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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## heather c. lou Interview

Katie O'Reilly

*DePaul University*, Kkatieoreilly26@gmail.com

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**Interviewer: Katie O'Reilly**

**Artist: heather c. lou (she/her/hers)**

**Location: Interview over Google Hangout**

**Date: May 16th, 2019**

*Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: 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.*



bio taken from <https://hclouart.com>, image taken from @hclou on instagram.

**ARTIST BIO:** heather c. lou, m.ed. (she/her/hers) is an angry gemini earth dragon, multiracial, asian, queer, cisgender, disabled, survivor/surviving, depressed, and anxious womxn of color artist based in st. paul, minnesota. her mixed media pieces include watercolor, acrylic, gold paint pen, oil pastel, radical love, & hope. each piece comments on the intersections of her racial, gender, ability, & sexual identities, as they continue to shift and develop in complexity each day. her art is a form of healing, transformation, and liberation, rooted in womxnism and gender equity through a racialized borderland lens. heather works in education as an administrator. in her spare time, heather loves ogling at puppies, snuggling with olive bear (her cat), sprout, and loon (her dogs), birdwatching, eating pie, playing her ukulele, and spending time with her loving partner.

### **INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT:**

**Katie O'Reilly (KO):** Hi Heather, it's so great to meet you!

**Heather C. Lou (hcl):** It's great to meet you, too! Thanks for the interview.

**KO:** So what is your current job now?

**hcl:** Well, I work as an administrator at a university right now. My role is in student life and leadership development, so I get to work directly with a lot of different students, which is a great part of my job. I use some of my experiences at work and with students to inspire some of the topics/themes regarding justice and identity. I work at Metropolitan State University, which is a public institution and we are one of the most diverse in age, identity, etc. in the state, which makes my job pretty cool.

**KO:** What kind of media do you use to create your art?

**hcl:** I started with true mixed media, like watercolor, metallic acrylic, wood block, etc. but I focused on making my art as portable as possible. Then I could work on it anywhere, and could start creating at any point.

**KO:** Do you usually have an idea in mind when you start creating your art? Or do you just start from anywhere?

**hcl:** Not really, it doesn't always start at the same point. Sometimes I'll begin with an idea in mind, sometimes I just start creating and the project starts to gain direction as I go. Sometimes my art will reflect feelings I haven't articulated yet, and I come to process my experiences through the natural process.

**KO:** So when people buy your art, is it usually your original work or is the subject matter commissioned?

**hcl:** Both! Commission and original work.

**KO:** Do you take every single one?

**hcl:** No, if it I don't like a project or just don't vibe with it I won't take the commission. The project and the art still has to resonate with me for me to make it. I make enough money at my job at the University, which is definitely a privilege in my life. I'm lucky to be able to say that.

**KO:** You have, or had, an Etsy page, do you have any of your income through your art?

**hcl:** I used to, but I started to resent making art after a while since I was just making it for other people, so I took my Etsy page down to focus on my own internal experience with creating art. I process through my identity through my art, and I want to honor that. I don't have to be the model minority - which adds pressure to be everywhere all the time. This is very toxic, internalized thinking which stems from capitalism, expecting Asian American people - especially womxn - to be everywhere all the time.

**KO:** Wow, you're right. It must be tough to have many of the intersections of your identity overlap and tell you to have to be working your absolute hardest at all times.

**hcl:** Definitely. With having a disability too, it's important for me, and everyone, to focus on their mental health first and foremost. We need radical disability justice because our capitalist culture makes the world too rigid right now. Life needs to be patient.

**KO:** Would you mind telling me more about your time on medical leave, and how that influenced your artistic career/process? If this is too personal I understand!

**hcl:** I think I'm going to skip this one- I was out of work based on some racist/sexist/homophobic experiences. I used my time off to process my pain and hurt via art. I capture some of this in my mnartists.org piece (<http://www.mnartists.org/article/does-mean-i%E2%80%99m-real-artist-now>).

**KO:** Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

**hcl:** I grew up outside of Los Angeles, California with my family. I identify as multiracial- Chinese (Toishanese) and White. I grew up in an interracial and intergenerational household, and my grandparents from Toishan were vital in my earliest understandings of what it means to be Asian- to center our culture, identity, relationships, and to navigate and resist dominance. I went to college in San Jose, California and majored in public relations and humanities/art history. I almost failed out of college my first year, and eventually was able to graduate in 3.5 years. My time in college was formative in my identity development as a queer Multiracial womxn, and it was the space and place where I realized the ways art can serve as activism/activation. After I finished at San Jose State University, I pursued my master of education degree at University of Vermont, focusing on equity, inclusion, and leadership development for womxn of color and people with multiple marginalized identities in education. I have lived coast to coast,

worked as an administrator, and continued to find ways to use art as a tool for connecting with students and colleagues. Naturally, given my passion for critical theory, art, and activism, I have spent a majority of my career incorporating art as pedagogy and a site of counter-narrative/storytelling- which has lead me to my current role in Minnesota.

KO: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

hcl: Yes! Every piece I work on incorporates my own identities and experiences. My womxn of color series includes affirmations for womxn and femmes of color, particularly Multiracial and Asian folx. I did not grow up in a household that was expressive regarding affection, so I wanted to create a series of pieces that reminded myself and my community about our inherent power, intuition, and ways we can heal from trauma. Another example would be a commissioned written piece on mnartists.org that focused on my own battle around internalized model minority myths, navigating white supremacy, and taking time to recognize the ways that I had to reprioritize my own wellness in work, art, family, and community. (<http://www.mnartists.org/article/does-mean-i%E2%80%99m-real-artist-now>) .

KO: 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”?

hcl: In 2017, I was included in a panel/art exhibit that complemented the “Open in Emergency: Asian American Mental Health” kit by the Asian American Literary Review at University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. I created a mixed media watercolor series about artifacts in my own childhood and experiences in community. There were watercolor/gold painted pieces of my grandmother’s jade, comfort food, prayers/guidance/asking to ancestors, and a map of trauma I am healing from. I also was part of the Funny Asian Womxn Kollektive (FAWK) Clapback Cabarets in 2018. This group of hilarious artists performed comedy to address microaggressions, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all forms of oppression. I performed a tarot reading for the downfall of white supremacy- and created a space to conjure spells to dismantle the violence of settler colonialism.

Because identity (race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, spirituality, etc.) is central to my work, there is never a time that my identities aren’t part of what I create. My identities and experiences are intertwined- my art cannot be subjective or removed from my own understanding of self in relation to the world around me.

KO: Was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally?

hcl: Being Asian is important to me personally, as it informs how I relate to those around me. Being from LA, I grew up in community where being Multiracial and Asian was the norm. Talking about mixed-ness was salient and important to community building. Now that I live in Minnesota, being Asian is important because I experience race in this

geographical region to be very Black and White. I want to remind people that Asian people are in the Midwest, too. That our experiences matter. That cross-racial coalition building is important. That we are not just model minorities- we have voices and opinions and can be emotive and be radical leaders. I cannot remove my identities from the work I do, and I cannot allow my own identities to be erased. Identity matters.

**KO:** What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

**hcl:** Moving to Minnesota, I've found a strong network of Black, Indigenous, People of Color artists and makers. We are constantly creating and supporting each other- whether with galleries, markets, commissions, grants, etc. I have had the privilege of creating commissioned pieces for colleges and universities, state entities, individuals, etc. I have traveled across the United States to facilitate art workshops and serve in residencies to support youth with multiple marginalized identities. I have challenged myself to expand, apply for gallery openings, fellowships, etc. I have shown my work in galleries across the country, and have been able to create pieces for organizations that focus on social justice, womxnism, and empowering BIPOC. I feel so privileged to have been able to expand my art and reach over the past three years, and am thrilled to continue to grow as an artist and educator.

**KO:** What is a project you're working on now that you've been working on?

**hcl:** Right now, I am working on a zine dedicated to womxn of color and "how to serve the ultimate clapback" against microaggressions, inspired by the FAWK Cabarets I participated in during the 2018 season. (pictured below)



image taken from @hclou on instagram

**KO:** Can you tell me more about this work?

**hcl:** This piece is a collection of microaggressions that friends/artists/colleagues/acquaintances have shared with me over the years. I decided to create a zine/booklet about the ridiculous racist/sexist/homophobic/oppressive statements/experiences and provide tactics/options to respond. Most of my art is in response to things that make me feel something- angry, confused, silly, happy, etc. I wanted to find humor in how ridiculous well-intentioned people can be- and the real impact of emotional labor on people with marginalized identities.

**KO:** What advice would you give to younger artists looking to create art?

**hcl:** Oooh, advice. I would tell younger artists to be intentional about creating their art. Be collaborative, diverse, and don't let yourself sell-out. Take people's money, but only if it resonates with your work. Create art with intention.

**KO:** That's perfect. Thank you so much for the interview!

**LOU:** Of course, thank you!

**End.**

