



5-3-2011

Ruyell Ho Interview

Sarah Bonner

Sarahsbonner3@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Bonner, Sarah, "Ruyell Ho Interview" (2011). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. Paper 32.
http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/32

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian American Art Oral History Project at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Art Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu.

Interviewer: Sarah Bonner
Artist: Ruyell Ho
Location: Artist's home in Chicago, IL
Date: May 3, 2011

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring quarter as part of the **Asian American Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*



Ruyell Ho, May 2011

Artist Bio: BFA School of the Art Institute of Chicago; BA University of California, Berkeley. Has had a 45 year career in art making. Was appointed to the grant review panel of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs for six years. Former professor of painting and lecturer at Bradley University, Peoria, IL. Exhibits nationally and internationally.

Selected Solo Exhibits

- 2008 Retrospective exhibit.
Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California. March, 2008.
- 2004 Morgan Stanley “Gallery in the Galleria” Winnetka, Illinois. May 2004.
- 1993 Gallery 1756, Chicago, Illinois. September, 1993.
- 1989 Erie Street Gallery, Chicago, Illinois. September, 1989.

1988 Center for Contemporary Art, Geneva, Switzerland. June 1988.

1988 Erie Street Gallery, Chicago, Illinois. September, 1988.

1988 One Illinois Center, Chicago, Illinois. November 1988.

1974 Art Institute of Chicago "Chicago and Vicinity Exhibit" Walter Campana Priz.

Sarah Bonner: Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family.

Ruyell Ho: I was born in China, in Shanghai, but my family is Cantonese, we are Southerners. My father worked for the government, so we traveled around the country. I came from an aristocratic family. We have a family record going back to 250 B.C. According to the family record, our branch of the family came from an ancestor that was the second son of the Emperor in the Chou Dynasty. His brother became Emperor and he became king with the title, Han. So our family name was Han, instead of Ho. Han is a title. He has a big piece of land, a country of his own. He was a king under the Emperor, his brother.

SB: So when did you come to the United States?

RH: I came to United in 1955, to go to college.

SB: Which college?

RH: Well, I went to high school in Hong Kong. Then I ended up in the University of California. My parents said, well, I wanted to be an artist but they said, don't be stupid, get a college degree first. I had a language problem when I first came. Our math and science is ahead of American high schools. We would go to school from 8:15-6:30 everyday. We would get out of school at 6:30pm, then there was homework, it was very rarely we would finish before midnight. Next thing, it's 8:15 and you go start again. On Saturday, we had half-a-day off we got out at noon.

SB: That is so different from here.

RH: Yes. So when I came, our math and science is two and a half years ahead of American kids. At the same time, I have language problem, I didn't know English, I learned English here, in America. So when it came to a major, the easiest thing for me to do is go into math and science, because I can't write essays, I majored in math. I ended up at UCLA, I had a terrible problem, I didn't have money, I didn't know the language, I didn't have a car. So, a really hard time the first year. The second year, a whole bunch of my friends, old high school classmates were at Berkeley, it's the same school, I just transferred. Eight of us rented a big house. I ended up with a math degree from Berkeley. At the time, it was really convenient, because you know, I had language problem.

I always wanted to be, way back, I really know that I wanted to be an artist.

SB: So when you were a child you knew, or were you in high school?

RH: When I was a kid, I was 10 years old, and my older sister (there's seven kids in the family, four girls and three boys.) My oldest sister was in college already when I was ten years old. So one time, on spring break, she took me to her school in a different city. It was a six-hour train ride, she took me to her college. She didn't have a babysitter, so I went along with her to all her classes. So, I was sitting in her figure drawing class, one day she give me a piece of paper and I was sitting next to her doing this drawing. And after while, her professor came by and looked. He was just trying to be nice and polite. And he said, well this kid is gifted. So that went into my head, he was just being nice, but to me at 10 years old, I was like, oh my god, maybe there is something. We live by a self-concept, your self concepts keep changing, all life long, but there is a building block in the beginning that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once you believe that you start trying to find validation. I knew, I really knew I wanted to be an artist. So after school, I did not think math was very interesting, to do anything, you need a doctorate, So, I took an evening class, I had a sister who lived here, I came to visit her and I took an evening class at the Art Institute of Chicago, figure drawing. So at the end of the session, this teacher said, there is something special about what you do. She said, I will see if I can arrange a scholarship for you. And sure enough she got me a full scholarship.

SB: So you went there for another degree?

RH: At the Art Institute of Chicago, there is a studio class, I already fulfilled all the academics. So I just did the studio classes. That's how I became an artist. I stayed there five years, even though I had a full scholarship, I had to find some ways to support myself. I got a job at the big hospital, at the time it was Presbyterian St. Luke, now it is Rush University. I had a lot of chemistry in college, so I went for a job interview, and got a job as a lab technician.

SB: So you supported yourself by being a lab technician while you took the art classes?

RH: Yes. It was pretty nice because I worked nights. So I had the daytime free. I was on call, they did not always call me, most of the time, one or two calls a night. They had a room at the hospital where the technician can stay, so it was pretty good. Toward the end, the state law changed, you needed a lab technician school certificate. I was just about done with the Art Institute. A lot of my friends took up art education, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to just go all out. So, I looked around and decided maybe photography is a good deal. They said that painting majors have to have two printmaking credits. I have a lot of etching, like three years worth of etching. This friend told me to lithography is really touchy and tedious. So I went to the department and said I have a lot of etching, but is photography a similar medium to printmaking? He said not really but we will take it, it's print on paper, so.

So, I took up photography, the basics. I knew the basics but then it's really not sufficient in the commercial world. I studied color photography by looking in magazines. I'm always a fast learner. The tradition is that you work as an assistant for two years before you became a photographer. I mean that's too much time. So this friend told me, all you need to do is to prepare ten 8x10" samples, color transparencies. Once you get that, start knocking on doors. That's expensive, a box of 8x10" color film. They still make them now, a ten sheet box costs \$300. So I bought a box, and borrowed an 8x10" camera. I did it carefully, making ten samples. I did all the testing on black-and-white film before I exposed them. So I got ten samples. I started looking in the Yellow Pages, not the want ads, because if you go to the want ads, there will be hundreds of people going there. I looked for a studio, one that was easy to get to. Sure enough, somebody hired me out in Northbrook. I had a little VW beetle to get there.

Studio photography, I've never done that before. They gave me a sample, said, "here, this is what we do." By then I learned about lighting set-up by studying shadows. If you have a light, then you have a shadow. It took me a while, but when the film came out, the studio manager said, "well, this is good. You are hired. This is good."

One of my classmates from school, she was my assistant, she had just as much training as I did.

SB: Is this when you worked for Sears?

RH: No. This particular studio did fabrics, draperies. Its called "soft goods." They had a big elaborate room set built. They worked for a lot of companies on the East Coast. After a while, they hired somebody who had a lot more experience than me, so I lost that job by then I got married and had a wife. So I had to do something. I went to this Chicago filmmakers' party, my friend was a filmmaker. Somebody said that this big architecture firm was looking for a still photographer. It just happened that I was the only still photographer, they were all filmmakers. So, I said, I'll try it.

This architecture firm was CF Murphy, Murphy built McCormick Place, they built O'Hare airport, the Daley Center, John Hancock and all that. So I went in there, at the time they were paying a company \$1000 per shot.

At the interview, I said, "I don't know anything about architecture but, I know about photography, and I have the equipment, there is no investment on your part, just let me try, if you don't like it, I'll walk." So they said, "let me see some photographs." At the time, I didn't have any photograph of building. I said, "my portfolio is tied up, but I can have it back next week." It was a Friday, so I made an appointment to come back Tuesday. So during the weekend, I thought, "I need to get some modern looking buildings." The circle campus, UIC was being built, so I took photograph and developed them in my darkroom. On Tuesday, I went back and showed them. They said, "when do you want to start?" I said, "now." I called my wife and said, "let's celebrate." And again, I went out on a limb, I knew nothing about architecture.

SB: Maybe that's the way to do it?

RH: Yeah. So then after working at Murphy for five years, the person who hired me, a really nice guy, from Texas, this big Texan. He looked out for me because I tried real hard in the beginning to learn. But after five years, he decided to set up his own architecture firm. He was the chief designer, he left. And then a new man took over and he's a German, he is really a racist, the first thing he did was fire all the non-whites, including me. I set up and designed a three screen, six projector system to show slideshows of buildings. To add insult to injury, he hired this kid right out of Columbia College, he was white, you know. I had to train him to work my system. Isn't that ridiculous? In those days, it was 74' when they fired me, just a year before my daughter was born. So my wife was pregnant and I lost my job. This guy was a racist. If it was now, I could sue him.

Every time you do these kind of jobs, your career is on the line, because they all know each other. So the next thing, I got into this lucrative thing, retail fashion. I mean, high fashion is all shot in New York, this was retail fashion, local designers and so forth, they paid these models, at the time, a couple hundred dollars an hour. The photographers took all the risks so consequently, we got paid a lot of money \$450 to \$500/hour. They had a day rate, five hours a day. There is preparation for the model in between. So all of these jobs, your career is in the line. So I put in extra effort so it would lead to better things.

By then, I have a kid and a wife. It just happened that when my daughter was a year old, we were living in an apartment in Rogers Park. We thought we better have a backyard for her to run around in. The thing is that, if you have this idea in mind, I learned a long time ago, if you have this idea, it will materialize. Most people are intimidated by the how. I mean we were living in an apartment and we wanted a house you know. That's outrageous. So we kept thinking of it. One day we had this friend invite us over for dinner. They lived in a big house, seven bedrooms, the husband and wife were both professors at U of I. They said during dinner they were getting divorced and they were gong to sell the house. Jokingly, I said,

I'll buy it. The next morning I got this phone call, they asked did you mean what you said last night? I said, "what did I say last night?" I had a couple of glasses of wine, so I didn't remember what I said. They said, "you were interested in buying the house." My wife said, "we're not buying a house." I said, "don't worry, if it doesn't work out, we will sell it." We had to find out the details first, how much is it? And they said \$30,000. I didn't know what \$30,000 was but I said OK, I've got this figure on paper. I went to a bank to look for mortgage, the bank said we had to send an appraiser. I mean this house was a mess, junk all over the floor. The first appraiser said, it was \$68,000. So the bank said this can't be right, so we sent a second appraiser and he said \$69,000. The mortgage guy said well, you were asking for \$30,000. He said tell you what, we will skip the down payment. We did not have any money for down payment. When you have a vision in your head, and you create a magnetic field, I believe in this very strongly, you create a magnetic field and things happen. A lot of people are stopped by the how. You see, you look at the outcome you want, you see the end, you don't worry about how to get there.

My daughter does the same thing, you see she wanted to be an artist. My wife was really strongly against it. She learned from me, she wanted to be an artist no matter what. And sure enough, she is a huge success. That's because she looked at the end result, not at the how. It's a state of mind, ultimately, you make mistakes or whatever, it's all going down to one thing. Are you happy? I am a very happy person. Because, my god, you know, things come to me. It's all a state of mind, in the East, the old country, they think about these things. In the West it's more materialistic. You can't judge people by material things.

SB: In 2008, you were in a show, *A Chinaman's Chance*, that your daughter curated, what can you tell me about having your daughter present your work to the public?

RH: That it's incredible, she wrote a really nice thing too. There were paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs and artifacts in the show. I gave her 50 sketchbooks, she had her assistant scanning them for two weeks. There were two monitors, one showing 2,500 drawings. It changed images every three seconds. There is another monitor showing two one-hour videos that I made. They did the show at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California and it's about the Asian experience in America. Except that my daughter is only half Chinese, she is half Italian, half Chinese. So she got invited, and her experience, is second generation, she used my work as a reference to her experience.

SB: Have you ever been in a show that was exclusively for Asian American artists?

RH: No. I try a little bit to stay away from that. The ethnic thing is really touchy. I don't want my work labeled as an ethnic thing. I mean, it is and it's not. I would do it only if it is obviously not an ethnic thing. I don't shy away from it. Larry Lee did one, at the Gene Siskel film center, he curated one for Asian American, it's called *Then and Now*, it shows old work and then current work. I ran into him (Larry Lee), he said, "I owe you something." I said, "what do you owe me?" He said he was about to give up art making all together because it was frustrating. So he entered a show, I was invited to be a juror, and I picked his work. He said that re-energized his desire to be an artist. So he went to the Art Institute to get a master's degree. Before that, he was about to give up, he said. So he owed me without me knowing it. Knowing or not knowing, I want to do the maximum good around me.

END

Ruyell Ho has continued to make art for the past 45 years. He has a prolific, productive career in art making that parallel all the activities mentioned in this article.