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Raeleen Kao Interview

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Interviewer: Beena Patel

Artist: Raeleen Kao

Location: In person – Uptown, Chicago, IL

Date: February 8th, 2017



Photo, bio, statement courtesy of the artist.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design

BIO: Raeleen Kao is a drawer, printmaker, and amateur competitive eater aka glutton residing in Chicago with a Charles Brand etching press, a red tabby, and forty plants.

Her prints and drawings have been exhibited in museums and galleries across the country most notably at the International Museum of Surgical Science, the Monmouth Museum of Art, Bert Green Fine Art, the Smith College Museum of Art, Tory Folliard Gallery, Firecat Projects, and Normal Editions Workshop. Her work has been represented at SELECT Fair New York, the Editions and Artist Books Fair in New York, the Cleveland Fine Print Fair, the LA Art Show, and Aqua Art Miami. Her work has been published in four volumes of *Art In Print* and featured in *Printed Editions: Online catalog of the Print World*.

Artist Statement: My memories since infancy are dominated by hospital gowns and surgical beds. I was born with a congenial heart defect and the latter part of my adolescence saw the onset of a series of chronic reproductive issues which have continued into adulthood. Historically, the United States has stigmatized women who are unable to conceive, who give birth to stillborn children, or who suffer through miscarriages. My work reflects the destruction of the female body and the recurring trauma induced by the loss of a child. <http://frozencharlottepress.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Beena Patel: Tell me a little about yourself- when and where did you grow up?

Raeleen Kao: I was born in 1989, and I grew up in the NW suburbs of Chicago.

BP: How'd you decide to move to Chicago then?

RK: I went to school in Madison, Wisconsin. And then after that I moved back to Chicago. Although when I was in Madison, I would meet people that would say I'm from Chicago and I would be like I know that 847 area code is. That's me [laughs].

BP: I know that Madison has a huge art community too, did you decide to move back because it was home?

RK: [Madison] was too small for me. Honestly-- Madison was really good for me because I ended up in the art program on a fluke because I went there for biology, and I intended to do stem cell research because that's where they pioneered it and then midway during the program I realized that I don't want to do this anymore. And I didn't really-- I never really took art seriously, and then, I took one print making class- and I had never heard of print making before- and I was like, oh, I really like the process of doing this and I just decided to switch my major to art. It ended up being one of the best print making programs in the country, so it was good luck that I ended up in that program, but it was too small [in Madison] and spending four years there in the same city.

BP: Because you say it's small- was it like you knew most of the community?

RK: Yeah, it was like I knew everyone, and by the end the people I went to school with I'm still really close with, but at the time I was like get me out of here [laughter] I'm out, it's too much. Plus- the art department isn't that big either, so it's like, being in one building with the same people for so long—it's overexposure and near the end of my college career, I was like that's it.

BP: So, you said print making, I think I read something that you double majored in art.

RK: Well, the way that the [art] program was that you chose two different concentrations. You had to reach higher levels of classes in those classes so I chose drawing and print making.

BP: Is your first love still print making then?

RK: Well, it's kind of both. At the end of the day, I'm always a drawer, but drawing and print making are like the same thing anyway. I mean to me anyway. Like drawing and print making go hand-in-hand. The methods are different, but they tie in together really well. At least that's what I think.

BP: How would you categorize yourself or your art?

RK: I guess I would define what I do as contemporary figurative because I've been increasingly doing this with my work moving away from figurative and portraits being like what you see or the standard idea of it. So if you think of something that's figurative, you think of a body or you think of a person, right? I really like- I guess a term for it would be new figurative. I think for me things that are representational of the figure but not necessarily- but aren't straightforward. So there's a body of work that I'm working on about, it's partly to do with breast feeding and maternity and also diseases and sickness specific to women, so, like problems with the reproductive system and breast cancer. The work itself is like a singular breast and growing out are different things that tie in to mother's milk and poisons and drawing things from Victorian representational like flowers and objects like that. That's an example of what I mean by atypical figural work.

BP: Do you usually do work based on female bodies?

RK: Yeah, a lot of it is based off of my own body, but I don't look in the mirror when I do it-- it's all in my brain, but it's all about-- basically it's all about women whether or not it's a depiction of an actual woman or a part of a woman-- it all ties in to women's health.

BP: I know that you've mentioned in a past interview that some of your art is based from when you were hospitalized when you were little?

RK: Yeah, well the first memory that I have is being in a hospital. So I think, like, --I don't think about it as this terrible thing, like I was born with atrial septal defect, so basically there was this hole in my heart, so my heart couldn't function as efficiently as a normal heart. I had to get surgery for that and I was three years old, so my first memory is being in the OR.

BP: Which is crazy!

RK: Yeah, and it's actually a really vivid memory. Like I can still remember like where the door is to the room and where the doctor and nurses were and their green suits. And I still remember all the tubes-- it was a really vivid memory for having been that young. In some ways I think that sort of affected my perspective on life and the other things-- like my family, has a pretty terrible genetic medical history [laughs]. I mean its fine, but some of those things when you think about it it's like why is my family so unlucky? So, my work has kind of been dealing with having to go through different medical issues in different stages of my life and it used to have-- when I first started doing art it all had to do a lot with vanity. It had to do with what happens to your body after surgery. People get really, uh, self-conscious with scars and biopsies. And things that are indicative that you've had with sort of trauma with your body and it was all kind of all in this vein kind of way. And now it's moved on to other things. But I guess that's where my art started.

BP: Yeah and it seems like it's still slightly influences your art, but it's not as prominent?

RK: Yeah, I mean I guess now it's transformed -I was really self-conscious about all these things for like the longest time, like, up until five or six years ago.

BP: So pretty recent.

RK: Yeah, there was this change that- and it wasn't immediate, but now it's been more like something that I feel is empowering, like I feel that mastectomy scars are the most beautiful things and I think showing off scars on women is one of the most powerful things because- the other thing, the other reason I feel this is way is -people are going to be nosy like no matter what. Sometimes it's okay, but the way people interpret it--[it's not the best] and I have had a lot of negative experiences with men. Men that I don't know think it's appropriate to-- so basically I have a scar from having heart surgery and people think that's it's okay to just like stare at your body and ask you weird questions that are super personal about yourself and it just makes me feel really gross, so part of it is I really like showing off scars that are very obvious to make other people uncomfortable.

BP: It kind of sounds like you felt violated before and now you're intentionally making sure to show it all off.

RK: Right, it's because I felt this way for such a long time that now I, I'm kind of like, and "What's wrong with you?"

BP: Or it sounds like you're saying, "You made me feel so uncomfortable, let me make you feel uncomfortable."

RK: Exactly. People do get weird about it because people are always asking, “Oh, why?” People like to ask why, so I like to wear these super low cut. I really don’t usually do because I’m not a public person, so I don’t like giving talks or going to my openings- I mean I like it, but it’s super uncomfortable so the only way I can do it is if I like build myself up for it. But whenever I do something like that I always do it for a point, like, wearing something that’s super revealing, but only the areas that I have scars in. And people ask me questions like why do you choose to do that because a lot of people cover it up, but to me that is such a stupid question. It’s not a stupid question- I know why people choose to cover things up, but it’s stupid in the way the reason why we’re taught to cover up scars especially as a women because you’re supposed to be like perfect. You’re supposed to be beautiful and a part of [that thinking] is companies like Madura that are making money off of making you feel bad for something like you went through this trauma and you survived it. It should be this symbol of strength, but society has taught and ingrained in people that it’s not [okay] and that [scars are] ugly. And the other part of all my work is I have people who have had the same surgery tell me that it changes their perspective to see me dress the way I do -men and women- and are super self-conscious about their appearance and having me be so open about it is really empowering to them. So that’s really important to me as a person and for my work. To be empowering to people and to have people look at it and think, “Oh, I know how that feels”-- even if it was as different experience to have people think, “Oh I went through this and that’s the reason why I’m drawn to this.” That’s really important to me.

BP: I think that’s amazing and that it’s great that you’re able to make such strong connections with your viewers. Going back to your schooling—personally being Asian American and having immigrant parents, if I had wanted to pursue a dream in the arts I don’t think I would have been supported [laughter]- were your parents supportive in your new goals.

RK: I mean- [laughter] my mom is super supportive now, but when I did switch over and even when I was about to graduate my parents were like you can still go to nursing school. For some reason- I was doing really well in my program and I just- it’s really difficult for me to keep doing something that I don’t really care about. So the thing is I didn’t go into art because I was too stupid to do med school. I never wanted to go to med school. So [my parents] telling me, “Oh you can still go to nursing school if you don’t want to go to med school,” it’s just it doesn’t have anything to do with what my brain is thinking now. But now, my mom is super supportive. I also have a brother and sister and my entire family does computer engineering, so I’m like well I’m the only artist in my whole family and extended family. They’re all computer people, so if I end up a failure my mom has at least two other kids [laughter] My family comes to my shows. My sister comes to a lot of my shows and my mom will come to my shows that she’s able to.

BP: Do you ever address the theme of Asian American identity in your art work?

RK: I think it all ties into it in a very, uh, - it's kind of like the idea of the question is your art political. I think it's all inherently political because of who I am and it's all somewhat self-portrait even if it's not directly so inherent. It ties into me being Asian American and the way that I grew up and the things that I dealt with by having a body that looks like me and having a body like an Asian woman. I think it does, but it isn't formerly addressed.

BP: Can you think of any particular art piece that brings that message across?

RK: I think a lot of it has to do with the perfectionism or the idea that your body is like a something that is fetishized. I can't think of anything particular. But in April I'm going to the College of Creative Studies in Detroit to do a residency with another artist from New York and the piece we're doing is a performance piece. We're basically going to be armoring ourselves with prints that we're making throughout the week. And that is more about the idea of Asian women timid and not like powerful and people thinking that assuming [Asian women are] submissive. So that piece will be all about empowerment- and women empowering each other. We're both from Asian heritages, so the idea of fetishism is going to tie in a lot. The residency is going to be a week long and we're going to make a lot of work and it's going to culminate in this performance. We're going to be working in the studio the entire week and the performance itself is the armor that we're going to make armor out of paper and work that we've made for that. It's going to be cut up and molded into armor and the performance itself is going to be us incasing each other in armor. It's the first time I'm doing something like that and I'm really excited to have another outlet for my work.

BP: That sounds like it's going to be fun! Also, I've seen that you had a GoFundMe page to open up a studio and congratulations on surpassing your goal—how's construction going?¹

RK: It's going good! I have everything built right now, and the only thing I need right now- there's this company I need in Villa Park that's a print making company. I got a lot of my supplies there because I don't need to ship it or pay for a bunch of shipping, but the way that they function doesn't make any sense to me because they'll get things once a year and then be out of it forever. So I've been waiting for supplies to arrive since last year. So basically everything is built, but I'm waiting for some supplies. I've been doing a lot of it there's just a couple more things I need to get to have [the studio] be fully functioning, but everything's great right now in terms of most of it. I have my equipment and I've been able to print stuff in the past year.

BP: Are there any upcoming projects you've been working on?

¹ Frozen Charlotte Press <https://www.gofundme.com/2g32t4c>

RK: There's one thing, but I haven't gotten it yet-- it's 60% certain, but I can't tell people yet. I'm just waiting until it's confirmed before I tell anyone. However, I'm going to Sothern Graphics Council which is a print making conference in Atlanta in March, so that'll be good. I'm a publisher there, so I'll have a booth there. I'm looking to exhibit outside of Chicago, and I do have opportunities to exhibit in Chicago right now, but I don't really want to take them because otherwise it's just too much to concentrate on one area, and then my collectors base gets over saturated.

BP: Would you say that you'd rather not be categorized or just based as a Midwest artist?

RK: Yeah, and I- the other things is last year it was the most productive year of my career mainly because I didn't have to have a day job and it wasn't even that I had a lot of time to work on my art- thought that was super necessary because I'm neurotic and I spend a billion hours on everything, but it's also being able to be in my head for the entire day it's really important for me to get ideas that are fully formed. And so because I was super productive last year I'm sitting on two shows-- two full shows-- so I have the work, but for me the older I got and the more developed my work gets. I always want there to be other aspects of the exhibition because so many of my work has to do with medical issues and women and things like that. I always want to have a show that's like, there's this exhibition but there's also, - like my ideal setting would be to have an exhibition inside a museum. Around three years ago I had a show at the International Museum of Surgical Science² and that was a good place for me to exhibit because they had other exhibitions that were tied to anatomy and medicine. I'm really interested in having [a place for my art where] I did a whole series of work on diseases that were specific to women because of those environments. So like dress makers in the Victorian era that would work for 20 hours a day and were subjected to toxic pigments that were in fabric. And then during the [19]20s women who worked in radium factories where they would paint on radium numbers on clocks so soldiers could see in the dark—which was super toxic! And then all these women were dying and getting terrible cancers and having their limbs fall off. But it was only women because they only hired women into working those factories because their hands were small and they could paint tiny numbers. And then the scientists who made the formulas and the owners of these companies were all wearing protective gears, but the workers weren't because women's rights didn't exist then- and they still kind of don't. Basically I have [a collection] that's a series of drawings that I have based on these medical diseases that effected women's workers and I would like to have that show be in conjunction with something else that has to do with either women's rights or chemical poisoning, so the ideal setting for me would be a museum that deals with chemical history, medical history or having programming with that exhibition deal with women's rights now.

BP: It's really interesting that you'd rather not have a solo exhibit.

² International Museum of Surgical Science <https://imss.org/>

RK: Yeah, I'm really interested in everything being liberal arts. I don't believe in arts being its own thing or science being its own thing. Or you know engineering being its own thing. I think people are going to learn so much better if you tie everything together- especially for the public. If you show the public statistics that's one thing, but if you show the public statistics and then on top of that—in a simplistic idea: people like pictures. When you talk about why it's important for cancer research it's one thing to go, "oh here's some research someone did", but that's why medical illustration exists, so you can learn from reading and looking at a picture. So I think that a lot of contemporary art is pretty inaccessible to people too because [viewers] go into it thinking that they're not supposed to understand it, so I think that if you have several exhibitions or have aspects that can marry each other it gives people a better understanding of art in addition to whatever it's being paired with.

BP: Do you see yourself as an artist that wants to be quite clear then?

RK: Yes and no. I think that it's pretty obvious- and I want it to be- that it's about women and women's reproductive/reproduction and certain diseases. One of the questions that I really don't like- not that it annoys me because it's natural that people are curious, but it's a question that I don't like answering is when people ask me when, "Oh all your work is about this, I want to know what you have gone through." And I feel like that I don't like answering that because it's more important to me that I want people to look at [my art] and think about how it relates to themselves or how it relates to their own lives. Once I tell someone the specific issues that I've had the piece automatically becomes about me. And I don't want it to be. I want it to be about you, the viewer. What have you gone through or what have people around you gone through that might make or reasons why [my art] drew you. When I was in college I had an undergrad exhibition, but this is one the strongest memory I had of people dealing with my work was when I did a self-portrait and the name of the piece was "I can't get you off of me", and this girl asked me, "Is that your piece? I know exactly how that feels." And for me that's like the best reaction that I've ever gotten. And that's what affected how I do my work now- even seven years later. Because I want people to feel that [they] went through this thing and there are other people that have also gone through the same thing. I want people to feel that they're not alone. It's really important for me to have [my art] pieces be open in terms of what it really means or the specifics. I think that art should be—I mean at the end of the day the art is for myself, but a big part of it is having it shown somewhere so other people can share that experience. I think art should help people in one way or another. Whether it be help people understand a big political statement or to help people go through something personal and I think that people who are drawn to my work- I'll have people who buy my work for personal reasons and tell me, "I was going through this thing and [my art] helped me get through this." So, even though our experiences are completely different as long as I am able to make it personal for someone else is really important for me.

BP: Saying that, does that mean when you're working on your art pieces you have a strong connection to your pieces?

RK: There is and there isn't really. I put a lot of thought into [my pieces], and I used to be super attached to my work, but for me the emotions get put into it when I'm drawing, but when I'm done it's like- when it's done and framed and on the wall it's not mine anymore it's yours—it's for the people viewing it. I finished it and now I'm giving it to you.

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