this sort of desire to create something that is meaningful based on that and you know my father left a manuscript of a diary during his exile journey and I'm working on it I've been working on it for the past ten years trying to write a book out of it and make a documentary out of it so. That's another remnant of my South East Asian origins. I also have a childhood in France, that of an immigrant of a small minority in a country that was not as multicultural as the world we live in today. So, I have learned to also empathize with other minorities especially in the US with the work I've done: the labor, the unions. So, I think my influence has more to do with my social and cultural upbringing and I do tend to have a sort of Asian approach to things and identities and I think that has helped me create works maybe in that fashion, from that vantage point of view.

S: How exactly did you get involved in art like when did you first start because you said your grandfather, those vivid memories that really resonate with you kind of draw you so how did the art really start?

K: Yeah, Both my parents who were teachers in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge years, they were academics and my grandfather always loved poetry and literature and even just recently when we were trying to clean my mother's place she had leftovers from my grandfather's books and he's always loved books in Chinese and also translated Western books, he even had a collection of Dante's Divine Comedy in Chinese which I didn't know of. I'm also working on feature a film inspired by this book series that will be completed in 2021 and so from early on we've been a family that never really had the opportunity to have full time artists but have always enjoyed the arts. My grandfather loved writing poetry so he also helped the Chinese community from South East Asia in Paris write signage for Asian businesses or write small poetry that people would hang next to their businesses for good fortune he was sort of know as the calligrapher for the community so he did a lot of that and my mother was known as the person who was really good at teaching Chinese and teaching languages she knew Cambodian, Vietnamese, and so she helped the community to read within Paris where we were growing up. So, those types of influences got me and even my brother who studied math at first and was a math teacher and later on veered into being sort of the manager of a music ensemble and at first I was in engineering as a lot of Asian Europeans or Americans are sort of told to do and because we were good at it in that sense because we did have this sort of I think heritage of coming to a country and having to fit within that country and the best way to fit into a country is to do well at school and make good studies, have a good job and I was pretty good at that but then after that there was a time in high school when I couldn't decide if I wanted to go to film school because I always loved films ever since I was a kid watching movies and then I was told not to go for it and I sort of regretted it. I worked as an engineer for ten years and then I decided after my mother passed away because I kind of always followed what she said and after her death I realized that she also wanted me to follow my own path. That was about eleven years ago, in my early thirties.

S: That says a lot how you were apprehensive about following your own path but, you know, you still did it, you still went on to be your own artist.

K: Yes, it was back in 2008 during the financial crisis so it was definitely not easy but you know, I've been doing it for eleven years and you know as an artist you have two ways to do it I think. Either you try to make a living still outside creating your own art through academia like being a teacher and doing those types of works or you go on to creating your own works commercially. I sort of didn't want to go academia, I could have gone back to school and I sort of thought about it, I was accepted at the NYU Tisch for an MFA in Film Production which was a very sort of prestigious school for filmmaking but I just felt that I didn't want to go back into student loans. It would have been the cost of a mortgage to go back to school and I sort of had done enough school in my life, I was a graduate student and I wanted to shoot and do things, get to make a living out of it, so I took on a lot of small projects at first and with word of mouth you get bigger and bigger clients and exhibits.

S: What kind of exhibition opportunities have either changed or stayed the same over the course of your art career? Like when you got bigger were you more requested by Asian American groups or like gallery's to do showings and stuff like that.

K: I think interestingly I was embraced by the Asian American community early on, that's how I first showed my first short film was through the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media (FAAIM) in Chicago. They were very, very helpful and enthusiastic about some of the short movies that I'd made in the beginning. That was back in 1999-2000 and when I first created my feature length documentary "Someplace Else" (2008) that was the year I decided to quit my job and become a full-time artist, it was shown at some festivals throughout the United States especially thanks to the Asian American community, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, The Vilcek Foundation which supports many Asian American Immigrants (and US immigrants in general) and the Hawaii International Film Festival, those were very supportive groups. Then I went back to Paris in 2009 and 2012 after my mom passed away to take care of a lot of paperwork and so I was sort of immersed in the French community of artists and that was a very different sort of environment than the U.S. environment of artist and from there in France, as a video artist you really have exhibit more in galleries that are not really about whether your Asian American or Asian it's more about the artwork that you produce and in the U.S I did have the opportunity to show at the Vilcek Foundation Gallery for 2-months which is a foundation that supports American immigrants so that was very, very helpful to my career and after that I had shown works with communities that were very diverse like the Ukrainian Community and then working with all of sorts of clients. For me its kind of hard to make a differentiation between the work I do personally and commercially. I don't really care about labels and categorization. I create works and you know, I put in 100% of myself in anything I do.

K: I'd like to also mention the Cambodian Association of Illinois which has been supportive of me and I have been supportive of them, the same with the French Consulate and community here. I have a special multicultural background as a South East Asian, Chinese, French and American.

S: Have you ever been in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian American or had you art labeled by someone as Asian American art or just Asian in general?

K: I think there's definitely been people that have said I had the kind of Asian influence. In terms of the artwork itself, some arts do have that Asian American or Asian European influence so I've had some works like one that meant a lot to me was about basically my childhood memory of my mom and after she passed away there was one single frozen dish that she had left in the fridge and that was the last dish she had ever made, that I can still taste, so I created a video homage to that last dish. When that was exhibited in galleries the influence was heavily Asian or of Asian American heritage.

S: Was your art being labeled as an Asian American artist important to you?

K: I think it's one of those strange things to be Asian American because there's a lot of clichés about Asian Americans which are sometimes very true because I think Asian Americans that are very prominent these days do kind of want to perpetuate that Asian American identity. Shows like "Fresh Off the Boat" or that movie "Crazy Rich Asians" and so I kind of don't want to be associated with that because for me it's not really true, at least part of it, but I'd rather not be associated with that with that Asian American part of things but I do believe there's definitely

something to be said about Asians that did immigrate to the US or other parts of our western society that we do share some sort of sense of family value, a sense of respect for the elders and what they have gone through in life in terms of allowing their future generations to pursue their own path in life so there is this sense of past heritage, strong experiences and perseverance and belief in something. Maybe we have a more subtle way and perspective about tackling subject matters, and it may be different than the culture where you are assimilating into and you also have your upbringing within France or the US . Personally, it gives me a more balanced perspective about the relationship I have with the different cultures. I do value the fact that I am Asian living in the western culture and have grown up with both sides of the equation, especially with aging, I definitely value going back to my origins but also cherishing the things that a place like America has given people like myself. I'm very grateful for these experiences.

S: Tell me a bit about your "Cityscape" series.

K: I wanted to create a memory, a sort of testimonial of the cities that I had lived in and basically the first one was Paris, it was the view from where I would always wake up in the morning, a view Paris because I lived in a building that was pretty high and that's very rare because there are not that many big buildings in Paris but there was one which I lived in, in a rather popular neighborhood and was sort of right at the edge of Paris. And so that's always been the view I had of Paris, a very beautiful cityscape of the entire city so I basically was going through tough times in life and looking at this sort of vista of the city and the sky soothed me so I decided to make this sort of kaleidoscope of the city's architecture but also of my personal emotions as I went through the grief of my mother's passing. So, I spent about 49 days just filming the cityscape (7 weeks is the mourning period for a typical Chinese funeral ritual in my family), just letting the camera roll while tending to the rituals of giving incense and preparing food for the dead at my mother's place, and then I took the best parts of it and created a time-lapse and instead of creating a regular time-lapse I made it into a sort of mirrored effect out of it.

S: Could you go into a bit more about the technical aspects of the making of the picture?

K: Of course, I did it for Chicago too which I spent about a week, a shorter amount of time than Paris. We take tens of thousands of pictures and then we go through the editing part of it, we look at what works, what doesn't work and basically think about the type of effect that you want to create out of it you have to also create a score for it. Paris was about childhood so we had a little lullaby created by Heather Stone and then Chicago was the place where I really became an adult so it had a soundtrack that really needed to be more about discovery and how we evolve your experiences of the city so I asked another friend in Chicago, Brett Callaway, to make the soundtrack for me. The editing process is just tedious , just a lot of frames to look at, make sure the speed is right, make sure that the transitions are right.

S: What exactly got you into short filmmaking? Did photography come first or were you always interested in both mediums?

K: I've always liked filmmaking, and back in the day, it was different from how it is today. It was 8mm videos in the late eighties and I got my first video camera back then and it was a strange time, my mom arrived in Paris re-married and so I had a step-father and he died of cancer

in 1989 just before he died he bought me a video camera and so I used that video camera to record all sorts of things with the family and things like that, I always used it to film something just like today kids have iPhones to record anything they want, back then it was videotaping with that 8mm camcorder. It was very expensive buying tapes, have to be a little restrained about filming things but I still filmed lots of things and bought tapes with whatever spare change I would have, I would definitely spend it on buying tapes. I always liked that and then I started creating shorts, its much easier creating a short than a feature but that's kind of gotten me into it and then I met photographers here in Chicago from the Chicago Tribune and that got me involved into the more intricate parts of photography and filmmaking and that got me learning more about the techniques of photography and filming which are very similar and different, one deals with apertures and shutter speed, picking up light and things like that. I like them both, I also do experimental feature films these days.

S: Which of your short films did you enjoy working on the most?

K: Well I think experimental works are the most fun to work on just because there are small pieces of experimentation, less linked to scripting and planning and funding and so with experimental you just have more fun. Whether the result is better or worse it's up to anyone's personal preference but as far as creating the work, definitely experimental.

S: If you had to choose between one of your photography's or short films, out of those two categories which of those two would you think as most impactful?

K: Its interesting, I've done short works that have been very impactful and that I'm very proud of like works that I have done during the Chicago School Closing, work that had been video journalistic you know. Jacobin magazine used some of it and I am very proud of those works that have helped the larger community with social struggles. So I have this part of my work that I'm very proud of the personal work I did for the Cambodian day of remembrance, and my Circumplex art installation about emotions. Right now I'm finishing a feature length film about Dante's Divine Comedy which hopefully will be a nice work and will get more people interested in an older book that's still very relevant today as we go through a society that's very much changing and not so different from back then several hundred years ago in the middle age and the world was as much in flux as today's world.

K: That's about it right?

S: Yeah.

K: Good luck with everything you do and your future endeavors.

S: Thanks.

**End.**