
Asian American Art Oral History Project


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Sky Cubacub Interview

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DePaul University

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Interview: Spencer Nieto

Artist: Sky Cubacub

Location: Sky's Home Studio in Chicago

Date: May 5, 2019



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: Rebirth Garments are designed and made by hand by Sky Cubacub. Sky is a non-binary queer and disabled Filipinx human from Chicago, IL with life long anxiety and panic disorders. Sky first dreamed of this collection while in high school and couldn't find a place where they could buy a chest binder as a person who was under 18, and who didn't have access to a credit card to buy one online. Sky is especially interested in Rebirth Garments being accessible to queer and disabled youth and is working on creating a program for making free/reduced priced garments for people in need.

In Sky's practice, the intensive hand work makes the process the most important part and gives them inspiration. Chainmaille has been the catalyst to every other medium that they excel in; all of the mediums Sky enjoys are obsessive and have repetitive patterns. It is the slow, thoughtful process that holds value and heals Sky's mind. Through chainmaille, Sky has found their patience. For Sky, everyday is a performance where they bring their body as a kinetic sculpture into the consciousness of the people they interact with in passing and on a daily basis. Sky embodies the spirit of Radical Visibility, and Rebirth Garments is their soft armor. Sky considers it armor because it has the power to give them the confidence and strength to feel comfortable in their first skin. Sky has been building their self this armor or protection, not against harm exactly, but as a way to give them courage. Chainmaille and Rebirth Garments are a prosthetic for the communication of Sky's inner world. Sky's body, Sky's identity and Sky's prosthesis are one cohesive being.¹

¹ Cubacub, Sky. "Rebirth Garments." Rebirth Garments. Accessed June 06, 2019. <http://rebirthgarments.com/#rebirthgarments>.

Interview Transcript

Spencer Nieto: If you wanted to start off by telling anyone who might not know who you are about yourself and what it is you do.

Sky Cubacub: Yeah, so I am the creator of a clothing line called *Rebirth Garments* and it is a clothing line for people on the full spectrum of gender, size and ability. That means I'm mainly making clothes for queers with disabilities.

SN: And how would you define or categorize the stuff that you produce whether you consider it art or clothing, how would you categorize that and then where does that place you as the creator?

SC: I'm a garment maker, I'm an artist, I'm a performance artist... I guess sometimes... I don't really identify so much as a fashion designer. Sometimes I just say it so people understand what I'm making. But yeah I think of it all as art and activism.

SN: When, how and why did you first get involved with making garments?

SC: I started to make like... doing embellishments on garments when I was... probably twelve. I started making chainmaille, which is the jewelry aspect of my clothing line, when I was thirteen. But I had been making jewelry stuff since I was five. This clothing line has been around since 2014. But yeah it's like, I guess I have been working on it for most of my life.

SN: Yes, it definitely sounds like you have at least been involved with some aspect of creation most of your life.

SC: Yeah both of my parents were artists.

SN: Since you are doing something so revolutionary in- for lack of a better word- design and what you are doing might be considered more anti-fashion going against that idea of what fashion is today. Where do you find inspiration if not in the fashion world itself? Many designers would look to other designers in that scene, but you must have to go outside of that to find solid inspiration, so where do you see yourself looking?

SC: I mean my parents are very inspirational to me. my mom was a professional dancer, and the way that I show off my clothing is in these fashion performances that are more dance based rather than like catwalk and boring, stoic, un-fun runway style. So yeah that was very inspirational to me. And then my dad used to be a painter in the seventies, you can see the paints around here [points to paintings around studio], so I grew up with these really beautiful, colorful, geometric paintings all around me at all times and I think that really informed my aesthetic. But

yeah he was also a video artist and all of my performances I try to document and video really well too. So I really feel like I'm a smash together version of my parents, and then I kind of go and fill in gaps of things they didn't do. But I was really inspired by the architect, Buckminster Fuller when I was in high school. And I really love his designs because they are both really thinking about function and sustainability but also extremely beautiful like the Geodesic Dome.

SN: That's actually a pretty good segue because one of the set of works that really stood out to me was "Repetitive Motion" from 2010.

SC: Yeah, that was actually my high school collection.

SN: Wow yeah, I remember seeing some screen shots from the video that showed some really awesome geometry work. There are some amazing shapes you create whether it's with material or whatever it might be. You say that comes a lot from architecture?

SC: Yeah, so that's like all inspired by Buckminster Fuller.

SN: I see in some of those looks and in a lot of your work there's a lot of different materials used, how did you start working with more foreign materials or things that may be less malleable or just different to work with?

SC: I mean I guess because I was taking sculpture classes in high school and that's where I was doing my fashion work. I would have a lot of assignments where it would be like, take a bunch of one kind of object and then make something from that. I guess I got into it then but in grade school I was making a lot of stuff with pop tops and things like that. So yeah I think I was really excited by nontraditional materials, and because I was making a lot of stuff with nontraditional materials, my teachers were like, that's great but you are a little too naked so you have to figure out something so we don't get in trouble. So then I started learning how to make spandex unitards, from my twin best friends from high school's mom. She was a professional dancer as well, but also a really great sewer and fiber artist so she's the one who taught me how to first sew spandex and that's mainly what I work with now.

SN: I was also gonna ask how did you start taking on these larger projects, but it seems like you've always been doing that whether it seemed out of reach at the time, it seems like that never really stopped you from trying.

SC: When I first started making chainmaille when I was thirteen, I was like, oh well maybe one day if I work for my whole life I can make a whole chainmaille outfit. And then two years after that I made my first chainmaille outfit, though it did have some fabric supplement with it that I designed and then my grandma helped me sew.

SN: The chainmaille outfit was the first time you were like ok nothing impossible here.

SC: Yeah It was pretty fine, that wasn't that hard, my teachers in high school were really awesome and supportive, like always trying to push us to think bigger. So if you made one really awesome thing that was absurd and then they would be like 'well what if you had 100 of them' and then you'd be like oh my god what if I did have 100 and usually it would be like wow that's too much but It was actually not I was happy to do all of that.

SN: That's pretty cool that your high school experience, at least from the art perspective, was very positive

SC: Yeah for art it was extremely positive for other things it was a little too stressful and then I did not like college at all.

SN: I was also going to say, taking a step back, we were also talking about not really being a designer in the fashion industry itself. I was listening to one of your interviews where you had spoken more about that and I was wondering throughout, do you think there is like near future hope for the fashion industry? Or do you think it really needs to be taken to an entirely new place?

SC: I don't know about the whole fashion industry, I think about how many of the huge luxury brands have gotten away with doing horrendous things and are definitely killing the world and things like that. So like I have a little bit of hope, I have more hope for small designers and I think small designers are being able to be seen more because of the internet but yeah I guess I mostly don't have hope for the entire industry I think they are a little too steeped in their tradition. I would love it, but I don't know if it's actually going to happen. But I think lots of parts of it will get better.

SN: Right and I feel like- well you really make athletic wear which is really like- it's not the fashion world itself but really its own aspect of art and fashion coming into itself. I guess that's somewhere that could be made into its own industry more large scale. Who knows what that would mean though. So anyways seeing that you work with a lot of different materials from cotton, spandex, metals and things like that, what role do materials play in larger themes?

SC: I guess I have been focusing on spandex because it's so stretchy which is very good for people like me, I have lots of sensory sensitivities but also I have stomach problems so I can't wear anything like jeans at all because they hurt so badly. That's why I have chosen spandex, I'd love to work with things like stretch cotton. I think for me working with stretch is very important I used to do all these things that were like found objects things that were very stiff materials or

actual sheet aluminum and things like that but I think I have been transitioning more into just doing the spandex because it's so much more comfy. I guess long term I'd love to figure out something that's not oil based because that's the number 1 killer of the world and the fashion world is number 2 and I am doing both of those. But considering I am doing extremely slow fashion and places like ZARA are literally making 4 million garments a day. I mean we should all do our part but I am not the problem [laughs]. And I am one of the only people that is actually filling a niche that really has been ignored. I think disabled queers, disabled folks, fat/plus-size folks and queer and trans folks need more clothes.

SN: Of course and that ties into the idea that even thinking about the fashion industry, that is not their agenda and that is something that needs to be an agenda. It needs its own industry, and I hate to use the word industry, but you know what I mean it needs that attention that it has not gotten at all. And you had kind of said working with found objects and sheet metal was more of the art piece sense of it, have you done things like that recently at all?

SC: Um... not really now I mostly do stuff that is very wearable.

SN: I have recently read your "Radical Visibility Manifesto"² from...actually when was that officially released to the public?

SC: It's confusing because I wrote it in 2015 and I put it online and it's still online but I finally made it into an actual zine at the beginning of last year. It just took me a really long time to figure out a place that I wanted to get the zine produced. It's very difficult most of the places are really expensive or don't do really good color but I ended up doing it through a comics printing place because they are so good with color.

SN: There is some very personal writing in there and some very meaningful things to you, since you wrote that in 2015 has it gone unedited since then in its original form or do you find yourself wanting to make additions to it at all?

SC: It's pretty unedited and in the zine I added a little letter and when I send it to people I'm like it's mostly unedited. There's like a timestamp, I know there are some typos in it but I have a little bit edited things but not really. It was more for like some clarification. Where I wanted to make things more clear.

SN: Definitely so like the ideas themselves have not changed then at all?

² Cubacub, Sky. "Radical Visibility Zine." Rebirth Garments. Accessed June 06, 2019. <http://rebirthgarments.com/radical-visibility-zine>.

SC: Yes the whole main part has been totally the same. I have learned a lot more since I have written it. I wrote it before any Rebirth Garments fashion shows which is like a totally different format. In high school I did modeling as just me, and then me and a friend, and then the 18 piece collection called Repetitive Motion. They were very much sculptural collections. Not as much for daily wear- even though I do wear a lot of the stuff on the daily.

SN: Do you still find yourself finding meaning in those sculptural pieces?

SC: Definitely I mean I have them around [points to a few sculptural pieces around the studio] I love them and I think they were really important to me at the time. I think if I hadn't made all of those, I wouldn't have gotten lead to what I do now. And I also think it was really helping me solidify my aesthetic. So that collection didn't have as much color as I really wanted to but It still had... I remember when I was being courted by SAIC [School Art Institute], they had first found me in sophomore year of high school and they were like 'if you continue to do what you are doing I think we can get you a full ride' and I was like 'ok! That's the only way I can go to college let's do it!' And for a while they were like 'I think you should do like not that much color' and I remember when I would go to portfolio days at the Art Institute, which is like where you meet all the colleges and a bunch of the colleges would be like 'Oh my god this color is too crazy' and I'd be like ok, I don't really think it's that wild but SAIC liked me because they liked my colors. But then when I was doing my senior collection they were like 'maybe don't do the unitards colorful' and I was like no I really want to but there's this idea that its more serious if it's not colorful.

SN: Even then regardless of what they think that's your work and your vision.

SC: Yeah and I think it was really important for me at the time, I mean I am still working on my vision but like that was a time of true doing whatever I wanted and having fun with it and I think that was very important in my development for art. So yeah, I needed to do that. But I am working on an all-black collection right now as you see on this rack here [points to clothing rack filled with black garments] I mean it's gonna be just my most popular designs but in all black. That's only because I had so many requests for it. I mean I have always said you can buy any of my stuff in black if you want because it's all custom.

SN: Yeah I actually remember you making an Instagram post recently about that

SC: Yeah I went on a whole rant [laughs], that was so funny I was just thinking about it and I was thinking about it in reaction to some posts people had made about me in reaction to Selma Blair, the actress recently came out as having MS [multiple sclerosis]. And she was like 'I think I wanna make a clothing line that's sexy for folks with disabilities' and everybody was tagging me like oh my god Rebirth Garments is and I was in all these articles and it was just funny because

people were like yeah but probably with less color and I was like did you see her Oscars dress that was very colorful what do you mean but also I can make stuff in all black like just use your imagination. So that's why I'm just going to make it easier for people so they don't have to use their imaginations and just show them direct examples. Ultimately I should just be trying to reach as many people as possible because the more people who know about me the more people who know my message. So I am just trying to make that like compromise, but I don't think it's a bad compromise.

SN: Yeah right and that's kind of along the lines of what I was going to ask you next, what do the more neutral colors mean to you since you do use so much color. It seems like it's kind of like the colorful stuff is what speaks to you more and for the brand but you have no problem working with dark colors.

SC: Yes I mean I'll do it and I know it will still look like me cause I mean it was still have different textures and different fabrics [points to rack of black pieces and shows textured panels] so yeah.

SN: For your work and themes and identities do you ever address Asian American themes in your artwork?

SC: Yes definitely, I mean I'm Filipinx. I'm hapa so I'm half. My mom is white my dad is from the Philippines he immigrated here when he was fourteen-ish [laughs]. He's always like I was thirteen, I was sixteen, but I'm pretty sure it was fourteen. But I actually have done three shows, one giant show, one middle size show and one tiny show that were all just Filipinx models.

SN: 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?

SC: Yeah, I mean all three of those shows were connected to a Filipinx collective called Export Quality that I am a part of and so those all had like gallery shows that it was connected to, so I would do it for the gallery. But yea, when I was growing up I was always like an Asian kid or an Asian American. I think I was in some sort of- my friend from grade schools mom was like very into the Asian American scene in Chicago I don't remember if it was oral history or photography project but I remember being photographed for some sort of Asian American thing in Chicago when I was in like third grade. I think more recently maybe it was in college, because there was like no Filipino artists in my college there was like two people and I knew them I mean most of the Export quality folks went to SAIC but most of them were younger than me or just went to grad school. I think In college people started thinking I was Latinx all the time but also everyone thought I was straight. People just don't understand [laughs] whereas like when I was in grade school and high school both of the schools I went to my classes were always like half Asian kids

and half of the Asian kids would be Filipino. I was definitely the weirdo because I was queer and nobody else, actually maybe some of them are queer now but I just don't know. But yeah, so I was just like definitely kind of an outsider in that case. But yeah, I was recognized as Asian or Pacific Islander for a long time but it seems like more recently people are confused about what I am.

SN: Is identifying as Asian American something important to you personally as well as in your work?

SC: Yeah, definitely all my identities are important to my work, in my manifesto I name a good amount of my identity. I think it's very important to me, I recognize I'm half white too. I am not really as white passing, I'm confusing looking to people. I like to be like yeah I'm Filipinx.

SN: Rebirth Garments has been growing exponentially, when it comes to the opportunities available to you, have they changed or mostly stayed the same over time?

SC: I think they have gotten bigger. My first fashion show for Rebirth Garments was really great, it was for Queer Ill + Okay and they paid me and all this stuff and after that for awhile I was like I just need to get out there so I was doing all these free shows and then I kind of made my business almost have to stop because I did too much free things. I love my community and stuff and people are always like your stuff is so expensive and I'm like for custom made work it really isn't. I think I feel guilty a lot of times so then I'm like I should just do free work but that's like discounting the labor of a queer POC person. So I'm like I just need to stop that. The opportunities have definitely gotten bigger I was featured in Playboy and Teen Vogue recently and just in the *New York Times* even though all of them have a little bit of problems with them. Mostly the *New York Times*. I love *Teen Vogue*.

SN: I am familiar with that incident with the *New York Times*

SC: Yeah, the whole day before I was trying to get it solved without having to say anything publicly because I don't like to have to call people out publicly. But then I was like I really think they probably misgendered somebody else, based on their attitude they sounded like they did not care.

SN: Now we are coming to the end here I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about anything you have coming up or that you are working on that you want to bring attention to.

SC: I have a bunch of small talks coming up. Zine Fest is a small thing but I love it it's coming up soon and I am going to be on the panel talk for trans-zine stuff. My sixth rebirth day is coming up. I will be six years old, I started the company about a year after my rebirthing. I have

some exciting things- I'm doing a screenprint residency in LA. Next Fall is going to be wild I am going to be doing a lot of talks at universities. That's the thing I am trying to focus on, I think it's one of the really good ways of getting the information to a lot of people where I think they are probably listening. Things through the universities turn into other things and other opportunities. I have this Kennedy Center fellowship. It's a pretty chill Fellowship I don't have to like move to DC. But I am pretty excited about things like that because they were like well you could tell us some things you are interested in doing and we could try to help realize that. I'm about to be hiring my first full time employee, they are my intern now and they will be working full time when they graduate. And I think my cousin is becoming my booking agent. The team has grown and shrunk but I've never had anybody full time. But if I want my business to grow I need another full time person.

SN: Was there a moment when you knew this was going to be full on and you were going to take it full time?

SC: I think I always knew this is what I want to do for the rest of my life and then I'd be like no I can't handle it I'm going to just quit. My friend Emma Alamo who I collaborate with tells me 'ok Sky you say like five times a year you are going to quit. So you need to go full force or not.' And I'm like I always do go full force but I get overwhelmed. This is the first year where I think I'm feeling like it will probably be growing instead of growing and shrinking. My dad passed away at the end of this last year. I think it put some things into perspective. Of course it's making my anxiety bad in some ways but other parts of my anxiety have quieted a little bit because I'm like some of these problems aren't problems because they aren't people dying. I think I'm just hoping that I can have a pause on bad things happening so my business can succeed.

SN: When you find yourself at the point that you want to give up, what pushes you to keep going?

SC: Definitely the teens I work with, when I feel really bad I will go and volunteer at my high school. It puts a lot of things into perspective for me. I see a lot of myself in these kids, I see how much things have gotten better with teens knowing so much more about things and understanding queer and trans things. I need to keep on doing my work for them too.

END.