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Rominna Villasenor Interview

Jamelle Apolinar

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Interviewer: Jamelle Apolinar
Artist: Rominna Villaseñor
Site: Teach for America Office, Chicago, IL
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*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



Artist Bio:

Rominna Villaseñor is a growing Pilipina artist who dabbles with the disciplines of performance poetry and visual arts on occasion. Currently residing in Portage Park neighborhood, she was raised in Quezon City, Philippines and later found home in Albany Park. Gallery 37 generated her initial interests in working with acrylics and watercolor while Young Asians With Power fueled her passion for APIA activism through writing. She has considered these two organizations as second family since the early years of high school. In 2002, Rominna was the spokesperson for the United States nonviolence initiative through writing and delivered a speech in Kuwait to commemorate its tenth year liberation. Rominna is a fourth year Gates scholar and attends the School of Commerce at DePaul University. On campus, she works heavily for two organizations, which are Alpha Kappa Psi (a co-ed professional business fraternity) and DePaul Students Against the Death Penalty. She volunteers often and her background stems from working for and with nonprofit organizations throughout the Chicagoland area. In her spare time, she finds herself yearning for a cup of elotes and Margie's 'Bucktown' ice cream.

J: Can you tell me a little about yourself?

R: Rominna Villaseñor. I was born in the Philippines in Quezon City in 1986. We moved to Chicago in '97. It took eleven years to file the paper work from my mom's side and so her grandfather petitioned my family and now we all live in the U.S.

J: From the information that I read about you [in class] it said you are a DePaul alumni. Were there any influences or struggles that you came across as an artist?

R: Being at DePaul?

J: Yes.

R: Okay, so I feel this is a 2 part question. One is do you struggle as an artist? And the second bit is do you isolate being Asian American being at DePaul? In terms of being a student at DePaul University in general it was great because it was diverse but it was challenging because you're hitting a lot of races in terms of statistics, but you're hitting a certain class of students where it's either middle or upper class students. And so there was a little bit of a struggle to relate and just being at students orgs you come across a lot of students who have a lot of resources and so naturally they can do more things in general. Umm, my identity as an artist at DePaul University didn't really flourish partly because I didn't take advantage of the availability of resources and a lot of it had to do with the Asian Americans on campus in general where I felt from my perspective being a commuter student just was not welcomed or celebrated.

J: Going back to what you said about having that struggle as a commuter and being an artist, how did you overcome that?

R: Okay so for DePaul I don't feel that I did overcome it because I didn't spend or invest time in finding those resources and being able to communicate in that way to students on campus to

professors. It just wasn't a fight that I was willing to take on. And so I found external avenues to do that. I found other organizations outside DePaul that can welcome art and celebrate it and that's how I really continued on.

J: So what types of work do you exactly do then?

R: It depends. Depends on the season. Sometimes I have more time for visual arts and that's like mostly acrylic, a lot of water colors, mixed media. And then the other part is spoken word or performance in general. Under the visual aspect it's more on a personal side whereas the spoken word, performing, and writing..it's with the groove with Mango Tribe although I just didn't find the space for that. We did perform at DePaul once so I guess that kinda counts? That's about it.

J: This is going to focus more outside of DePaul now. You were involved in "Young Asians With Power." Can you explain what exactly that is?

R: Yeah! It's actually fun! You can lighten up a little bit! And so it was really interesting when I was in high school I got heavily involved in social justice issues in general. In particular with Asian American issues and that sort of evolved because I was really frustrated with my school. I went to St. Scholastica Academy it was an all girls school in Rogers Park. And we had this international club that used to be called the Asian Club and they wanted to be exclusive so they called it International Club. Then International Club all they did was focus on the variety show which was really disheartening to say the least...

J: Why do you say that?

R: Because it's a luxury to be just concerned about the variety show. There are a lot of Asian American issues that students are not willing to tackle on especially if they have access to resources and have access to great local artists then nobody's just celebrating that. And also being in high school people are mature enough to take on these issues especially if they're facing it on a daily rate. And so I was really frustrated with that and I said I was going to form my own group and I'm going to calling it Southeast Asian Club and so I got my best friend to file the paper work with me. And it was controversial for awhile being a high school student because they were saying it's very exclusive and the type of work we're taking on is very aggressive. And from that the person who was moderating the club met this Asian American artist who was in a band who also knew Anida Yoeu Ali. And at the time she was just starting YAWP with her former husband Marlon Esguerra. They were saying, 'Oh you know why don't you join this.' And after I had invited Anida and some of the members of Mango Tribe at my school that summer is when they formed YAWP. And it was this amazing journey I was in it for a really long time from its conception till when I went to college.

J: What exactly happened in YAWP?

R: WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN IN YAWP! Man, those were like the formative years of Asian American activism. That was the prime. A lot was going on. When it started I felt it was at the peak of the main characters in Asian American activism. You have the two big ones in Chicago; Anida and Marlon. They were I felt like the head honchos of it all. And I didn't realize that until

I was older where I started meeting people they were saying , ‘Oh you know Anida...Marlon...they’re amazing!’ And so what happened? We can start with the basic what happened in YAWP. It’s a writing program. Well it was originally started as one. It’s three hours. We met every Wednesday and every Saturday. It ranged anything from doing exercises in the beginning to writing to exclusive corpses’ to doing freeze poems. Everything to spotting Asians on T.V. and turned it into a poem and then performed the heck out of it. So I’m surrounded by these different artists that were my age at the time. Some of them were younger some of them were older and everyone was a writer. And I could honestly remember days where I would stand outside the Collective space and just get really scared because I wasn’t a writer. And all these writers were from Gallery 37, Young Chicago Authors, and so at that point you’re just kind of figuring yourself out. Within it we had a mentorship program. We ate a lot! Part of the reason why the first gen. YAWP group was so tight was because we seriously cried and laughed together and just everything. There would be days where it would end really really late at night and Marlon and Anida or whoever was a mentor at the time would drive us home. And before that we would go to Chinatown and get the late night menu. So it was pretty much my second family where at times I couldn’t turn to anyone they were my family.

J: That’s really interesting because I get where you’re coming from finding that 2nd family you can come to...

R: And also it wasn’t like...When I think of Asian Americans in the beginning right? I wasn’t aware of these different things. You have this picture. It could be a video like of Southeast Asians it what it looks like. But YAWP changed all that. Part of that was I had to self reassess everything that goes on in my brain, filter it, how filtered is it, who’s influencing it, what are the images coming to me, who’s it being funneled by, the things I see, what kind of TV am I watching, that TV, and all that. So that really was the initial kind of boost for how I think and honestly if I didn’t join YAWP I wouldn’t be an artist. I wouldn’t consider thinking about social justice issues and all these different things I should’ve been thinking about and a lot of people should invest their time thinking about. And YAWP was formed when I was a sophomore in high school that would’ve been in either 2001 or 2002. And then from their 9/11 happened and that was really striking because YAWP was sort of this space where we had different facilitators from different walks of life, different Asian American groups. And there were times where we’d go to rallies and being a high school student you’re sort of in the middle of this of what’s going on and you’re form history and you don’t stop to think about it years down the line. You go, ‘Wow, that just happened.’

J: Is YAWP still in existence today?

R: Right now they’re reexamining the curriculum and how it’s being developed because it’s hard to sustain a three hour program if you don’t have the basic needs. I left YAWP when I started college at DePaul. And it felt like a break-up and it was over. Because you’re spending a lot of your time crying with it, laughing with it, really pouring your artistic side which you don’t necessarily open up to a lot of people. It felt like a break-up because I’m gonna figure myself out without this family that I considered for so many years. And then a year after that that’s when I joined Mango Tribe. And I don’t know what’s going to happen with Mango Tribe. Hopefully, it

will be continued and it turns into this program that's for students by students led by artists and I hope so much for it.

J: Looking on the YAWP website I recognized some of the names on the list from a couple of years ago. An example would be Jeff DeGuia. I don't know him personally but I recognize the name because I went to his first benefit concert that he held. So it's really interesting to see how far some of these people have come along...

R: It's really interesting if you examine the first gen. YAWP. So the people are in the very very first year. There are so many people that came out successful. One of them works for an Asian American networking, like broadcast networking. One of them works for FACT in U of I, one of them formed a sustainable Asian American group in Minnesota. So these are leaders who wouldn't have thought about it otherwise without being in YAWP. And then you can see from their how it grows. Jeff DeGuia is actually cousins with Heather DeGuia who is a first gen. YAWP and she led the movement in UIC. Then her cousin followed on. Heather is cousins with Vanessa DeGuia who used to be in Mango Tribe and was also a YAWP facilitator. So it's like this multi-family ties. These are people that honestly when I went to New York I called up Ruby, she's one of the former YAWPers she's a first gen. YAWP also led FACT at U of I. I could just call her be like hey I need a place to crash, let's. So I crashed there and we just free wrote. And these are artists at heart so you can always call them and say hey you know what I'm stuck at a bump I need for you to look at this. And then we free write on our phones and then we just randomly send an e-mail and say hey I wrote this on a bus look at it. It's continual.

J: With all of that what's your involvement in Mango Tribe?

R: Some years ago I got a call from Jill Aguado and she used to be a YAWP facilitator and said hey why don't you consider this joining Mango Tribe. 'Cause I used to volunteer for their shows and Anida was my mentor in YAWP and she co-founded Mango Tribe. So they're familiar with my work and they'r familiar with my energy so she said why don't you consider this? Here's a contract look at it I'll give you a week, think about it. So I looked at the contract I had some questions cause at the time it was a big deal you don't know what to do cause it was Mango Tribe. So I got on a call with Jill and Marion who were the co-artistic directors at the time and I said okay sure I'll join. We went to New York. We had a Mango Tribe artist meet and from their just stayed with the group. It's evolved a lot from being this ginormous group from being multi-city collectives so now about seven. It's ever-evolving, it's always changing and the direction of the group is really controlled by the people. Mango Tribe was formed essentially to address violence against Asian American women. From there they wrote many different pieces that turned into performance theater based types. Right now it's not specifically addressing Asian American violence as an issue but rather it's encompassing. So right now we're at a transitional point where are we going to be here for Asian American women identified or are we going to focus on specific issues because it's a small organization tackling on a world of many different things. And so really it's performance based, theater based, we have writers, we have graphic designers, and right now it's based in Chicago, New York, and New Jersey. So it's still keeping that multi-city dynamic which is challenging because it's unique in that way. It's also very fulfilling because you have that connection Midwest to East coast.

J: With everything you've been involved in like YAWP and Mango Tribe, what would you say is the most rewarding thing you've gotten out of it?

R: I was actually also with FAAIM. It's like an Asian American film organization. They review independent films and they showcase them in April so you should definitely go. Honestly, my heart will always go to YAWP because, how do I put this? It's kind of like your go too. I really can't imagine the trajectory of my life had it not been for YAWP. Before YAWP, I was also an artist but more on the visual side not very conscious at all. I was an artist for Gallery 37. I paint what they tell me. But YAWP really took a turn because it's like wow! I really didn't know that it can be an issue that people can really make fun of you for being Asian American. I didn't know what model minority was at that basic level. Then you dive into more issues like ...How come I have peers my age who don't even...have never even heard of these things and then you look at DePaul. You're surrounded by the exact same people you study from YAWP. You're just like wow these people just don't think. Don't get it. You can't engage in these conversations because it takes years of conscious critical thinking to have them to start having these conversations. And when these conversations do end up happening in a form of workshop it stops there. And I see it happen time and time again that's why I didn't want to get involved with the Asian American community at DePaul.

J: How would you change addressing those issues you focused on at YAWP to the Asian American community at DePaul and any other community that's blindsided by the whole situation of what it means being Asian American?

R: You start with the people. I mean you can't change an entire scale of people unless you find that one person who's really passionate about it. ACE could have been. I tried to go to meetings but then you look at the leadership and you look at their goals. What are their goals? Their goals are to put on a variety show and it sucks because DePaul is well resourced as a university. They bring out artists that cost \$20,000 but they can't bring on local artists that cost \$200 to put on this amazing workshop that will get people to think to get them to really mobilize people on campus. And then you look at your peers. If you think about the Asian Americans in the Loop campus and figure out what are the kinds of things they talk about. You listen to these conversations. I was a part of a fraternity on campus the Alpha Kappa Psi. At the time when I was President we were the largest on campus in terms of active members because you have you know fraternities that have like 200 members but in terms of active members they only have 7. It was mainly Asian American. I never could put them in the same room as I would with the Tribe. You know I can't invite them in the same space. It's because people just don't engage in conversations. If I can't even get the people who respond to me like if I need something at 3 o'clock in the morning I'll call a fraternity member and say hey I need you to draft this agenda do it. They'll do it. If I need somebody to go to Lincoln Park to drop off you know fraternity materials so the speaker could get there on time, they will do it. But I can't have those conversations with them. And if I can't have it with them what's the point? Because you start with your family, your fraternal brothers. You can't move them then what goes? And then I want to be solution-oriented. I just don't want to complain and say "this is useless. DePaul sucks." Because that's just the really easy way out. Actually when I was on campus I put together a show last minute for Kristina Wong. And the reason why I did that was because 2 students orgs dropped the ball. And were

like we're going to invite Kristina Wong. And nobody ended up doing it, nobody filed for the money, nobody invited her, nobody reserved the physical space for her to perform and everything was set on her. So I ended up taking the initiative, pulled it off, even made the flyer. After that I was really furious. I'm looking like this professional artist from California coming to Chicago doing a show at a really discounted rate. She's giving you guys \$1000 off her package. And then from there I had this critique conversation with Melissa Enanoza, who was an officer for ACE. And it gets you thinking how people are being remembered. So we sat down with the 2 orgs who sat down and dropped the ball. It was a critique of how do you function as an organization. Because if you're dropping a ball with a professional artist in this space. What happens when it's just students? What do you do? How does your agenda run? You meet at 9:30 at night and how long do the meetings run? What do you accomplish? How do you make sure you're really providing resources and not just providing free boba on like Tuesdays? And then I thought it was going to go somewhere. We had professors involved then it stopped there. And then it happened again when Mango Tribe performed on campus. You know an org. dropped the ball. There was no presence on campus. Asian Americans account for a handful of people. There should've been people there that were pretty invisible and it's because are not mobilized. They don't care. At this point I'm pretty much driven by the grassroots of this position. Where you start off at the bottom and work your way up where you make these decisions based on that. Right now because DePaul..the masses are not like that I would say start from the top. Look at the leadership from ACE. Look at the leadership from the Asian interest sororities on campus. Look at the people leading it. Put em in a workshop I don't know! Put em somewhere. Get them to care. And then from there they can share because it's kind of like being an artist behind a mic. People could say freedom of speech and all that. You're an artist, a free spirit you should do whatever you want. By the end of the day once you're behind a mic you're responsible because people listen to you. And if you don't take on that responsibility if you say you know what people can filter anyone. That's not true. People will listen to you. You have power, you have stage, you have the platform. Not everyone can afford that platform. Like that leaders should be held accountable. I don't care if you have a group of 5. I would much rather have a group of 5 really strong Asian/Asian American/ Asian interest organizations and really get them to mobilize people than a group of 85 people...For me honestly it was hard to relate to people. When Mango Tribe performed on campus my friends who were Asian or Asian American came because of me and not because of the performance. Post-performance they were like oh you did great. But no comments were made about the show. And that to me was unfortunate. Although I'm very thankful that they were there for me. It's just that it gets you to think who do I surround myself with. If I'm going to spend majority of my time with these people yes. I questioned how do they influence me?

J: So what would you say to those struggling artists or any Asian American in general who's trying to get the message out there that they do exist and that there's still that stereotype and wall that's still built?

R: That makes sense. I would say first artists who do self identity themselves as Asian or Asian American artists whereas they already include that in their biography. Some artists will just say I'm Asian American and I was born...insert whatever. Unless you're addressing the Asian or Asian American issues you should not have that identifier there because it's a pretty strong identifier. So artists need to examine their own craft. What are you writing about? What are you

performing about? Who's your targeted audience? Are you intentional with your space? Because unless you examine your own craft you can't really say you're struggling or you have a challenge. From that grow your base. Get to know other Asian Americans. There's a lot of people especially here in Chicago who are just passionate about what they do. And unless you can connect with them it's hard being an artist and it can be very challenging to take on your own craft and survive. So yes, one, examine your own craft and two, get to know other artists and from there you can dominate the world.

J: So overall what was the biggest lesson you learned?

R: You should always eat rice. You know you should share meals with people. I learned that people are more willing to engage if you eat and sit with them. Us Asians we grew up sharing meals. We grew up in this big family setting where it is encouraged for you to share a meal with someone and from there you get to talk about other things that are important. And always just push yourself to be better. It's hard to be okay with your own craft because once you're okay with it that means you're not pushing yourself to whatever you can be. And don't be afraid of criticism. Yes, there will always be haters out there. And maybe your performance sucks but that's okay. And maybe it's a series of fifty sayings that your stuff sucks but that's okay because it means you're doing something much better than people who don't do anything. But at the same time really push yourself to be better and that's partly surrounding yourself with other Asian American artists and get a broader perspective because you wanna move people just as much as you wanna be moved by them.

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Designed by: Rominna Villaseñor and elisa arnea of Mango Tribe

"Here's the latest artwork I did in collaboration with a mango tribe member, Elisa Arnea. I drew the image and she turned it into an e-blast flyer that will be used in commemoration for the Asian/Asian American women in green movement."

-Rominna Villaseñor"