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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Thomas Kong Interview

Jon Lovisetto  
*DePaul University*

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**Interviewer:** Jon Lovisetto

**Artist:** Thomas Kong

**Location:** In Person – Kim’s Corner Food 1371 W. Estes Ave, Chicago, IL 60626.

**Date:** May 15, 2019



*Bio courtesy of the Artist, Photo taken by Interviewer*

**Artist Bio:**

Thomas Kong is an artist working in collage and assemblage, using advertising, packaging and other surplus material from his convenience store, Kim's Corner Food, located in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago.

Kim's Corner Food features an evolving installation of Kong's work, and is open to customers and visitors 7 days a week from 8AM - 8PM at [1371 W. Estes Ave, Chicago, IL 60626](https://www.google.com/maps/place/1371+W+Estes+Ave,+Chicago,+IL+60626).

[The Back Room](#), an experimental project space in the store's former stock room, operated from October 2015 – March 2019, and has now closed. Bio from: <https://thomaskong.biz/>

*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.*

**Interview Transcript:**

**Jon Lovisetto:** The first question I have is... how would you categorize or define your artwork.

**Thomas Kong:** [He replies quickly] collages.

**JL:** And how would you define yourself?

[this question puzzled Thomas so I explained it differently. ]

With owning Kim's Corner food, Would you consider yourself more of an Artist or more on the Businessman side?

**TK:** [With hesitation he responds,] Myself? I'm an Artist... collage Artist.

**JL:** When did you start creating collages? Did you start making them before you had your store?

**TK:** No I started almost six years ago, after I had opened the store.

[We were interrupted by a customer so I began to walk the isles. As you look from in between the shelves and any empty space in the store, his collages coat the majority walls. They decorate the front desk, windows, and even the drink coolers.]

**JL:** So when did you open Kim's Corner Food?

**TK:** Around 2006 yeah! And I started Making collages in 2011.

**JL:** Before your collages were displayed everywhere, did the locations of certain colleges give any significance?

**TK:** no I Put them all over!

**JL:** Do your collages hold any meaning behind them?

**TK:** I Include my word, *Be happy!* on them

[as he goes through and points out the little sticker that reads the words be happy and says: see, Be Happy! That my word, I like to be happy!]

[Another customer enters. After they leave, he lights up a cigar inside his store and we continue talking.]

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**JL:** Were you born here in the United States?

**TK:** No I was born in Korea, in 1950.

**JL:** Did you come here alone, or with family members?

**TK:** I came here with my mother my sister and my wife hahaha. [Thomas smiled when he mentioned his wife.]

**JL:** Did your family motivate you to create art, or what was your motivation.

**TK:** I was cleaning the shop and I noticed it was kind of dirty, so I cleaned it out. And on the shelves I used packaging to make it not dirty.

**JL:** To prevent the dust?

**TK:** Yeah, yeah and wherever looks rusty or bad I cut the packaging to cover it.

**JL:** So your collages are created from what other stores would usually throw away?

**TK:** Yes the packaging. Cigarette, drinks, chips.

**JL:** That is really an awesome how you take what others think is garbage and make it into art! Do you choose to do this for the environment.

**TK:** Well I cut shapes I thought looked nice and put them together in the storefront window. People passing by told me they liked them. So I made more with different material like leafs.

**JL:** Did you get any criticism because people thought it was abstract?

**TK:** No no, everyone told me it's unusual and catches their eye and they like it so I started to make more for inside the store!

**JL:** Did try to get your collages recognized?

**TK:** No they came to me, they came in to take pictures. They asked me to put them in their gallery and their website.

**JL:** Thats awesome people can recognize your art beyond just the store!

[He told me a student from northwestern comes to help organize his collages and clean the store. He said the student, Daniel, prints the stickers that says "be happy" for him.]

**JL:** Do you have any unfinished work?

**TK:** Yes I have this, where I'm using new material.

[He pointed at a collage that was mostly made up of Styrofoam with leaves taped onto the front of it.]

**JL:** How many Collages do you make a day?

**TK:** Well on a good day maybe 20, but when my head is not in good condition ummm like five to ten.

**JL:** Woah you are constantly keeping busy that really amazing! Do you have more collages that are not displayed?

**TK:** Oh yes the entire Backroom.

**JL:** Do you mind if I can check it out?

**TK:** Sure, no problem! I go unlock it! But it's kind of a mess right now.

[We walked towards the storage space where collages of colorful packaging stood in piles, cabinets, and drawers that stacked from the floor to the ceiling. When I stepped inside my jaw dropped overwhelmed by the amount of work he has produced.]

**JL:** Wow this is amazing, all of these are just from six years!

**TK:** Yes, but it wouldn't be so organized without the help from Daniel. He also helped me receive a grant from an art foundation.

**JL:** Do people ever come in and ask to buy your collages?

**TB:** Oh yes, I sold quite a bit too!

**JL:** How much do you sell them for, do you determine the price?

**TK:** 5, 10, 20 dollars, 50 dollars, and some big ones one hundred dollars. It depends how much they want for it, but I ask for donation so i can keep my work going. I need to buy supplies you know... like glue and tape.

**JL:** Do you sell work only from the backroom?

**TK:** No, both stuff from here and the backroom. But a few times I have had auctions from professional auctioneers. I've sold in Germany, Japan, and even Shanghai China.

**JL:** Wow you are Global, that's awesome your talent is recognized around the world! Im super impressed!

**JL:** I was eyeballing a collage in the backroom. Can I give you some money so I can bring a collage back to show my class?

**TK:** Go ahead sure, show me!

**JL:** What do you think...Will you let go of this one?

**TK:** Yeah no problem, do you have a pen?

[Thomas continued to date and sign the collage I picked out. Followed by his word "Be Happy" written on the back. I gave him 10 dollars because that's all the cash I had.]

**JL:** Thank you so much Mr. Kong for the Collage and letting me talk to you! The amount of collages you have inside your store and in your Backroom is incredible! You are such an inspiring man and you give off such a positive energy! Thank you again, I'll see you soon!

**TK:** Not a problem, Thank you for stopping by!

**Image 1:**

Store Front Photo

“Kim’s Corner Food”

Location: 1371 W. Estes Ave, Chicago, IL 60626



**Image 2:**

“Thomas Kong Mural”

Location: 1371 W. Estes Ave, Chicago, IL 60626 (other side of street)

Coordinated: By Roman Susan Art Foundation



**Image 3:** “Untitled” - the Collage I bought from the Backroom

Year: Unknown

Medium: Collage

Materials: Packaging, Construction paper, Tape

