
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Tim Hugh Interview

Matthew Holmes
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Matt Holmes

Interviewee: Tim Hugh

**In-Person Interview: Gene Siskel
Film Center, Chicago, IL**

Date: April 25, 2012, 8:00pm

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200 Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Bio:

Tim Hugh loves what he does. For the past 12 years he has been the Executive Director for Asian American Showcase hosted by the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media (FAAIM). As a director Tim has kept the founding goals alive and at the center of everything the showcase is about. He finds happiness in helping others achieve their life time goals and in enriching and educating audiences. Tim treats the Foundation much like Herb Tam treated the Asian American artist collective Godzookie in the late 1990's; with respect and altruism in the groups actions. Tim has steered the foundation in the right direction for the past dozen years and plans on continuing working for FAAIM as long as he finds happiness in helping others.

- Bio written by Matt Holmes

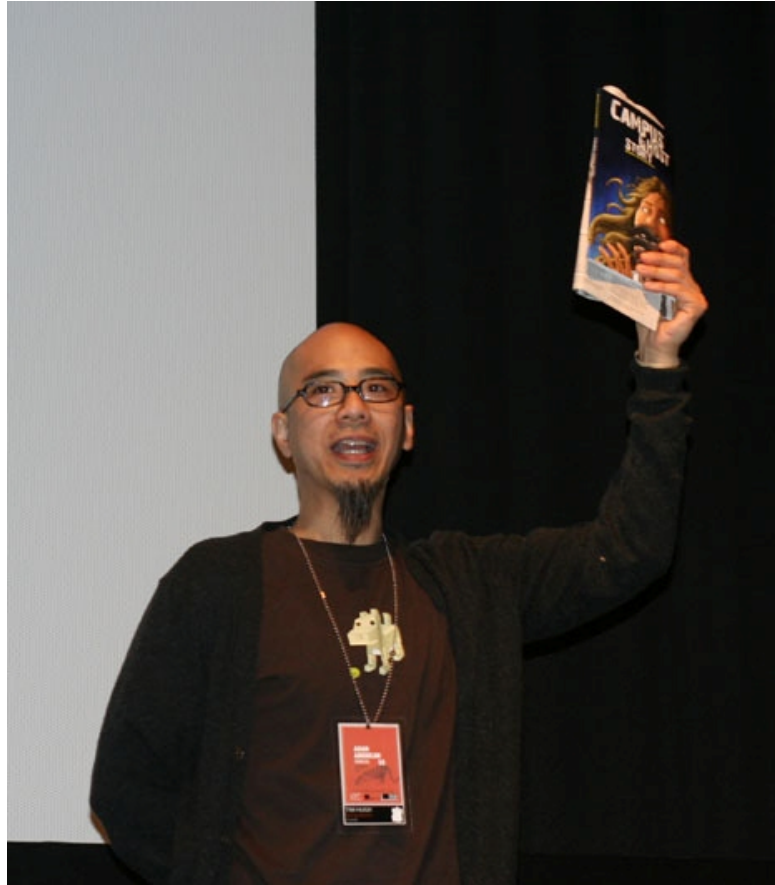
Visit the FAAIM website for additional information: <http://www.faaime.org/>

Interview Transcript:

Matt Holmes: Can you tell me a bit about yourself. Where you were born?

Tim Hugh: Born and bred in Chicago...lived here most of my life. Went to the school of the Art Institute of Chicago for photography, did not graduate.

MH: What made you not graduate? Just choice or-?



Tim: Yeah I think just looking down the road, there was no money to be made as a photographer. And I think I needed to get a job at some point. So I think it's that whole, you know, art student can I make a living out of this?

MH: And you decided to go a different route?

TH: At the time I was like, "no I can't," so now I'm an auto mechanic.

MH: Would you ever consider going back or revisiting what you studied?

TH: I always said that if I was rich, I would go back and finish. But...

MH: Far away from there?

TH: Yeah and the nature of photography has changed. I think that digital cameras and the way people shoot is different. A lot of people have fancy cameras but they don't know how to use them. They just go around click, click, click, click without being able to control what they're doing. I think that's the difference between a real photographer and people with fancy cameras.

MH: So do you think that maybe programs such as Photoshop affect that as well?

TH: Yeah that's cheating too. My nephew has a really nice camera, but he doesn't know how to control aperture or light, but he just goes into Photoshop and fixes everything. And you know it's the same but it's different.

MH: It's almost like faking the natural art of the artist.

TH: You could get by without knowing how to actually use a camera I think. So I don't know. I would go back to school but not for photography, maybe for something different.

MH: What do you mainly do now?

TH: Well I'm an auto mechanic by day. And then I run the festival [Foundation for Asian American Independent Media's Asian American Showcase], just during my free time. And I guess for doing that, it's just knowing what's in the pipeline, knowing what directors are working, knowing up and coming filmmakers, being able to know documentaries that are being made, and you know just staying on top of Asian American art/ pop culture.

MH: So you must definitely try to be in the center of independent filmmaking?

TH: Yeah yeah, I mean I try to keep up with not just Asian American but independent films in general. I do the regional finalist judging for the student Academy Awards.

MH: So you're not just into independent films, it's more like film in general you enjoy?

TH: I actually watch anything and everything, like I even watched Jack and Jill, that Adam Sandler movie. But you know if I had to choose, it would be mainly independent & foreign cinema.

MH: Alright, so what would be your favorite piece then?

TH: [Laughs] Movie of the week, it changes every week.

MH: All the time?

TH: Yeah I watch a lot of movies in a week so...I might get hooked on a director, and I'll watch everything he made and then I'll move on to something or someone else.

MH: Is there a particular director at all or directors?

TH: Well it depends for what; there are so many different styles of filmmaking. I think for me, Akira Kurosawa is a good starting point just because of the scope of the body of his work. He's made the epics films, the samurai films, the slice of movies. He's done so much in his career.

MH: So you're obviously a fan of live action. Do you like a mix of animated or computer generated imagery in films at all?

TH: Yeah I'll watch anything, like one of my favorite movies of recent time is called *Summer Wars*. It was a Japanese anime, but it also dealt with technology. It was also inspired by Takashi Murakami's artwork so the world inside the internet was all these flowers and pop Japanese characters but it had to deal with how the youth of today relies on the internet and they don't know how to communicate without it so when the internet goes down everyone like panics. And it's like the old people who aren't "connected" know how to talk to their neighbors and get things done. So it's kind of a pretty cool movie.

MH: The last film I saw here was actually *Salad Days* and it had a common theme of relying on the internet too much.

TH: Ha, the youth culture. I think people with smart phones and stuff like that; you get so dependent on technology that when you don't have the internet at home or you're out of the loop of Facebook or something you don't know what to do. I think that's going to be a problem in the future of seeing how younger kids learn how to communicate not just with family and friends but with business and stuff like that. They're not going to have the critical skills.

MH: You mean the critical social skills to make it in the world?

TH: Yeah, yeah.

MH: I also saw that the animal style [shorts films on skateboarding throughout the world] was a focus of the showcase this year?

TH: Yes.

MH: That was mainly about skateboarding right?

TH: Yeah it was... I've been skating all my life and we've shown skate videos before on and off. Maybe like one in a shorts program every now and then. And when I was growing up, there was no internet or anything, so the faces I would see in the magazines would be like Asian skateboarders every now and then. Even back in the day of "dogtown" there were a couple Asian American skateboarders so that I was accustomed to seeing [them] in magazines and then videos. Animal style was kind of to pay tribute to that and the legendary Bones Brigade Video – *Searching for Animal Chin*, but also to bring in current skaters not just from America but Asia. And we were able to mix [it all] in... it sort of came like a travel log too. There's skating in the US, different styles of skating, but also in Hong Kong, Thailand, and actually I think in Singapore too. It showed not just Asian skaters but American skaters skating in these foreign countries.

MH: That's definitely something a lot of today's youth and many other people would enjoy seeing. But did you consider any other themes this year that you ultimately ended up rejecting in favor of the animal style?

TH: No not really. This was something we thought about for a long time...years, we just never had the capacity to follow through with it. So I called my friend Martin Wong, who used to be the co-editor of Giant Robot Magazine, and I asked him to curate the show. And you know at first he had never curated a shorts program so he was kinda hesitant, but together and through friends we know enough skaters and filmmakers, and he got it done. It's pretty awesome.

MH: Have you ever helped contribute to or make a film yourself?

TH: Yeah

MH: How many?

TH: Just a bunch of small projects. Like sometimes I'll help with music supervision. Sometimes camera, sometimes editing, you know maybe trailers stuff like that. Personally I don't want to make a movie, too much work. But I appreciate the art form and I appreciate the people who make it and that's kinda why I like doing what I do. To be able to support and to help the people that do make the films.

MH: So did you have a personal favorite this year?

TH: Um, we had a really great selection of documentaries this year, and I think like one of my favorite films of the year was the *No Look Pass* documentary. It was about a first generation

Burmese female point guard from Harvard. So the timing was just right because of Linsanity¹. She graduated from Harvard; she had dreams of playing pro ball in Europe. She tells a great back story and she's really open and candid about her personal life, her family life, her background. And also being gay in the Burmese culture, it's really fascinating.

MH: You obviously have been working with the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media for a while now. Have you ever noticed an aesthetic that has repeated itself throughout the years or any trends basically?

TH: Well, we do notice things because of filmmakers, especially coming from student filmmakers; take for example Justin Lin who directs big Hollywood films like *Fast and Furious*. But when he started out we first noticed him when he was still in film school making little five minute short films. And then he eventually started making some longer films and documentaries for the Japanese American National Museum. And then eventually *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) which was his break out film. So we'll either follow filmmakers or every few years there will be a trend like you'll notice either like a bunch of adoptee films or identity pieces. But even if we've been doing this for so long, there's still a group of people who have not seen a film about identities or a film about adoptions. One year it might be a film about Korean adoptions another year it might be about Chinese kids being adopted. There's always something that will come along but it's new for different people so we try to keep that in mind when we are selecting films. So for example even if we have seen something similar in the past, it might be talking to or reaching out to a new group of people.

MH: So you basically find yourself in this role as an educator. You almost need to pick the right ones and you wanna give-

TH: Yeah it's basically a combination of paying attention to who our audience is. Trying to present different things every year, there might be different themes in the same kind of films but they'll be presented differently from year to year. It's also knowing when something might be topical, like maybe education might be hot in the news and we might show a film that has something to do with that. So we might want to bring that into the fold for that year.

MH: So do you have any plans for next year's showcase? I know you just finished this year and you were extremely busy.

TH: There are films that we know are in the works and there are things we know we might have passed on this year and we might want to bring on next year. We just finished our 17th year but we also have our big 20th on the horizon. And I think that we are gonna be looking towards the 20th anniversary for the next really big one.

¹ Jeremy Lin is a famous and talented basketball player for the New York Knicks. He joined the team in 2012 and became a sensation for leading the team towards victories. The term Linsanity was created to refer to the popularity he gained so quickly due to his success.

MH: So you're planning on saving your best material for that most likely?

TH: No, I think for that one we want to work with the Chicago Asian American Jazz Festival. They're gonna be turning 20 at the same point. And Tatsu Aoki, who we featured in this year's festival, you know he runs the jazz showcase so we want to work together and maybe combine them for that anniversary.

MH: Oh so there's a good chance there could be a jazz infused festival coming up then?

TH: Yeah, originally our festival stems from music. Back in 1995 the guys who started our festival, Sooyoung Park, Ben Kim, and William Shin, put out a CD. It was the first compilation CD of Asian American rock bands, and was called *Ear of the Dragon*. Then they put together a national tour of the bands. And they got MTV coverage, back in the day when MTV was big, and when they covered music not just showed reality videos. And it was kind of a big deal. It was also written up in the New York Times. After it got all this press, they decided to branch out to give Asian Americans in other media forms more coverage. To give artists, filmmakers, writers, not just musicians more exposure... and that's basically how the showcase was born.

MH: So it was essentially made to get a bigger presence in the media and it was also really to expose more people to...

TH: Asian Americans yeah. Growing up because we didn't have the internet, you weren't able to see a lot of Asian Americans in the arts. They were there you just didn't know of them. And the idea of the showcase was to highlight and bring these people to light. You know artists, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, you knew were there but you didn't really know who...so it was kinda there to help everybody not just musicians.

MH: So do you have a particular artist then that you can think of? That you grew really close to in enjoying his work, or that you would want to focus on here ever or see if their work has influenced any other filmmakers or directors?

TH: Well, I mean I guess for filmmakers everyone would look to Wayne Wang because he was one of the first ones to be able to make like Asian American films, and then Hollywood films. You know to be able to do both is rare. Justin Lin has been for the newer generation to be able to make his own films like *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) and *Finishing the Game* (2007). They both played at Sundance, but then be able to do films like *Fast and Furious Five* (2011) and these bigger Hollywood project. I think every filmmaker would like to make a big feature film and I don't think filmmakers try to be independent filmmakers. I feel like you just are because you don't have the resources, so for Wayne Wang and Justin Lin, those were the guys who were able to do both and bridge over and do big Hollywood budget films. I think that people really view those guys as role models. You know nowadays you don't see a lot of bands fronted by Asian Americans, they may be in the background but you don't see a lot of them as the lead in the band. Back in 1995 it was Sooyoung Park, one of our founders, was in this huge Indie band

Seam with William Shin. It was kinda cool to see Asian American rock musicians fronting the band.

MH: You said that the founders created the Foundation [FAAIM] in '95 right?

TH: Yeah

MH: When did you come here to the Foundation?

TH: I actually was a fan of the band and that's how I learned about the film festival, through the band. The first time I went to the showcase I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what Asian American films or cinema was. But then watching the movies and the short films that they were showing, and being able to relate to the characters that I was seeing on screen, it was refreshing. They weren't speaking with a bad Asian accent. They were kinda punk rock just like me and it just opened up this whole new world for me. And so every year I would look forward to going to the showcase and I would just sit there and watch everything I could because I knew I wasn't going to be able to see these type of films anywhere else. And eventually i just became friends with them. Helping out, taking tickets or watching a table or whatever. And then I think in 1999 and 2000 two of the founders moved away for different jobs and they asked me to help out Ben Kim who still hadn't left. And I think that's how I really got started. And then eventually Ben moved away for a job too so then it was just me holding the fort down.

MH: So you obviously gained something when you first visited and went to the first festival. Do you think you changed a good amount since the first festival, or feel that as the festival evolved it kinda evolved with you?

TH: Yes and no, I think that because our festival had this really punk rock aesthetic when it started, we tried to stay true to that. And also our mission statement is really specific, so the work that we show and the people that we want to represent, we are also true to that. So we aren't gonna show a big Wayne Wang type of movie because he doesn't need the exposure. We're gonna show a film by someone who needs the support and exposure early on in their career so we would kinda like to stay true to that too. It's also filmmaking and the nature of filmmaking that has changed. The festival has gotten bigger. We used to be just like 3 days and now its 2 weeks. And with our partnership with the Gene Siskel Film Center we have the flexibility and capability to do a lot more than when we first started.

M: Did you gain a partnership with the Gene Siskle Film Center halfway through your time here?

TH: No they were always a partner; we used to show back at the school [of the Art Institute of Chicago] before they had the Gene Siskel Film Center. And in the new space at the Gene Siskel Film Center we have the gallery space we could use, and the audio capabilities of doing like live

music inside the theaters is better, even the projection booth with being able to show in two theaters if we need to. So we have a lot more flexibility.

MH: Well you said you want to show films to help emerging artists not be independent anymore and being bigger with their personal goals and ambitions. Have you seen a lot of artists succeed in that because of you guys showing their films or not even as a result of your efforts?

TH: I think showing a short film by like a student filmmaker is a big deal because it gives them that push that one, their work is good, and two that people want to see it. I think by supporting them early on in their careers it gives them the boost to take the next step and that is to shoot a feature. And the amount of features that are available this year are by people we've known and we've shown they're work in the past. There's probably like 10 feature films this year, I mean we didn't show them all but they were made. So I think that by showing them and supporting them all early on, I think it goes a long way.

MH: That sounds very altruistic, trying to help an aspiring artist get further than they could on their own.

TH: Yeah well that's part of our mission statement². It's also not just for the artist but also for our audience. To create role models so that a kid could come and go 'look mommy this movie was made by an Asian American. I want to be a filmmaker too.' I don't necessarily think that the old stereotypes of being doctors, and lawyers, and white collar workers were giving the artistic ones who maybe want to be a musician or a painter the role models or the outlet to show their work. Without having those I think it'll be a lot harder to tell your parents [you want] to go to art school.

MH: What influenced you to continue with your career path and here [Foundation for Asian American Independent Media] at the same time?

TH: Ha, well one it's not a career. I like what I do. I like being able to know that I make a difference. Or just inspiring our audience and being able to provide the work. And year, after year because I know that there's gonna be someone new that's gonna need my help. Or a new audience that's gonna see something inspiring for them to tell. It's just like through a documentary, and just like what we're doing here for the Oral History project is like. A lot of the documentaries create dialogue. Whether it's through their family or their friends but when people start talking about their stories or things they've seen it opens them up to tell their history. So I think that we see that time and time again. So someone might come to us and say they came to our festival five years ago and that they got into film school, or they wanted to tell a story, or they wrote something you know. It's kinda like why I do this.

² The four goals of the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media as stated in their mission statement are to educate communities about Asian American history and issues. Introduce Asian American perspectives into the ongoing self-definition of or multicultural society. To foster understanding across lines of race, ethnicity, religion, age, and region. And to sustain growth and encourage excellence in Asian American culture.

MH: So do you see yourself being here for a lot longer or are you unsure?

TH: (Laughs) This is year 12 that I have run the showcase. It gets easier and harder at the same time. But again I don't look at it as a job so I guess you would say it's a passion.

MH: Obviously with a passion you're gonna want to pursue it for much longer.

TH: Yeah. You know, again you see great work and it inspires you to want to continue helping these people and year after year the work gets better. The filmmakers are more talented, the audience responds. It seems hard at first but I think once it's over you realize the difference you made. Not just with the filmmakers but with the audience being able to appreciate seeing these works, a lot of these works will never be seen in a theatrical run. I'm not saying they're not good; it's just the way that the distribution is set up it's not made for small independent films.

MH: Final question then, is there any other festival highlights you would like to share? Or key points you think we missed upon?

TH: Well this year we had on paper one of the best showcases ever. We had a documentary that was directed by an Academy Award winning director. We had a film right after it played at the showcase it started its theatrical run at the Music Box [Theater]. We had our opening night film that world premiered at South by Southwest (SXSW). We had a bunch of documentaries that had won audience awards at a bunch of other film festivals. So I think on paper the entire year was a good year for us.

MH: That's good to hear.

TH: You know the animal style shorts program just selling out going crazy. I think it was a good year for us.

MH: Thank you for your time.

TH: Thank you.

END.