
Asian American Art Oral History Project


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Von Kommanivanh Interview

John Pluciennik
DePaul University

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Interviewer: John Pluciennik
Artist: Von Kommanivanh
In person interview Chicago Illinois
Date: 18 February 2010 1pm

*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*



Biography: Von Kommanivahn was born in Laos in 1979. He came to America in the winter of 1983. He originally moved to the river park neighborhood with his family and five brothers. His father was a air force mechanic that taught English in the Philippians. In the sixth grade, Von won an art scholarship for a art workshop for high school students. Both of Vons parents did not understand his need for art. Von had to disobey there beliefs to pursue his love for art. In the early nineties Von and his friends choose to do graffiti art to express there emotions. They always pushed each other to new limits. In his late teens, he earned enough money to create a portfolio and when Julia Walsh of Walsh galleries got a glimpse, she instantly grabbed him off the streets. He currently makes a living off selling art, vintage, and antique goods. He plans to have upcoming shows in Pakistan.

John: Tell me about yourself?

Von: Well I really don't like to think about myself or talk about myself. I came here in 1983, Laos. I came here in December 1983 and came here to Chicago. I show work at Walsh Gallery. As of right now I am about 30 years old.

John: How do you identify yourself? When did you realize your passion in art?

Von: Being that I came from a working class family being an artists was not really an option. So I made enough money to start doing artwork, but I've always been drawing sense I was a kid. I started drawing when I was in kindergarten about every other day. I learned how to draw by copying pictures off textbooks. In class, I would be drawing and stuff like that. It was more like an obsession to me. When I was a kid I never realized that I was an artists, to me people paid attention to my artistic abilities, but I never thought I would become an artist until the age of 18 when I started making paintings. Before that I was basically making drawings and study works or whatever else I did.

John: How and when did you first get involved with Walsh Gallery? What exactly is the Walsh gallery and what does it represent?

Von: The Walsh gallery is at 119 N Peoria Street downtown west loop. They focus on Asian contemporary artists. There are many that aren't Asian-American, but most are from south East Asia and throughout Asia, Korean, and Japan. And how I got introduced to them is when I was 19 years old I made a body of work and you know friends and stuff were interested in it but my friends are not artistic people there not in the art scene or anything. So I was doing it for a while and I though you know if I gather my art together and make a portfolio I would see if the gallery would accept my work and see what I can do so as far as that. I kind of took a gorilla approach because I didn't know any artists and I do my own thing on my own time so I didn't know how to go about it besides doing it the hard core way. I basically just went into Walsh and asked if I could speak to a director and gave her my portfolio and she took a look at it and called my back the next week and set up a show 4 months down and I have been showing there for close to ten years.

John: Can you tell me the meaning of America is Grey (2005)? Also how did you make Ether (2003)? How long did it take you to make ether and what does it represent?

Von: America is grey: that painting was a portrait of Arafat its funny how a man who can win the Nobel piece prize can be demonized as an evil person. I mean its basically like a American's conception of the person but the person itself is representing his own county, his own people, so we over hear can only see what we see as far as media and what television shows people watch, but its not really what is going on. So America is pretty grey. Its pretty much in a way putting yourself into harms danger to go into other

peoples land other peoples territory and trying to occupy that at the same time your demonizing the people who are fighting for there own land. You can look at it in different ways or both ways I'm just stating my opinion.



America is Grey

Von: Ether: It's mainly made out of a recycled material. The shell of it is made out of wood and plywood. Pretty much its form is made out of wood and scrap metal and all kinds of stuff. It has electrical components and all that kind of stuff. The reason why I made it is I mean there are multiple reasons but you know one of the main reasons is its kind of dealing with the issue of alienation. I mean ever sense Iv been in this county, I'm a first generation you know, and I came here with my parents. We didn't have immediate family members or friends so we came here not knowing anybody. So in a sense I have a sense of alienation because when we first moved here we didn't live amongst the Asian people, so we lived in a black and Hispanic neighborhood so people always looked at us like aliens because we didn't look like them, we didn't talk like them and they kind of thought we were weak and stuff like that. I mean what ether really deals with is pretty much alienation. I feel as a if I don't really belong in this place I don't really know that many people in this society a it's just a moment empower myself to have the knowledge of building something. It's not like I want to go to the place I was born it's just kind of like a metaphor meaning this is isn't the place I belong.



Ether

John: Do you feel as if Karstund Lund's quote about the Walsh Gallery is accurate? *The chaotic, prickly compositions created last year seem to embody our seething pathologies as much as depict them, and a squadron of scrap-metal airplanes, hanging from the gallery's ceiling, are an appealing expansion of the artist's ragtag aesthetics?* By Karstund Lund.

Von: This point of view is its pretty accurate. I mean that's my style of work because my style of work ranges from all different kinds of subjects or subject matters. You know it's a good way to put it yea.

John: Do you ever address Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example

Von: no because as I was growing up my parents were Buddhists so they always had this teaching were its not really about oneself it's about everybody so we never focused in on being Asian or having super Asian pride or anything. We see us and our family and everybody else as one kind and Asia is where I'm from but Iv been in America so I don't have a real close identity with being Asian.

John: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an "Asian American artist"?

Von: I mean that only goes to who ever is viewing or whoever that opinion is. I don't see myself as that way but some people do. I don't know I can't really answer that. I have never been in an Asian American artists exhibit specifically but most of the people I deal with only deal with Asian American artists but its not a big deal.

John: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

Von: Its been getting better and better. When I first started I started doing group shows with people and so now from group shows it expanded out to multiple solo shows that I have been in and my work had been being shown at fairs in China, New York, Miami, places that I would not normally go by myself but because of art I got to go.

John: What are you currently working on?

Von: I'm working on a new exhibition. It might possibly be hear in Chicago I don't have a concrete title on the exhibition yet but it will be a solo exhibition dealing with violence and chaos and disenfranchised people and immobilized people and I usually incorporate other subject matters.

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