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3-2-2016

CC Ann Chen Interview

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Basham, Margaret. (2016) CC Ann Chen Interview.

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Interviewer: Margaret Basham

Artist: Chien-Chien Ann Chen

Location: In Person, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL

Date: February 3, 2016



Photo Credit: Anna Sand

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.

Bio: C. C. Ann Chen is an artist and educator based in Chicago, IL. She was born in Taiwan, and grew up in suburban Maryland. Chen holds a BA in Architectural History from the University of Maryland, and MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Chen's work stems from architecture and landscape, and explores perceptual translations and misinterpretations of place, time, and memory. Projects range from direct observation to site-specific ideas, following an intuitive, experiment-based approach in her studio practice. She has been awarded artist residencies by Marble House Project, the Ragdale Foundation, and will be joining the Clipperton Project to sail around the Faroe Islands in 2016. Chen has exhibited in numerous Chicago venues, including slow gallery, The Bike Room, Glass Curtain Gallery at Columbia College, Heaven Gallery, and Research House for Asian Art, Beverly Art Center, Zhou B. Art Center, Hyde Park

Art Center, and The Franklin. In 2012, Chen was a recipient of the Midwest Voices and Visions Award and exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

Chen is Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Liberal Arts Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (bio from: www.ccannchen.com)

Interview Transcript:

Margaret Basham: I want to first start off by getting to know you little more, where did you grow up? When is your birth date? Where did you go to school?

Chien-Chien Ann Chen: I was born in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1971. I spent part of my childhood there and then my family moved to the states in 1979. I lived in suburban Maryland just outside of Washington, DC and went to school there. Most of my family still lives there. For my undergraduate studies, I attended University of Maryland, and earned my MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

MB: How would you define or categorize your art or/ yourself? How would you label yourself to the art world?

C.C.A.C.: I would define myself as a working artist. I don't know if I would give a more specific category than that. I started out painting, so that is my home base; it has the most influence on my studio practice. I have also leaned toward sculpture work, centering on landscape and architecture. My undergraduate studies focused on architectural history; it continues to fascinate me. Architecture and landscape is often the starting point, but I am not tied to any one medium. It really depends on project.

MB: A follow up question to that do you pick a landscape beforehand?

C.C.A.C.: It depends on the project. There have been opportunities to visit other places with dramatically different landscapes and I built a project around that. Often times I try to leave my mind open to trying new ideas not related to landscapes. As you may have noticed, there are very different types of works on my website. I think of landscape and architecture as a starting point that I return to often. In trying new ideas, it's an opportunity to solve new problems, or answer a question. I find great pleasure in new challenges and putting myself into a new role.

MB: How did you get started as an artist?

C.C.A.C.: Well I mentioned earlier I studied architectural history in college. Once I was out of school, I worked for an architecture firm in DC. After 3 years, I returned to school, to pursue painting. Architectural history was a roundabout way for me to becoming more curious about art making. My mom has also been a strong influence. She always had several craft projects going at once: knitting, macramé, beading, etc. She always shared

ideas, taught me different handmade techniques. Making things by hand always around the house throughout my childhood.

MB: So art has always been in your background?

C.C.A.C: Yes, arts and crafts were always in the home. It was a strong part of my upbringing.

MB: You came to the Art Institute for grad work. Is that how you got started here in Chicago?

C.C.A.C: Yes. I worked in DC for four years, after completing my BA. My sister was living here so I visited her and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It really helped me learn about the program and that was when I decided it would be a good fit for me. It was a good change of pace for me. I started to follow a different direction for my career and I went on to complete my MFA here.

MB: Another follow up question here, do you notice a difference in art here from the East Coast? We focus on art difference in Midwest in my class.

C.C.A.C: Yes, there is a difference. UMD is a very large university and close to DC. However, the art scene in DC was limited at the time. There were not many gallery opportunities for young artists. The Smithsonian museums were a great resource, and I visited often. I wanted to be in a city where the art community was more open and held possibilities for artists. So, Chicago's art scene was a big draw. Another difference was stylistically - the artwork was different in DC. Having lived here for over 15 years, a consistent aspect of the art scene is the spirit of invention, taking risks, and experimentation with different forms and materials. In addition, artists running gallery spaces is also a plus. It is starting to happen in DC. But in the 80's, DC establishments felt like institutions, not accessible for a young artist. Chicago seemed much more open. When I visit, I still go to old favorites like the Hirshhorn and Sackler.

MB: In 2014, you were in a show called *Words We Live By* and you showed a silverpoint on paper called, "Pledge of Allegiance." Can you tell me about that piece?

C.C.A.C.: The piece is a smallish drawing in silver point using wingdings font. I took the exact words of the Pledge of Alliance and the United States Oath of Allegiance and transformed them into wingding font. The show was curated by Larry Lee. The start of the conversation is how individual artists interpret the title/theme. How one might use certain lessons or guides they live by. What I was thinking about was what words I myself have followed or not followed. When I first immigrated to USA, I attended school, but understood and spoke very little English. In elementary school, we would recite the Pledge of Allegiance before class. It was the first thing I memorized. I didn't know why I was doing it but I knew it was the start of the day. I knew much later it was a pledge, but my first encounter I didn't understand the significance. Turning the text into nonsensical symbols reflects the disconnect I felt toward the pledge. In junior high, I took

the United States Oath of Allegiance. I understood more English but the meaning of words were still lost on me. I knew the importance connected to the process of becoming a citizen, but as I think back I'm pretty sure I didn't understand what I was saying when I repeated the oath. I thought this fit nicely into the show that Larry was curating.

MB: Was there a certain reason why you picked the materials you did?

C.C.A.C: At the time, I was teaching myself to use silverpoint. I liked the process of drawing with metal on a primed surface. It looks like pencil but it is very difficult to erase it. The permanence of an oath connected to the material; there was no way to redo the symbols – I had to recopy the symbols multiple times to get oath correct. I liked the subtle connection between the materials and meaning.

MB: Can you talk about the work in the context of the show *Words We Live By*?

C.C.A.C: Larry planned the show to be in multiple venues; each one was a little different. I chose to show in North Branch Projects, an artist-run space that focused on artist books and bookbinding. I chose the space because I had considered making the pieces into a book. Each artist choose the gallery they wished to show in. the main relationship was with the title/theme of the show; there were no subthemes, as I understood it.

MB: Can you tell me about your project, “Most Photographed, Least Remembered” from 2007-2012? On your website you state that, “the book is a collection of image documenting the process of erasure.” What do you mean by that?

C.C.A.C: I took that photograph in 2006, during an artist residency in Catskill, New York. That area of the country has some of the tallest waterfalls in US, but unfortunately it rained much of my time there. The trails were closed, so much of that time was spent driving in the rain. I took pictures of the storms, because it became a challenge to see. The landscape was a constant blur, distorted and ‘erased’ by the rain. I embraced the idea that the trip was in a way a failure. I couldn't go to the sites I had planned. I wanted to do something with the storms. I printed some of the photos on water-color paper using water-based ink and chose one to work with. Then, I began to wash the ink off. Layers of the ink washed away. One part of the work was my curiosity about water-based media: would it be possible to return the paper to its original state? I documented the erasure, as each layer of ink was removed. The paper took on a new form as it deteriorated in some areas, thinned out by the rinsing process. I would wash it once a day. The most intense part of the documentation process was making it into an artist book. The book shows the process very directly. The last page is the lightest or ‘ghost’ page. I need to decide whether to continue, and destroy the print altogether, or leave it in the current state. I have about 25-30 pages. I think of erasure being parallel to thinking about memories of travels. You take lots of photos to remember the moment or location but by the time you get home the photos all look the same. These experiences look the same when you go back and look at the photographs. You've captured that experience but are unable to redo it; there is no permanence to it. That was part of the idea of the erasure: it's parallel to our

inability to remember everything we see. How you remember a place being more beautiful or less beautiful, as time passes. When I started, I didn't know what to expect, what the results would be.

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

C.C.A.C: I don't really. I don't see this as a separate thing from myself. It's part of my identity. I don't specifically make it a separate topic. "The Pledge of Allegiance" might be the most deliberate piece that addresses my experience as an immigrant. I see it as something that is always part of my work. However, I don't single it out as the only aspect (this seems odd to me) because I feel it is always part of who I am.

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

C.C.A.C: To my knowledge, I have not been labeled specifically with the description "Asian American" artist. I don't actively seek out a label. When asked to provide a bio, I use 'working artist' most of the time. I am always looking for interesting opportunities, and would be open to ones with Asian American theme. My primary interest is pursuing interesting ideas.

MB: If so, was identifying as Asian/ Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain?

C.C.A.C: I think it is important to me personally. Do I identify it as the only thing? No, I feel it is an important part of my identity. I would never deny that, but the artist community is so large and rich. I wish to participate in all aspects of the art community. I try to leave things open, to ponder, question, and be challenged by different ideas.

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

C.C.A.C: The art community is always changing. What has stayed the same for me is having an amazing group of artist friends to debate with. My studio practice is continuing to change; I am a bit restless. I like playing around with different directions and exploring unfamiliar ideas and/or materials. Often, I gravitate towards connections to landscape, architecture - they have been long standing influences for me. I also participate in group shows regularly. It tests your thinking, and gets me out of my comfort zone.

MB: What are you currently working on?

C.C.A.C: Color, (laughter) I having been reading Landmarks, a book by Robert Macfarlane. The book includes a glossary of nature and landscape terms used in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. The author collected these terms over 10 years. As I read this book, I began to imagine creating a color glossary that parallels his collection. I'm

still reading and developing the idea. Part of the research is going to hardware stores to look at paint swatches, as they often have interesting names. I have been looking for names of colors that go with the glossary what color those things should be. The next stage of the project might be to develop my own colors and names.

End.