
Asian American Art Oral History Project


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Chi Jang Yin Interview

Anna Huang
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Anna Huang
Photographer: Chi Jang Yin
In person Interview: Chi Jang Yin's DePaul office- Chicago, IL
Date: February 19, 2010

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 Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.



Artist Biography

Chinese-born media artist Chi Jang Yin is best known for her reflective, autobiographical work, which comments upon the state of Chinese culture, past and present. Her video work combines documentary, experimental and narrative disciplines and she often imbues her work with elements from her background in photography and performance art. Through humor and irony, her conceptual work leads to the merging of personal and social statements. Themes of Yin's work consist of displacement, alienation, absences in relationships, memory in narrative, and individualism reconstructed and intertwined with social and cultural infrastructures.

Yin's award-winning videos are internationally recognized and are frequently featured in film exhibitions, galleries, museums and film festivals, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Kassel Dokumentarfilm-und-Videofest

(Germany), Asian Art Biennial at The Taiwan National Museum of Fine Arts (Taiwan), The Contemporary Center of Art (Bulgaria), The Cheekwood Art Museum (Nashville), The Phoenix Art Museum (Phoenix), The National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, D.C.), The Gene Siskel Film Center (Chicago), The Pacific Film Archive (University of California-Berkeley), The Los Angeles Film Festival, and The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, IDFA (The Netherlands). Her videos are distributed by the Video Data Bank in Chicago and Videotage in Hong Kong.

As an Assistant Professor of Media Art at the Department of Art, Media, and Design at DePaul University, Yin uses the method of critical thinking analysis of contemporary photography and avant grade films and video art as a tool to engage her students in discussion.

As a curator, Yin travels around the world to curate film and video programs, which are seen by international audiences. The most recent programs that Yin curated took place at Sun Yat-sen University in China, Chicago Filmmakers and The DePaul Art Museum, both in Chicago.

Recently, Yin's video was featured in an exhibition "The Faces of Evil: 1939–2009" hosted by the Ars Cameralis Culture Institution in Poland and curated by Marek Zielinski. The show included works by Paul Chan, Mona Hatoum, Martha Rosler, Koken Ergun, and Bill Viola. The monthly long exhibition showed important films and videos on the subject of war, genocide, totalitarianism, and the traumatic effects of war past and present.

Her upcoming work "Pretend Nothing Happened" is a split-screen HD, allowing viewers to compose illusion of fiction without a central perspective. The narrative combines documentary elements to present a Chinese-French woman reconnecting to a closed factory and a river in China.

Artist Statement

The camera turns into a weapon, a third eye and a secret device recording events that I am not aware of in the particular moment of time.

In 1976, when I was three years old, the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended. Two years later, our family left China. Since 2004, I have visited China every year in December. During each trip, I spend a month living in the southern city, Guangzhou, where I was born. The propaganda films, national songs and loud voices from speakerphones that characterized my childhood are gone. Instead, Western influences are now implanting hip hop culture among Chinese youth, yuppie culture among young professionals, Internet culture and a new sense of fashion. However, the details of Chinese living stay the same — layers of dirt and dust lie on every

object and surface, trash lies in the street, layers of posters and words cover surfaces, broken windows, rusted doors and unfinished painted walls make up buildings and people nimbly respond to everchanging government policies.

Yin, Chi Jang. Chi Jang Yin. 22 Feb 2010. <<http://www.chijangyin.com/>>

Interview

Question 1: In your biography, it says you do a lot of autobiographical work that comments on the Chinese culture but at the same time it mentions some themes of your work are displacement, alienation, absences in relationships intertwined with social and cultural infrastructures. Does this mean you have more of a negative image or connotation when you think about China or your childhood? If not, what does come to mind when you think about your birthplace? (i.e. family, culture, childhood memories).

CY: Interesting. What do you mean negative?

AH: I mean “negative” as in when I look through your art, I found that it is not the typical standard pictures with smiles and it does show elements of alienation. For example, I looked at this picture [refers to Children Playground picture], children when they’re playing they’re suppose to be free, at least in this culture. They’re suppose to be running around and all but at the same time you have them on a grid and they’re very aligned. I read the themes and it is of alienation and displacement which usually are not positive things.

CY: It’s an interesting question. I never thought of that. For example, when I took this picture, my husband was also with me and I think one thing interesting about art is that you can see it. I think the differences between advertisements and art is that advertisements have a very direct message. As in this advertisement is about beautiful shoes, this one is about selling you certain things and that is that. The reason why I am interested in art is because it opens up more of the value of good and bad. An example of this one is the photo (Chinese Playground). I mention my husband was also with me and he saw this photo. You called it a “grid” and he saw it as a net which acts as something to protect the children. He saw that if there’s anyone who would throw any garbage at the children, it would stop it and protect them. (Laughs).

AH: Oh it makes sense! I never thought of it that way.

CY: Exactly. This is actually a building, a dormitory, so when you look down this is what you see. The reason why the net is there particularly is because sometimes people like to throw things, either accidentally or intentionally. The net is actually protecting the children from any object. On the other hand, on [your perspective] to why they're playing a game in such an organized manner really opens up on what someone can think about something with a different intention.

Question 2: This is a classic, possibly cliché question but I want to ask if you had any identity struggle? I feel like this is important to ask because you are sort of like a child of two worlds so what does your identity embody?

CY: I have this question since I was young. It is kind of personal--but I have to say that since I have been practicing Zen buddhism, Dharma is my HOME. My curiosity and desire to understand the humanity become more important than my identity issue. I am making art to understand myself as well as others. The Zen buddhist practice is important to my art and my being as individual.

Question 3: Do you think that being an Asian American or just an Asian artist makes it more difficult to break into the art world? As in, have you ever faced any barriers because of that fact that you are Asian?

CY: Your question implies "difficulty/negative" as Asian Americans who go into the art world. I am not sure if that is what you mean, but the fact is that the art world is constantly changing. It is like the world of fashion design and is about being popular in the right time and right moment. As a result, the meaning and value of art are constantly changing. I always believe in myself as the best audience of my artwork--as in that way, I will not be pulled and pushed by the fashion. I keep my focus intact.

Question 4: Can you explain your work especially the pictures of "Didactic Intervals"? They seem to be pictures taken focused on poverty or objects you don't think about in your everyday life. For example, the picture that stood out in my mind was the one with a lot of worms or some kind of insects surrounding a newspaper.

CY: I want to say something about the picture. I don't considered the thing that I shot as poverty because in America what we see is a lot of this consuming culture or culture all about commodities. What we see on television or any kind of magazine is the fantasy. It's really about fantasy- of how we're suppose to look like, or how women are suppose to look and dress like, and I just don't think normal people look like that at all. When we see something normal or see something closer to reality, sometimes we would compare that to the magazines and considered that poverty but actually (laughs) it's the reality!

AH: I understand, that was just the picture that definitely stuck in my mind. (laughs) That's the one that pops out to me the most. When I looked at it I had to look at it for a few minutes to try to study it and everything and that was really interesting. I just

know that, if from an American perspective, poverty is probably what they'll think if they look at it so I just wanted to bring that one up.

Question 5: Based on the last question, do you think you'll ever take a different approach and go to more of the not reality? More of the American consumerism, American type of fake pictures that would be seen in magazines or do you think you will stick with the one you have now?

CY: First of all, I have nothing against Hollywood or anything like that but I think I like my work, and I think I will stick with that. (Laughs)

Question 5: Do you have any upcoming projects or anything you're working on now?

CY: Yes, I have something right now. It's called "Pretend Nothing Happened" and it's going to be about a Chinese-French woman reconnecting with a closed factory and a river in China. When she arrives, she found out that the factory is closed and then her life just goes upside down. All of expectations of what she's suppose to be or what she's suppose to do and everything goes upside down. Actually that's how the film starts, with all her expectations going downward. Then the film talks about how she reconnects herself to a village and river in China. The title is called "Pretend Nothing Happened" and it's actually based on a real person, not me! (Laughs)

AH: (Laughs) And when will this be coming out?

CY: It's supposed to come out on March 15th but right now the piece is in post production.

Question 6: And this is the last question, what changes throughout the years have you seen in China?

CY: Oh.. my God, I think everyone will answer that question differently. I will say that my perspective is not something that can represent what really happened in China. Most of the time I will stay in Guangzhou and Beijing, I will have to say my experience is pretty limited because I stay in the small group of people I know. For example, filmmakers, documentary filmmakers, professors, academic people in China so what I think can really represent what happened in China. Based on what I've experienced, I think people are excited that there is opportunity to be different, opportunity to be rich. What I mean by "rich" is based on the fantasy or propaganda of the message from America because they watch a lot of TV. I remember when I was teaching a class in China, some graduate students saw Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives, so they actually were exposed to a lot of American culture living in China. And that is something, I think, is an affect of what they think life could be. It could be a kind of fantasy, kind of glamorous but that is from people who live in the cities. People who live in the village, I would say they mostly maintain the same ways. They work hard and don't really have much of a chance to be educated. They constantly battle with medical health problems, medical fees, tuition to pay for

the children to go to school. Therefore I would say one hand yes it changed a lot from the outside point of view- like the city, you know seems like “wow it grew a lot” or “wow it turned so big”. On the other hand, there are a lot of people that didn’t benefit from any of those changes at all, I think.

AH: Yes, I agree. It doesn’t apply to everyone. So yes, that was my last question! Is there anything that you want to add to this interview? Maybe just anything on your work, on China, on Asian perspective?

CY: I would say, that Asian American work in art, literature, documentary- they are all very important work.