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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Cesar Conde Interview

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**Interviewer: Ramona-Sky Rosenthal**  
**Artist: Cesar Conde**  
**In Person Interview: Artist Studio, Chicago IL**  
**February 6, 2016**

*Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.*



Image courtesy of the artist.

**Bio:** A post-contemporary painter, Conde uses old world technique using modern materials to paint his realistic portraits. Conde is a Filipino-American Chicago based artist who was primarily self-taught until he hit a wall with his technical skills. Upon realizing his artistic limitations, Conde decided to study at Angel Academy of Art in Florence, Italy with John Michael Angel, who apprenticed for Pietro Annigoni. He also studied with Master Painter of Technique Mixte, Patrick Betaudier in his atelier in Monflanquin, France. Conde's influences are Carravaggio, Rembrant, and Goya. Conde continues to learn and explore the infinite possibilities of painting. Conde's series "In The Hood – Portraits of African American Professionals Wearing a Hoodie." won the first *Paul Collins Diversity Award* in ArtPrize 2014. His current work "The Bang Bang Project" started November 2014 after the acquittal of the police officer who shot Michael Brown. Conde was an Artist in Residence sponsored by Hebru at Lacuna Artist's Lofts. He also was an Artist in residence in Monastir, Tunisia. Conde has exhibited in museums and galleries nationally and internationally. He is currently in a group exhibit in Taipei and has participated in Miami Art Basel 2013 and 2014. This summer, Conde will be going to the Philippines to paint a mural along with 9 other artists. This fall, he will exhibit at The Field Museum in Chicago sponsored by a grant from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in a show called "Art and Anthropology." His works are in corporate and private collections. Latest acquisition of Conde's work was by Grand Valley State University. (<http://cesarcondeart.com/news.html>)

## **Interview Transcript:**

**Ramona-Sky Rosenthal:** What were your upbringings like being a Filipino-American individual and how did that affect you as an artist?

**Cesar Conde:** Filipino American identity has politicized me. As a first generation immigrant, I came here when I was younger and was in the process assimilating. I realized that through assimilation, I was losing my own Filipino identity. Also, buying into the mostly race with white conservatives, so it's buying into that ideology, but then I realized at one point that, ideology had actually been working against me, as a person of color, as a person of a different sexual orientation, as a homosexual. The Republican party has always been against me, LGBT, and of course they're anti-choice and I am pro-choice, so that ideology had completely worked against me. Being Filipino American has affected my way of looking at subjects, issues, which has gotten me engaged in activism and realizing the power of art to make change, and it does happen. The work provokes an inner dialog and an outer dialog so that people can engage safely regarding issues and matters.

**RR:** What is your birth date? Where did you grow up?

**CC:** I was born in 1963, September 23rd, 1963. I came here in the 70s, early 70s in 1975 and during that time went through the Carter administration, the Ford administration and the Reagan administration was when I became more active.

**RR:** What was your upbringing like?

**CC:** I grew up in a middle class immigrant family. Both parents are white collared professionals. I grew up in a middle class neighborhood and went to sort of a lower to middle-class schooling, public schooling in Seattle. However, my first year was in Chicago; I grew up in the West Side. I spent a year in the West side and that was a very great experience because it exposed me to different cultures.

**RR:** Did you go to a traditional art school or did you get another form of learning?

**CC:** I have attended workshops at the Art Institute of Chicago with this amazing French woman. I so enjoyed her. She was powerful. Wanting to improve my craft, I spent time at The Angel Academy of Art in Florence where I learned draftsmanship. I realized my drawing skills were poor and I wanted to learn from the best. Then I studied with a French master by attending his workshops, of all places Joliet, Illinois every summer for a couple of years; until he personally invited me to study with him in his studio in the South of France. I stayed with him for a month. It was glorious. He wanted me to stay for a year, but I was not ready. When I was, he was already in a terminal stage. I continue to learn other peoples' techniques and how they render. It's easier now with technology. I never stop learning. Art is to be shared and so does knowledge and technique.

**RR:** When did you know you were an artist?

**CC:** I have always enjoyed my creative side. However, growing up in a traditional Asian family, it was always considered as a hobby; one can never survive in this. So I followed the straight and narrow path of the usual, which was go to school, college and get a job. I was not after I became a flight attendant and had a steady job that I pursued my creative side. I started out in theater, modeling, taking photography and doing workshops in both acting and painting. In retrospect, I have always been involved in theater arts from elementary school through high school. College, I majored in Speech Communication, which at one point was one cohesive body with Drama. I never called myself an artist because an artist is supposed to dedicate themselves full-time in the arts. That's a misconception. I started displaying my work in Chicago as I developed my craft. It was the realization that I felt secure enough in myself to say "I AM AN ARTIST." The reality is that less than 10% of artists who I know in this country are making money in the arts, 9% have spouses, significant others, trust fund, or other source of income that allows them not to have a secondary job. I am one of those artists who works full-time as a flight attendant because I enjoy it. When I'm on a layover, I sketch, I write, I go to galleries and museums in the country that I have layovers at. The moment I realized that I AM AN ARTIST was when I stopped giving a shit of what other people say or I think they say. The artist community has a stigma that they are not successful because they have another job. Well that's on them. I just flew with a co-pilot of a 747 who actually graduated from The Art Institute and had her graphic design business and sold it off to fly. I also know a neurosurgeon who is amazing renderer and painter. I am already a full-time artist. I believe that only the artist can label himself/herself the artist. The world is my studio. So if people think that I am hobbyist because I have another job or I am not an artist, I really do not care. They can just fuck themselves and I'll invite them to one of my solo shows; ahhhh labels, I hate them.

**RR:** How does your series of paintings from your portfolio "In The Hood" of profiles of African Americans reflect your feeling towards your identity as being a Filipino-American?

**CC:** As you know Asian Americans are viewed as the model minority. What happens is that it's actually a crutch and something that has been used during the Civil Rights Movement to work against African Americans. That idea of the model minority is to divide African Americans and the Asian American community. And that in itself had placed Asian Americans in a different platform. More of a privileged platform, saying oh well that's them and here we are, were the model minority; we played on that culturally. "In The Hood" also wants to challenge that an Asian American who cares about social justice; social justice has no color, social justice has no boundaries, human rights, equal rights, women's rights, all the same right. So that in itself is an homage to my African American brothers and sisters. And the idea that we had been placed in this crazy standard being the model minority, but interestingly enough some people bought into that. But there are many Asian American activists that are not just myself. I know a lot of Asian Americans who are activists, artists that are challenging that notion as well.

**RR:** When did you first start painting works that demonstrate your feeling of humanity?

**CC:** I have always had... I have always had that desire to do so. I wanted to make it... I wanted to paint not just people, but the feeling... and it is about the goodness of humanity. I wanted to capture the goodness of we as a human species, and what we can do. I have always liked the forms, the figures, the faces, and bodies; I love bodies, I love figure, faces, expression, emotions,

so I like to convey that in my paintings. I started painting over 25 years ago. And I have always believed that to know the form...for me my philosophy is I want to know about the form, so that I can go away from the form. So maybe in 20 or 30 years I will evolve into more of an expressionistic, nonrepresentational. We do not know right where it leads, but right now this is where I am and I am really loving it.

**RR:** When did you come to the realization that you wanted your paintings to be embedded with a political and social dialogue? Was there a particular moment in your life?

**CC:** It's always been the specificity... like "In The Hood" Portraits of African American Professionals" right after Trayvon Martin shooting. And I am an agnostic, but I do believe in the higher power; I am a spiritual person. So I asked a Hawaiian uncle what I should do about Trayvon Martin and when I heard the voice tell me that I should put African American Professionals in a hoodie to challenge perception and reality; and then that was followed up by "The Bang Bang Project." "The Bang Bang Project" is about young black lives lost and based upon what happens to the dreams differed to Langston Hughes poetry; and also the Ferguson incident in Missouri. So after the Ferguson incident when Michael Brown was shot and I went to the protest in Lake Shore Drive and I was really able to really listen to the youth. And I am seeing all these beautiful empowered, not just African Americans, but Latinos and Asians, actually...youth in general were against this police brutality bit. And so I wanted to put young black lives laying on the sidewalk looking at you and saying, asking the question of what you have just taken away my potential to do, to make positive changes in society.

**RR:** Is there a reason why the faces of these individuals in your portraits are so close up?

**CC:** Yes, because I want it to be unavoidable. I want it to capture your attention right away. The size, in this case, size matters. In order for ones inability to escape I would say and evoke that dialog, that this issue is also bigger than us. The issue of institutionalized police abuse of power; it's institutionalized that they take care of each other. But you know there are a few bad apples, a lot of great apples too. There are a lot of great cops out there and its also challenging for them you know. However, there are some people who could use better training and be sensitive to training, and you know there are racist cops.

**RR:** What were the first steps in deciding what mediums you wanted to pick?

**CC:** I have always loved oils, so I am very partial to oils. I have worked with acrylic, I love the fact that it is fast drying and you can achieve a lot, but my technique is called technique mix, which is where I render the figure in charcoal first. I draw it, so it's a traditional way of painting and then I fix it. And then I do all the whites and then the darks, I do layering and layering and then I do the glazing. I have always been an oil fan.

**RR:** African American photographer Gordon Parks says a quote and I wanted to know if it contents with the sentiment through your works? He states, "I suffered evils, but without allowing them to rob me of the freedom to expand." What you think about this?

**CC:** I agree. Because I have experienced discrimination, I experienced not just... because I am a person of color, I am Filipino American, Asian American, but also as a gay man. And so yes I use that anger and channel that energy to create.

**RR:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American themes, historical events or personal or global identities in any of your pieces? If so, give an example.

**CC:** Absolutely, it goes with in the realm. Actually I am doing a series called “My Tribe.” It is portraits of modern Asian American males and females. I also did a lot of identity series. One of them was recapturing using the traditional pose of David and Goliath. Using David as the native Filipino in the Ingrue Tribe, holding the head of a white man and the title of the piece is called “Decolonizing The Colonized Mind.” So it is a piece of empowerment and it is very suggestive. It is metaphorical. It’s taken away the insecurities that have been brought upon by colonial mentality.

**RR:** How does it feel being stamped as an Asian or Asian American?

**CC:** I think it’s a privilege. I think it’s a privilege from my point of view. I first and foremost really I am an artist. I am a person. And then we... it’s just very natural to put a label, Asian American. It does not mean I am a bad artist. It only means I have a different perspective, different point of view. And I am very proud to be Asian American; to be apart of the dialog in the states, and to be apart of that fabric.

**RR:** What types of exhibitions opportunities have shifted or stayed the same for you over the course of your career?

**CC:** I think thematically it is about humanity--It is about celebrating humanity, it is about love. But there is also some sense of humor that is in there. There is some satire that happens in my work. As a matter of fact, I will be doing a work that will be exhibited this April, the theme is disco. I need to be able to go from one serious body of work, to something fun like this gentlemen I am doing right here, right now, Kenji-Son. He is underwater, he is very surreal like. So usually when I want to express something politically, something that I react to, something in society, that is when I do the serious stuff.

**RR:** What are you currently in the process of working on? Do you have something coming up in the future that you’re excited about?

**CC:** Yes, I am actually excited about... right now I am combining “In The Hood” and “The Bang Bang” project and a project called “Collision.” It’s where “The Bang Bang Project” meets “In The Hood” and it discusses the issue of race and that project is going to be a traveling exhibit. I will be going to different parts of the country, different universities, because I think youth can make a difference. You guys are making a difference. You are the future, were doing this for you. So that there will be a better... you know hopefully your future will be a lot better then what were facing right now, especially with this 2016 election, very interesting. It is horrible actually that [Donald] Trump exists, that [Ted] Cruz exists, I do not know what your political leanings are, but I am so anti-them. Another exhibit is coming up; it will be a group

exhibit, a tour in Italy and then there will be another exhibit--a tour in Germany. I currently have a piece in the Art and Anthropology section in the field museum and that mural is going to be ten artists, five Filipino American, five Filipinos, painted a mural that will be a part of the permanent exhibit there. And then we also have our individual pieces--that is going to be there until June. And then in two weeks from now, February 20th, you're invited, in two weeks from now, at the Elephant Room where I am having a solo show. And it's with "The Bang Bang Project"; it's collision, it is the first touring part of collision.

**END**

Images from "The Bang Bang Project."



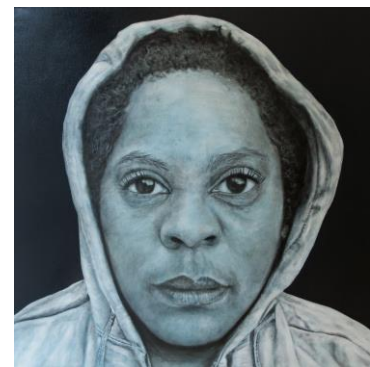
60''w x 58''h

60''w x 58''h

Technique Mixte on Canvas, 2015

The Elephant Room Gallery, Art Next Level Project Gallery

Images from "In The Hood-Portraits of African American Professionals Wearing a Hoodie."



48''x48''

48''x48''

48''x48''

Technique Mixte on Canvas, 2013

The Elephant Room Gallery, Grand Valley State University, Blue Rider Art Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan