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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Kathy Liao

Lei Chen

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**Interviewer: Lei Chen**

**Artist: Kathy Liao**

**Location: Phone interview**

**Date: May 29, 2018**



Photo and bio 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 Biography:**

Kathy Liao currently resides in Kansas City, MO, and teaches at Missouri Western State University as the Director of the Painting and Printmaking Studio Art Program. Drawing inspirations from her diverse cultural background and personal history, Kathy Liao mixed media work is about the intimate yet universal concept of relationships. Liao received her MFA in Painting from Boston University and BFA in Painting and Drawing from University of Washington, Seattle. Liao is a recipient of various awards including the StudiosINC Studio Residency Program, Charlotte Street Foundation Studio Residency, Elizabeth Greenshield Foundation Grant, Artist Grants from Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Vermont Studio Center, and Jentel Artist Residency. In the past, Liao taught at Boston University, University of Washington, Seattle University, and Gage Academy of Art. Her work was shown in Boston, New York, Los Angeles,

Seattle, Kansas City, and many other cities nationally and internationally.

**Interview Transcript:**

**Lei Chen:** Can you please tell me a little bit about yourself?

**Kathy Liao:** Yes, My name is Kathy Liao and I am a visual artist and an educator. I teach at Missouri Western State University as an assistant professor of art, and I am currently the director of the painting and printmaking program here. I grew up in Taiwan. My family immigrated to the US when I was in middle school and we lived in the LA area. I moved to Seattle for undergraduate at University of Washington, and then Boston University for graduate school in Painting. I went on to teach at various institutions on the east coast and west coast. My current job brought me to the Midwest where I call Kansas City home.

**Lei Chen:** How would you define or categorize your artwork and yourself?

**Kathy Liao:** My work has changed in the last couple of years. I am predominantly a painter. My work is image-driven but also process-based where I incorporate printmaking and collage through layers. Lately, my work has taken a new direction and I gravitate towards more wall installations. I bring all those elements onto the wall to create a physical environment where people can enter. I don't know if I can specifically define my work, but I want my work to tell a story, to be relatable. I want to talk about the universal relationships we all experience, such as the ones with our family, our loved ones. I think about the distance we try to bridge between these relationships, especially for immigrant families. My recent work tries to recreate my own memory and experience of immigrating to the United States, and that sense of immensity, how big of an undertaking it is to move from one country to another. I think of the decision making that went into making that choice, that transition, to uproot a family, for hope, for a better future. I hope for my work to be relatable. I believe people from all walks of life have shared similar experiences. My stories may not be theirs, but I hope they can see their story reflected in mine. Recognizing that people are desensitized to current events and headlines as soundbites, I want the viewers to be able to walk in, be surrounded by, and spend time with the work.

**LC:** When did you know you wanted to become an artist? When, how and why did you first get involved with painting?

**KL:** I always loved to draw when I was a kid--always drawing and taking part in the competition. My family brought me to the United States because they wanted a better education for me. My parent's aspiration is for me to be a doctor in the United States. When I got into University of Washington, my parents are so proud because they believe it was the best medical schools in the country. They really wanted me to go there. I was a pre-med major, and I was taking psychology and science classes to get ready to apply to medical school. In my junior year, I sat down and tried to write the

personal statement for my medical school application. That's when I realize I really don't know why I wanted to go to medical school. I drew blank trying to write something. I did not have any good reasons for myself to attend medical college, nor did I want to be a doctor. I was taking my first painting class at that time, and I realize, I felt much more passionate, I felt challenged and excited. I felt like I have a million reasons why I want to continue to pursue art. That was a moment of clarity and I knew I want to continue my studies in art, to continue painting, and I realized I wanted to be an artist.

**LC:** I'm interested in your series "Distance Between Here and There." Can you tell me more about this series and what inspired you to make this work?

**KL:** That series is very personal to me. A lot of my work is auto-biographical. I think back to my own relationship to my family. For 15 years, my father lived in Taiwan, while the rest of my family lived in the United States. So, distance is a huge thing. For me, there is always an American home and a Taiwan home; there is always the family across the ocean, on the other side of the world. I have to think about the physical distance, like where I am in Kansas City to Taiwan, about 7500 miles – it's very far. And I have to think about how do you connect when they are so far away? Growing up, it's those collect calls, those long distance phone calls. For as long as I remember, my dad called me every single day. He would dial those long distance collect calls and reach me at odd hours, just to check on me, to connect with his daughter. He had since passed away and I will always remember him as the voice on the other side of the telephone. I think those calls, the ritual of it, really stuck out to me.

In recent years, everything has changed, as you know. Instead of expensive collect calls, you have smart phones, you can Facetime, and connect with people instantly through messaging and video chatting technology. It is different, isn't it, when you can just message someone instead of flying across the world to see them. I think about how close and far you could be with someone you love. In the last few years, my grandmother's memories have been fading away, she's got dementia. My grandma lives in Taiwan and I talk to her on the FaceTime often. But most of the time, she doesn't remember who I am, and of course, the technology confuses her even more. She doesn't know how to hold the phone and most of the time, I only see her shoulder or part some odd angle of the room she's in. It's such a bizarre juxtaposition, seeing my face right next to hers, flatten onto the iPad screen. She feels so close to me when I see her face next to mine on the screen, but it only reminds me of how physically far away she is, and I am not there. It is not the same as me being next to her, hugging her, touching her. That's the cyber distance I think about in my work. How do we integrate, how do we bridge that distance? What are some of the rituals we engage in to connect? We have an interesting relationship with technology. On the other side of that coin is the disconnect that happens when you are absorbed in these technologies - people next to you can feel a million miles apart, and you live in your own social media bubble. These things we have in our hands can allow us to be closer to those

we love even when they're far away, and we might be ignoring the immediate person who is sitting next to us, a failure to connect, a breakdown in communication. That is what that series is about and can talk a lot more about it, too.

**LC:** Can you talk about how painting scenes of “physical, psychological, and cyber distance” might change our perception? You mentioned Facetimeing with your grandma in your statement for “Distance Between Here and There.” I’m curious to hear more about your relationship between technology, painting, and the “compression and expansion of distance.”

**KL:** Yes, I have talked a little about that in my previous answer. I think of the physical distance between here and there, between you and me, and from where I am to where my “other” home is, like my American home and my Taiwan home. You have to travel, you have to get on a plane to get there. The psychological distance speaks to how emotionally connected or disconnected I can be to the other side, the other end of the phone, the person I’m right next to, regardless of physical distance. And of course, we talked a lot about the cyber distance, the screen flatten our faces onto one screen, it can feel so close and intimate, but how real is that? Through paintings of screenshots and oddly cropped interiors, I hope people can relate that bizarre distances we experience everyday, and how it defines our relationship to one another. People can connect with a feeling. When you see my grandma in the painting, maybe you will see your grandma, your mother, or your experience with dealing with watching someone losing their memories. There is a compression and expansion of space, as I mentioned earlier, through technology. Two countries can be compressed into one, two time zone can be compressed into one. It can feel so close when I see my face next to my mom and my grandma; but I recognize I am so far from them at the same time.

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

**KL:** Yes I always go back to my own experiences and memories for my work. Back in undergrad, a lot of my work was very specific to my identity as an Asian American Woman. I painted a lot of self portraits, I explored themes of bound feet, and questioned the stereotype of Asian femininity through veils and dresses. I continually return to my self portrait. Through my face, my Asian features speaks a thousand words. Even if I don't have to tell you a story, my portrait will tell you about my identity, who I am as an Asian American woman. That is something I think a lot in my work and is it inescapable for me. At the same time, I don't want it to be so direct and heavy handed. I don't think it serves my goal. In my recent work, I don't want to highlight the difference between people, to beat people over the head with how different I am to you, that I am an Asian American, and you are not. I want to find common ground, to find the similarity between people and experiences. I want people to see: here is my story, and your story mirrors, overlaps, and intersects with mine. We

all have different perspectives, and you may see your world differently, but we share the same human experience. My earlier works, I focus on my identity; now I'm more interested sharing stories of moments that shape who I am, my relationships with my family, and my place in the community. It's a different approach.

**LC:** 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"?

**KL:** Yes, I have been included in an Asian American exhibition when I was in Seattle. I worked with the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. I identified with their mission and their programming. I loved working with them. It was hard when I moved to the Midwest. It is not the same as being in a big city like Seattle or LA - I think there is not a large Asian population, and there are only a few Asian American Asian artist in Kansas City. I often feel like I tend to be categorized, and single out as the Asian artist in town. That is something I tried to navigate around because I don't want my work to be specifically labeled as Asian art, which it is not. I don't do calligraphy, or other examples of what people think as "Oriental" art. I do still encounter stereotypes where gallerist would tell me that they know Asian CEOs to sell my work to and my work is niche. That's not what I am doing and that is not how I want to be represented. My work has a place in the contemporary art world and it shares my perspective, it is influenced by my background and my experience as a female Asian American immigrant in the United States in the here and now.

**LC:** Yes, sure. Was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

**KL:** It is important, but like I mentioned before, I don't want it to be pigeon holed into that one category. I want to think my perspective is part of a larger conversation. I think my story is part of a complicated tapestry of what is going on here in America. My work is a platform to share my immigrant experience, to share my story. In my work, I look for patterns and repetitions in behaviors of the immigrant family. I want to understand the driving force behind making choices to uproot a family. What does it mean to be an American? What is the difference between my American Dream or the dreams of my parents? I think there is something more I am interested in, and I want to be the part of that conversation. So it is important, but I want it to be a part of a larger conversation rather than being typecast in one category.

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

**KL:** I moved around quite a bit in the last decade or so. I have moved to Seattle to Boston, and back to Seattle. Now I am in Kansas City. And I think the exhibition opportunity has changed in every city I have moved to. I am actively involved in the

art community in places where I have been to. I was very active in Seattle and found a wonderfully supportive community to my work. As I move from one place to another, I seek new opportunities in those areas. Other than solo, invitational, and group shows, I also participated in many academic exhibitions and juried exhibitions around the country. It is very important to me to contribute towards the show in different ways by adding a different perspective to the exhibit. And I love how different connections and collaborations come out of those opportunities. More recently, I interested in getting involved in public art and engages a community. I'm currently painting a mural in Saint Joseph, Missouri.

**LC:** What are you currently working on?

**KL:** Currently, I have work at the “Now/Here” exhibition at H&R Block Artspace in Kansas city. With this last installation piece, I did, I thought about rituals and repetitions. Phone calls at the same time every day, packing and unpacking luggages when you go back and forth between two countries, eagerly waiting at Arrival and saying good-byes at Departure, getting into another long winding customs and border security line... These rituals are performed by many American Dream hopefuls, despite not knowing when or where the line ends. I created a wall installation to invite people to be part of this ritual, to wait with travelers, to enter into the never-ending security line. And those security lines can feel like it could go on forever and I think that is an experience that a lot of immigrants, a lot of people coming to the United States experience. I remember returning to the Embassy again and again to yet fill out another form, year after year. It is a commitment and an immense process to move here. I want people to ask, who is trying to come here? What is the driving force behind making choices to uproot a family? What is the comfort in these rituals? And how are we staying connected as families, as a community, as a nation? Those are what's on my mind.

**End.**



Image: 3AM Kitchen

Material: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 60"x48"

Year: 2018



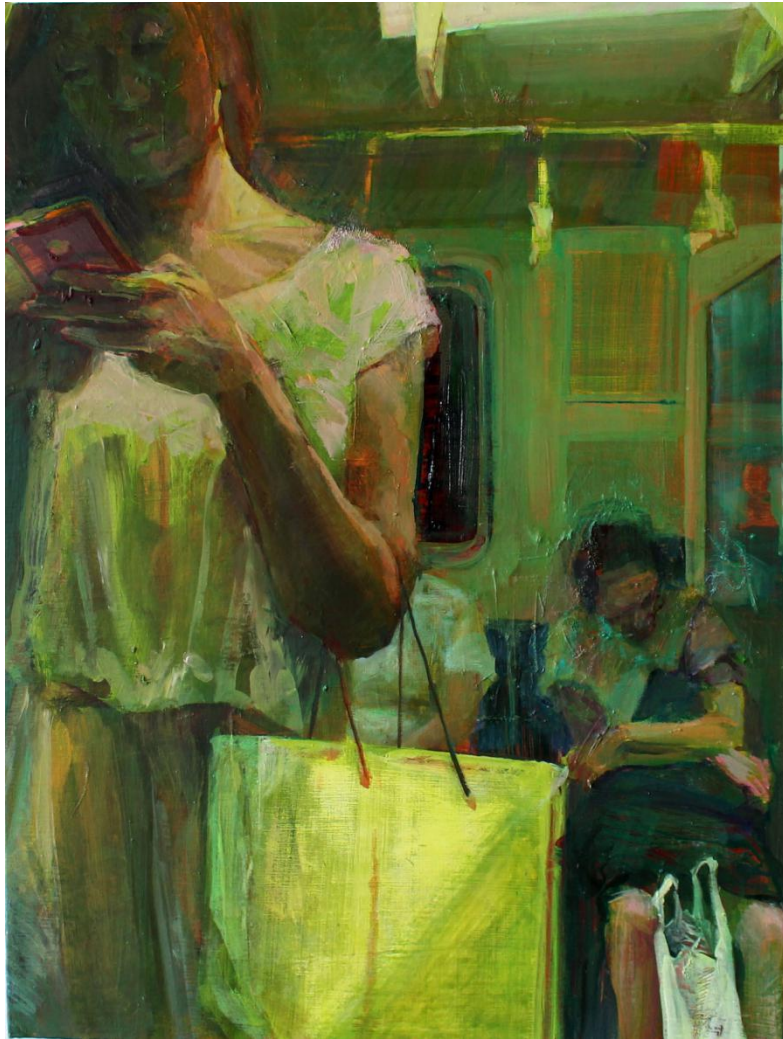


Image: Bags

Material: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 40"x30"

Year: 2018