
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Kazua Melissa Vang

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DePaul University

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Interviewer: Justin Beales

Artist: Kazua Melissa Vang

Location: via telephone – Cottage Grove, MN / Chicago, IL

Date: 5/23/2019



Photo from: <http://in-progress.org/vang-kazua-melissa>

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in 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:

Kazua Melissa Vang is a Hmong American filmmaker, visual artist, photographer, teaching artists, production manager, and producer based in Minnesota. Melissa is currently a lead artist as well as a teaching artist for In Progress. Her most two most recent photography works were showcased at In Progress under the exhibit, “NEXUS: Honoring the Self-Taught Photographic Artist” (2016), and “Hmong Tattoo,”(2017). Her current photography project is taking portraits of Hmong refrigerators and freezers. From her collection “F R I D G E S,” was featured in the exhibit, “Foodway”(Summer 2018) at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and is currently featured in “Sib Pauv Zog” (Fall 2018) at the Hennepin Government Center. She has stage managed for Hmong-Lao/Lao-Hmong Friendship Play with Lazy Hmong Woman Productions and is currently producing Hmong Organization, a comedic web series with writer, May Lee-Yang and Peter Yang, and director, Kang Vang. Vang helped run the Qhia Dab Neeg Film Festival from 2015-2017 as a publicist, which features Hmong American films and filmmakers. She is currently developing a short as a writer/director and has produced multiple short films by Asian American filmmakers in the Twin Cities.

Bio from: <https://kazuamvang.com/#work>

Justin Beales: What was it like growing up in Minnesota and the large Hmong community there?

Kazua Melissa Vang: I was born and raised in Minnesota, I was raised in St. Paul and then lived in the projects within St. Paul and then once my dad decided to go for his masters, he then moved our family to Mankato. So, then I grew up in Mankato from 1990 to 1999 so I spent a good part of my elementary there and then afterwards there was an unfortunate event of my dad having a stroke and so our family moved back to the twin-cities in North Minneapolis where we worked and cared for my dad so then afterwards our older siblings were able to save enough money to move us out to Cottage Grove and so here we are. The thing about that is so now we have moved around a lot I was able to see lots of different communities not only from the small towns but also the north side of Minneapolis and then also back to the suburbs of south St. Paul. In terms of the Hmong community I got to say that I have viewed the growth of where Hmong people have lived. It's great to see that there are so many more Hmong people in Mankato compared to back in the early 90's. So, for me it sort of gave me a sense of community even when I was growing up in Mankato as a child and when I would come up and visit the community I would always say there like family or cousins and there's thousands of them. That was my experience and it didn't faze me growing up in Mankato that people are like oh there different and I would see family members greeting people and it didn't faze me as much. It wasn't jaded or anything and I was always really open and accepting of them and just excited to see my cousins.

JB: I actually grew up in a west suburb of Minneapolis so I'm very familiar with the community because I'm part Vietnamese so my mom growing up would always take me to the whole neighborhood and it's all mixed in there and I would see all these places with the names Bui, Nguyen, and Tran everywhere.

KMV: The biggest thing to me when moving back besides going to school is seeing the Hmong community farmers market and when I go there is that I'd see an aunt of a cousin of an uncle who would offer groceries and say "this is for your dad, make sure you feed your dad with these vegetables and this is for your mom."

JB: So, the whole community really helped you out there when your dad had his stroke?

KMV: Yeah, but we had to move back, so if that never happened, we still would have moved out of Mankato and we would have had to go back because of there being easier access to resources.

JB: How would you define or categorize your art, such as your photography?

KMV: I do most of my photography in black and white if possible unless I do a project and will use film in black and white but that is getting expensive now a days. In terms of what my photography looks like I do more photo documentaries in terms of highlighting amazing moments that are in my community and home that I grew up with and hanging out with. I'm still trying to figure out where I'm at in terms of photojournalistic analysis because for me it's more of a photographic expression that highlights the slice of life and the mundane things.

JB: Would you say your artwork is less politically driven or powerful as many of the other artist in your category/community?

KMV: Its definingly not politically driven because a lot of people don't like politics in their daily activity because they don't feel that it's really going to affect the policies or the community and its really more to themselves. In terms of when it becomes a commentary then yes it would be because it's about the mass amount versus just the individual. Besides my photography, I also do film and mixed media illustrations so on my Facebook page is a lot of my illustrations are just sketches and it really ground myself into the traditional of art, but still it's one of those things where its more mixed media because of materials definitive of what category it is. I think for me it's more that mixed media is like a videogame and you're leveling up so each layer is a new level and either you can't build any further or you've built comfort and confidence in that piece. For Asian film making I've been really focused on Asian American narratives making that possible and am trying to initiate Asian American film making in Minnesota and make it a mecca for Asian American film because I grew up with a lot of the Hmong, Cambodian, the Laos, the Thais, and I feel like a lot of south east Asian narratives can happen because the whole east and west coast is dominated by east Asians.

JB: What, why and how did you first get involved in becoming an artist?

KMV: A little cliché but I would have to say I became an artist when I was very young because were all artist when were young. It wasn't always just drawing for me I was always just bouncing around trying to figure out what I'm passionate about, so I'd go from drawing to pottery to sculptures to even crafting and knitting. It wasn't till I was in college that I decided to be an artist and focus on making art. When my dad got sick, I think that really changed a lot and that really constricted me down to become a businesswoman, lawyer, or doctor and my family had to shift because we had to start caring for one and another especially my dad. I remember even in elementary he was always like "go for your education, you need your education to survive in America" and I agreed with that and its evident in my older sibling where they are highly educated and they are doing corporate and higher education. Our family shifted when my dad got sick and that opened me up to whatever I wanted to do, so not necessarily to say it's the best financial way to go but for me I was always about the arts. One indicator was when I did an internship with a lawyer when I was in the end of my first year of high school, found out I don't want to be a lawyer and don't like to be in boxes.

JB: Did that come off as what was more conventional for you and it was assumed that you would become a lawyer or something like that?

KMV: I was always thinking that I wanted to make our lives easier, I was thinking about the law, social justice, and whatever that meant to me when I was young, but in terms of recognizing, the arts were big for me during that internship, I can't be boxed up and I care about cases and I care about people and trying to help them as much as I can but I learned I can also do that through the arts. So fast forward to college, I thought I needed to be a scholar to create my work and I thought I needed to be an overachiever and got a bachelor's in individualized studies and focused on art, anthropology, and Asian language and literature. After my junior year my councilor said "where your proposal for you BIS, we need you to submit it in" and the day I finished it and I wrote all the arguments why I needed all these credits and classes, it dawned on me that I wasn't creating and I have all these ideas and focuses but its ultimately not supposed to be on paper and research. It's supposed to be an artwork and so that day I just like went to the art department and signed in and told my councilor that I want to be an artist and even though I'm going to be behind a semester or two I want to create and I have enough life for myself in terms of being Hmong American and

Asian American that I've done the research in analyzing and dissection and looking at my culture in a western lens so for me I wanted to break that and I then wanted to become an artist. I then finished my classes there, got my BA and it wasn't until I got out of college that artist life hit me.

JB: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes, or history in your artwork and if so, what would be a specific example?

KMV: Yes, that thing about Asian American when you say even African Americans or Latin Americans that they have pockets of different ethnicities and cultures that you have to acknowledge and I'm definitely a thread part of that weave in that tapestry that is building this Asian American narrative here through the arts and for me and hopefully their isn't and artist who is claiming to be making art for all Asian Americans because that's quite impossible unless you can have clones in multiple lives or you could time travel or whatnot. I would definitely say being Hmong American is part of being Asian American.

JB: I agree completely, the different communities and ethnicities of Asian alone are way to complex and different to just toss into one category.

KMV: The thing is when I do my artwork, I'm not responsible for other people's narratives or artwork when I'm not part of that community, identity, or culture but can reflect being part of a community together and that's per say being singular. A great example I'd say is my portraits of Refrigerators called *Fridges*. When I say it comes from Asian America it really is and it's about the times and today because the conversations I'd have with elders and I'd ask them "what was life like before refrigerators, when you were living in the mountains of Laos and in the refugee camps, what was it like without a refrigerator" and they're just like "I can't imagine it" and would say something like "you don't know what it's like, you guys are so privileged with technology and resources", but at the same time they're saying that there is a way of preserving food and what food is more valuable over certain ingredients they won't need, so therefore the storage is important. That gets into conversation and I think any conversation about food itself is very universal, so the refrigerator itself doesn't only reflect the Hmong American experience but also the Asian American experience. I think it's also very universal, I see kids in the neighborhood come in and look at the artwork and say that just like mine and it's a little Somalian American and they'll ask what certain things are and I'll be like "I don't know, it's like a Kemps ice cream bucket or something that in there." I'll just be like "it's one of those things that you can't touch, and your mom will probably yell at you if you and then remove it."

JB: Which exhibit is this piece part of on your website, I see the projects are listed by year.

KMV: It's the last photos of my website and it's called the *Fridge Theories*. Recently within this year or two its actually been exhibited over MCAD (Minneapolis College of Art and Design), also part of the fortieth anniversary at the history museum, so one of them was featured there. This past month it was part of the Thirty-three View Exhibit with second shift studio in east side St. Paul, then shown at the government center in Hennepin county downtown, and its going places and I'm pushing for it and hopefully my other work will get there soon. I know people will recognize my work, I actually want people to see it and be able to. The thing is that if I only have it at one exhibit and one time only, I know my community can't see it so the more I have it exposed the more I can make chances and opportunities to go see it.

JB: What types of exhibitions and opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years? From when you first became an artist till now, how have the types of opportunities changed?

KMV: I would say from being a college graduate and my connection to the university and the institutions. We get opportunities to show kids because you're so connected to the faculty and the support. So that shift to the community, it's been interesting because I get to see who my audiences are, and the thing about it is that right now because we are in Minnesota, the art has been highly supported. I would say the Asian community here is more accepting and receptive of art here. So, if you were to invite them to a gallery or take a weekend away from doing traditional custom stuff, they'll come and support you or you get these other supporters come in who are Asian American, and so you get to see the audience being built and see the community learning to actually go after the arts, get access to places. I'm not going to say it's a wave like as big as the Hmong new year's, but there are pockets that happen and I think right now that the changes that I have seen in terms of my exhibit, there finally thinking outside what they know which is predominantly the white community here. At the same time, I can see they're picking the more recognized well-known artists. Like, I love Wing Young Huie,¹ he's a great photographer. Once his artwork goes in, it's like 'oh the Asians done', he's the Asian folk and I'm like 'no, he's an Asian American man, you need us women', so hopefully that opens up more. It's changing a little, it is opening up a lot more than it was in the 90's I'd say, early 2000's where there's actually none or the spaces are not created to represent us and our artwork and stories.

JB: What is the next thing you are working on, your next big project you're trying to do. Aside from the exhibition, just something individual.

KMV: This year I received the *forecast public art career project grant* and for me it's my first grant I've received as an artist. For me, I usually work under people or in collaborative with people, but this is the first I've received so I'm taking this project with care because it is under the theme of caregiving. My dad has been sick since 1999, so it's coming to a 20th year anniversary come November, so idea of caregiving, versus being a caregiver, versus being a daughter, and the relationship with that. So, I'm creating three experimental films, photos, and artwork about it but am also trying to give more of an emotional understanding from my father's perspective for the audience to get a glimpse of what it's like to be in this care for 20 years. So, that is what I am focusing on in terms of my photography and film, and for sure I am continuing my refrigerators. I sold, produced, and traveled to Korea for a month and photographed Hmong refrigerators out there. These are Hmong people teaching English in Korea out there, and I basically bounced around and photographed their refrigerators in the Korean apartments. It's very interesting to see similarities from across because the bridge is so small, so I'm doing that and I hope I can travel more with collecting stories food, preserving, full cultural food, and the relationship between home, and especially now the freezers. You probably are aware of those bed size freezers that open up and there's all this mystery stuff in there, so I'll be doing that as well.

¹ For more on Wing Young Huie see <https://www.wingyounghuie.com/> or an interview with him at https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/60/

JB: You may have answered this but how did you originally come up with the refrigerator and freezer idea?

KMV: So, my relationship with my mom is always about humor. I think it wouldn't be anything else because there's irritation and everything. I know there's a burden my mom goes through so everything needs to be funny. So, one time I thought I was going to be really nice and clean the refrigerator and put in fresh produce and everything.

JB: This was when you were younger or your current age?

KMV: This was 6 years ago, so a while ago, but I thought I was going to help so I started cleaning the refrigerator, emptying out containers. I see mold and I'm like 'oh god this needs to go' and she walks in and says 'what are you doing!' and I say 'you don't touch anything and don't know what this is, this stink, I'm going to toss this out' and she is like 'this is what goes into all the great things you like to eat. For me after that incident, we had relatives who came over and I was in the kitchen and they were just snooping around. You know those relatives who are very judgmental. They came in and I felt very exposed when they just come into the kitchen and open the refrigerator. My big thing is the difference when you have host and you make your home their home, and just know your relationships and when it comes to the refrigerator the saying "what we have in there is what you have in there". But when you have people come in and that relationship is not established, it feels like there judging you on what you have, what you don't have, and what it looks like. So, for me it was that feeling of 'ugh why did they have to do that'. Then it really got me thinking about that feeling, that intent. It's very much dependent on who you go to, we very much enjoy the idea of having a lot of food and an abundance because there's enough for your family and others. That's always been a part of me growing up and my mother and for her, not only hosting but having a community. When you go out to a community event and there's always a little bit extra for you to pack a little. So, you see that in the refrigerators and the leftover food from parties on the weekend and then you see things they're going to make like egg rolls for the following weekend. That where it started, and I didn't experience that from my relatives, but that is like when a non-Hmong person comes in and looks at your refrigerator with no association. That's my thing, the refrigerators do not represent a certain family or individual but a compilation. I'd rather it be a perspective of the Hmong Asian American of what's going on, but this is not everyone.

End.