

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
**Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University**

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Interviewee: Isabel Cuenca  
Interviewer: Chelsey Wen, Mai Ton  
Date/Time of Interview: April 20, 2019  
Transcribed by: Tiffany Sloan  
Audio Track Time: 1:07:48  
Edited by: Tian-Tian He

Background: Isabel Cuenca was born on a small island in the Philippines and moved with her parents to the United States when she was fifteen years old. After about a year and a half in America, Cuenca's family moved to Houston, Texas. She stayed in Houston through her undergraduate years at the University of Houston before moving on to pursue her career as a painter. She traveled outside of Texas to receive a graduate degree in art and has focused her painting career around the style of geometric abstraction. Following graduate school, Cuenca had the opportunity to complete an art residency in her home town in the Philippines which she says was a major step toward her ultimate goal: bringing her knowledge of art back to the islands.

Setting: The interview took place in a study room at Fondren Library at Rice University on April 20th, 2019.

Key:

IC: Isabel Cuenca  
CW: Chelsey Wen  
MT: Mai Ton  
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop  
...: speech trails off; pause  
Italics: emphasis  
(?): preceding word may not be accurate  
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

**CW:** Okay. Today is April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019 [**IC:** Mhm]. My name is Chelsey Wen and this is Mai Ton and we are interviewing Isabel Cuenca [**IC:** Yeah]. So first could you just tell us about where you were born and a little bit about what it was like growing up?

**IC:** Well I was born in the Philippines in a tiny island that looks like a sock. So, um... I grew up in a *small* city. Um, I guess everything else, everything in that area is pretty small. Like... you're... you're considered, you live in the province if you're—you know, if you live outside of Manila or, you know, the northern part of the cit—of the country. And so... um, very small social circles, very everybody knows each other, everybody's like sort of married to each other. Um, and then when I was fifteen my parents decided to come and move to the States. So, it was a little difficult being like fifteen when all your friends are just starting to go drinking [**CW** laughs] or like, you know like, everyone is starting their social lives or mixing in with the older generation and kinda trying to fit ourselves in it. Um, so... then like from then on it—my—it just felt like a little disjointed, I didn't know the culture here. I didn't, you know, like I-I was lucky enough that we were taught English. So like communication wasn't that... a problem, it was more of like how do I fit myself *now* in a society that's completely different, that's like multicultural and especially like—we went straight to L.A. Which is *huge* [**CW** and **MT:** Mhm.] diversity and I just didn't understand a lot of it until later on you know, when you're... in college or grad school or something, like it's...

So, I don't know like life is different. Did you start from like knowing each other, having a lot of friends and growing up with the same people to having nobody? No, not necessarily nobody, I had a cousin that I was close to but that's it. Like my social circle became from like, went from like huge it went to like, handful. So, it was, it was different. It was a little difficult but it's not *that* bad. And, so, yeah, that's how I grew up and that's where I'm from.

**CW** and **MT**: Okay. [**IC** laughs]

**CW**: Um... uh, so why did your parents decide to move to America?

**IC**: I think it was just... um, either, you know, like financially it was really difficult. Our... our main source of income in our island is... um, sugar. So, the Philippines used to be like the biggest export of sugar at some point in history, and our island, because we were so focused on that and a lot of developments started or like, I guess a lot of people that were interested in that would kind of congregate in our island. The—it... you know, like, it... it—it's just... there's like a, I don't know I've heard this from my mom, but I don't know if it's true. But she said like the people that lived there who were like the top of that field were like the king makers, like they cho—you know they had enough power to choose the president or whatever of the country. So it's... you know, it's... it's good in that sense but it isn't the same since um... since the 80s which was when—or like, I'm not sure in the 70s or in the 80s, but when um Marcos, when our president put the whole country [**CW** coughs] under martial law and so it took the power out of the people he didn't like and gave it to the people he did and so and then took all the wealth from the country and then now we're like a third-world country. So, I think financially it was a little hard. Um. I don't know, maybe they saw that if you stayed, we would just be the same. You know? Like I've been back, and I don't want to really say it, but like I feel like the people who are there and especially in my little island it's like it—they're a little stunted. Like they still... like... like you're, you have a family and you still love to party and [laughs] I'm like, I don't get that. Like t—the priorities are very *odd*.

So, in that sense, like I'm appreciative of like moving out and I wouldn't have been an artist if I was there. There's no art history there's nothing... um maybe the most famous artist there at the time would have been like still Da Vinci when there's like *so* many more has happened since then and we just don't know about it because no one really tells us. So, I remember being in an art class and I painted like this angel that I found, like it was another person's painting but it was... I didn't know anything else. So, I had these artistic—like art encyclopedias at home and so oh I picked this one painting of an angel and I copied it and like the next day... like... someone stole it? And I don't—I don't understand that like I don't understand like I don't know if like someh—like I don't like the value of it for some reason... was enough to—for someone to steal it and I don't, I didn't really, I was so *confused* about what that meant when I was—it was just, you know, it was just a project. And so li—and I don't even remember who the artist that I copied was but, not that it was any good, I was like so young but it was just weird like innocence that like... just... I don't know [laughs]. It's—it's just that's how it is, it's very weird. Yeah... so I don't know...

**CW**: [laughs] Um.

**IC**: [laughs] I don't know if that answered your question, but...

**CW**: Yeah.

**IC**: I can—I can be pretty... winded [all laugh] with my answers.

**CW**: Um, so, did you start painting for a very young age?

**IC:** No. ... Um, but uh, my mom was artistic so she did projects like she would make necklaces and, you know, she could—you know she would travel to like Bangkok and then kind of imitate what they were doing there and so it was more of like projects. It wasn't like we were making... we were painting picture frames or like things you hang your keys on but I never thought... I knew I could do it, like I—I guess I kind of felt like... I enjoyed doing something like that but I never really thought of doing it as a profession. Like, there was just no way. I would have been like [CW coughs], I don't know what I would have been if I stayed there [CW: Mm].

So, I didn't really start painting until... college. Which, I was like maybe 22, 23, and even then it was on and off when I was trying to figure out a major it would... you know, I got into like, the physical therapy and nursing you know I—and like um... accounting and so th—it was like everything else but art. So, I tried everything else but art. But I'd—for elective classes I did take 'em and sort of figured out what I liked and didn't like... 'cause... that's pretty specific too. Yeah.

**CW:** Um, so like when you were in the Philippines what were your parent's jobs?

**IC:** Um, we were um, hm... sugar farmers like everyone there is. I mean, everyone who has... lineage, I guess. So that's—that's you know [CW: Mhm]. So, for something that has been so prominent in like the culture, you know, that's somet—that if you're—if you have a lot of land then it's good 'cause then you [CW: Mhm.] you can sustain yourself but if you don't have too much... My—my dad is uh one out of ten children. [CW: Mhm.] So like, when everything got split up, and he's the youngest [CW and MT laugh], so not very much was left. So, it—it—it was a choice and... he's the only one who's here out of all ten siblings, so that's kind of hard for him. It's a little bit better for my mom, half of her siblings are here and half are there. But, for my dad it's just him, and so... I don't know pretty brave I guess [laughs]. [CW: Mhm.] It's not easy.

**CW:** So, when you guys moved to America, did they have difficulty finding jobs?

**IC:** Um, no. Um, I guess... Kinda, kinda not because L.A. you know, um, again my mom's side of the family she had a sister here already that helped her out and... uh, my do—my dad got sponsored. So, you know, he worked pretty much right away. But for the first, maybe a year... I was living with—we were all living with our aunt in a one-bedroom apartment with eleven people in it [CW laughs]. So, I mean, kind—w—very very weird and... everyone was sleeping on the floor. You better not go to the bathroom at night [all laugh] 'cause you gotta step over like six people just to get there. Like, it's crazy. It was crazy. Like our bathroom door was broke, the toilet was always clogged, it was... it was fun and... kind of difficult but eventually we got our own place and so... yeah. But that was, yeah.

**MT:** Um, why did you choose, like, Houston to go to?

**IC:** Um. About like a year and a half in to us moving here, my mom got offered a job here [MT: Mhm.] So then we all sort of, you know, she went ahead. She said it's good here, it's a lot slower, and so she just moved us all over. Um. It—it's nice because like the apartme—for me we were also looking forward to it because... our apartment wasn't really that great. It wasn't in a great neighborhood, there would be... dealers coming into like the parking lot and there would be like a stabbing in the school across the street it's like, it's L.A. I guess. But um, [laughing] um, she—so, when the opportunity to come to Houston came up, we were thinking about, you know, like apartment versus a home because we could rent a house here for the same amount. And, you know, our neighbors downstairs wouldn't be blasting their music to the point where our floors was like shaking all day, you know, so we were all like *yes!* Let's go, you know, and uh this like lifestyle is like crazy here in L.A. like. And then coming here it's you know, a lot more laid back and it's—it's—it's nice. But at some point I also wanted to like get out of this [all laugh] like it—it's slower it's you know, when you're young you're kind of... you want some... something else,

to try something else. And so, that's all part of it. I guess. So, yeah. So, my mom got a job and then we all moved and then eventually my dad got a job and we all went to school and... college here and then grad school I went somewhere else.

**MT:** Yeah.

**CW:** Um, were there any other surprises that you had when you came to America?

**IC:** Hm. I think a lot. I... I think, um... I'm not sure if it's necessarily a surprise. Like do you, do you have a specific like thing you're thinking of when you s—when you say that?

**CW:** Um, no, just anything that you had to adjust to, something that was different than your previous life.

**IC:** I think—I think... um... tra—I think... traveling on my own. ... 'cause, you know, like well, okay, so the difference is like in the Philippines you don't really drive yourself. You have, labor is cheap, so you have a driver, you have a—you have a maid, you have someone who does your laundry, you have, you know, someone who cleans your house. So... in that sense, which helped to have a cousin that, you know, that I was with or my siblings is like trying to... travel on our own. So like, learning bus routes, like that stuff was different. And, you know, we spend our days in the library, 'cause what else are we going to do? And it was close, and we can walk or we would walk to the grocery store and... not necessarily, like, doing things for ourselves but I think... we... had to be a little bit more independent. Because again, our parents were like working *long* hours and would never, you know, you would only see our parents at night and they would have to leave early in the next day. So, for most of it, it was like really independent thinking or, you know, like kind of make plans on your own which I never really did before. But I think, I don't know if that's necessarily something that's like just in the States that I would have experienced. I think it's just part of growing up and just navigating, you know... like how to do that, how to exist in this environment or in this world or something like that.

Uh, I wouldn't, I don't know if there's anything that's really... a culture shock per se. Maybe I can't think of it on the top of my head, or I'm just not... I don't—maybe I never dwelled on it until I just kind of let it go. But like eventually there were thing—like once you kind of... know, sort of social things? There were things that would like feel a little bit more racist or, you know, like oh, maybe we shouldn't have said that or, you know, being more aware of like cultures. Eventually that's kind of where I... you become a little bit more sensitive to it and try not to offend anyone which, you don't *get* if you're in the Philippines because everyone is all the same. There's no sort of racism because they're—we're all the same but there is classism and all these other things. So, there's no other-ness, but *here* there *is* and so... I didn't even quite... navigate that until like later, like, way later. So...

**CW:** And did you just learn that through practice or...

**IC:** I think it's a lot of like, school stuff which—I really, I *love* being in school. I—I mean, I'm not the best student [**CW** and **MT**: laugh], but I think... I think it's, you know, maybe grad school made a difference? Or art because it's so personal and it's so, you gotta really reflect on yourself and, you know, like who do you want to represent and who are you representing by default and so like you can't ignore those things. Um, taking an Other-ness class helped which, you know, like then you kind of see the signs, you kind of break down all the social issues that are promoting things that you don't like and so, that are not so helpful, and talking to other artists who *are* really socially active really really helped, like Matt! Matt has been more like... he's, I feel like he's the more social of us two, and so like he, he really goes out of his way to show up for things and talk to people and put himself out there, and I'm like uh... [**CW**: laughs] just take me with you, you know, like just drag me along even though I don't want to do all of those things. So, I think... but in—but in the same sense we're taught—we understand each other that,

hey, you know, we're both *this* and... we're tryna say something about it and even if we don't want to we are. So, like, how do we navigate *that*? Or how do we even like... harness it and use it for our advantage as artists, as Filipinos, and you know, how do we... um, include other people or make them feel like this is something that they could see themselves in, you know. Because we're not complete—like as much as I'm—I feel like I'm a hermit and I don't want to leave the house, it's, *I'm still that person*, I'm still connected and with the internet we are all still connected. So, it's not a complete like disconnect like we're still tru—I think that's it. Like, for me I'm like always trying to connect, but like, not always being successful... but... I still have to try... I guess this is, kind of what that is, so [laughs].

Yeah, so, that stuff so when—but when you're aware it's like ugh, you know, like what do you do when you're aware about like things that are offensive, like do you confront it, do you—*when* do you confront it, when do you not confront it and... so... that's that—eh the best example that I can give in terms of like a culture shock which is sort of a little bit of a reverse. I went to go visit the Philippines last year. And one of my friends that I've known since high school, we were driving to a restaurant and he was like 'Belle' and I'm like, what. 'Is racism, like does it actually exist?' And the fact that he—he had to doubt it like, for me was like *what*? Like that's a *question*? Like... to us it's like a given because we're living in it, we understand that it's happening. You know, we kind of pick it up when it does happen but like for—for them that's so different. I was—*that* for me was more of a culture shock than anything else. I'm like, *of course* like when we're in the Trump era like it's so obvious, you know, like sexism is so out there. Like, it's—I was so shocked. I was so—I'm like *yes!* [laughs] Like I was about to go on like a big rant about it but I was like, no they're not gonna get it. You know, like, it's they don't have to deal with it so it's not really a thing but like for me it's like *wow*... I can't believe that was asked, you know. So that was more of a shock than anything else [CW: laughs]. So, yeah.

CW: Okay.

IC: Yeah.

CW: Um, so do you think if you had stayed in the Philippines you would have also not really felt the effects of [IC: No, for sure] of racism?

IC: For sure, like... I—I stayed there for—oh, I did a residency at my home town like an artist residency and I was there for like four months, and yeah. I—I could've—I could see myself like being just like them and, you know, like we're jus—just not aware and like there's nowhere—way to be aware so, you know. And we're, our culture is so like we love everything American. Like, we're Filipinos but we, for some reason, celebrate Thanksgiving. There's no Indians there, there's no pilgrims, like why are we celebrating an American like holiday in the Philippines? Like it doesn't make sense. Like there's, you know, so like our love for America, our like the idea that America is some—is what we want to be... it's so like...it makes it such a...a disconnect. But they don't see that it's a disconnect because for them it's just like oh, we like it and they're celebrating, oh, well we have, you know, friends there and they're celebrating so we're celebrating with them. Oh, we're going to use this day to be thankful. But you know, you can be thankful *every day* it doesn't have to be... so just that *wanting* to be but not understanding it. You know, like that sort of appropriation of it but like, but that's what they *want*. But you to appropriate their culture, but anyway—*anyway*... that's [laughs], that's what it is.

CW: Um, so can you describe, well I don't really know what an artist residency is or how that works...

IC: Well, yeah! Um, usually it depends on the program, there's different ways like um usually you apply for it, they look at your stuff, and if you get picked, um... they give you, uh, let's say I'm in Houston and there's a residency in um Vermont and then to—oh, I got it! Um... they're gonna have you come for like a month or wha—however long the residency you applied for. Usually it's a month to like three months

and they provide you with the space. You're in a like, you're in a farm with like five other artists. So you live there with them and you get your own room, and then at the end—so you have work space, you have communication with other people, usually they want you to do a workshop for the community like whatever your specialty is. Let's say pottery, you know, you do a pottery workshop and then... at the end of it you get a show. So—so then you have something, so that looks good in your resume and all that stuff. So, that's what a residency is.

Um, that's kind of what I did. Again, like the Philippines is a little slow, *slower*, so I—I was, I think his first artist to have done it until—I think it was a big learning experience. Like I used to live there, I should have the resources to get from my house to where the gallery is, but I don't. And, you know, like and usually when you're here you bring your own car and there's ways for you to get to your space, or you live in the same area you're in. So that one was a little bit more, well I have to like... make connections for him and how things are supposed to go. Not that I really know too much, but that's you know like I think it's—and then now he has a living space next to a studio space, next to the gallery space, so it's a lot more convenient for the artists that he is bringing in now 'cause that was like a few years ago. So, there's a big improvement and I'm very excited, and I told them like if, you know, there's space again one of these years like I'd love to come back and do it all over again you know? [CW: Mhm.] Yeah, so that's what a residency is. So a lot of artists, um... either have teaching jobs for like, you know, to just survive day by day. Or they go do residencies back to back 'cause you have living space, you can—sometimes they give you a stipend and a show, and so like that's what some people do. Like some artists do, like that's how they survive the year. Which is a good way to do it if you love writing and, you know, have a lot of ideas I guess [laughs]. Yeah.

**MT:** Um, can you describe like how you started to get into the art world after like college and stuff like that?

**IC:** Um... I think if you have... If you decide to be an artist, and you go for your bachelors that's great, right? Art isn't really something you have to have a degree for to do. There's a lot of artists that don't and are very successful and there are some who do and are very successful and so—but for me, I figured I started so late. I started in my twenties, it wasn't something I was—I knew I was doing in high school or like middle school. It was, I never dreamed about it really, um... so... after all the major changing and, you know, my parents wanting me to be secure and all these other things. Um, I finally decided that yeah, I'm gonna be an artist... um, I was applying for um, the architecture program at U of H, and so to apply for the program you have to have a uh... a portfolio. So the portfolio, I was like well okay I'm gonna take a couple art classes so I can have a portfolio and then once I got into it, the class I was in was also sort of the preliminary class to get into the painting program. And so while I was in it, I got in the program and I was like well, I'm just gonna do this 'cause I feel like I—I did well and I'm curious. I understand what I'm doing, I'd rather do this. So once I decided, you know, I had to convince my parents that it was— [laughs] it was the right choice. Which is—um, I don't—I still don't know if it really was, but I love what I'm doing so that's okay. Um... and so I was like—they were like well if you're gonna do this, you know, you're gonna—are you gonna get your masters? And I'm like, yeah, I'm gonna go all, as far as I can in terms of education and then figure out what happens after.

So... having experienced what it's like—with the education you get with a bachelor's versus the education you get as a—when you get a masters, it's so vastly different. And I think for me, I would...ba—getting a bachelor's degree in art is barely scratching the surface, *barely*. I was, I feel like I was so much more naïve... just getting a bachelor's degree and I, if it's something that other people *want*, I would highly suggest the graduate—um to get a masters. You'll cry every day [CW and MT laugh] because it's—it's like so hurtful and everyone needs to say something to improve your work but it's like ugh. You know, and like you work so hard on a project and they're like, well I don't know like I don't think it works. And I'm like, well I just spent a month doing this so you're telling me in the month that I

spent was like... mmm trash 'cause like the work didn't come out good. So, you cry every day, you go through a lot of stress, but I think the conversation and the people that do come and talk to you are very very knowledgeable.

So, I learn—I learned a lot in the very short amount of time. So I... um, and then after that coming back—like coming out of it I was so scared. After grad school you get so scared about everything. So I contacted Matt, I was like, hey... like I don't want to keep getting rejected anymore by myself and feeling bad about myself alone, do you wanna be my fail buddy? [CW and MT laugh] Like literally! I was like, do you wanna fail with me? And so like, I think having someone to back you up in terms of art is great, like that's how I approached it. And then you start writing together, and I think he also informed my work a lot and I think this year was the—I think we... we put a good show together in terms of like as a duo and how to work together to create something more cohesive. Our work used to be like, so different and it didn't really w—uh—the gallerists were like, they don't really work together. I'm like, oh okay, thanks! And then go home and cry [CW and MT laugh]. But like, you know like, that's just the pa—part of it, like no matter what you're going to get criticism so it's the field. You know, it's about... it's about personal choice or personal—whatever you *like* basically. So... yeah... so how do I—I'm still working on it. Honestly, like I'm still... still working on figuring out how to... be an artist and... kind of keep going. So, it's a process but, yeah. It's not easy [laughs]. If you don't mind getting rejected every day. Not every day, but like constantly.

**CW:** So when did you meet Matt?

**IC:** I met him in um, at U of H. We both went to uh, he was finishing up the program as I was getting in. And I, you know, we know each other. Oh, we recog—I recognize he was another Filipino. I think he was the only other one? Um, in the program at the time. So, you know I was like, oh okay! And then he was older so I—he was... coming out of the program so I kind of felt like, oh okay like he's not gonna want to talk to me [CW and MT: laugh]. I don't—I don't have anything to *say*, you know? Like, he's probably thinking of other things and so we didn't really talk for a while. I mean, we would just like say hey once in a while until I came back and I was like, hey are you still making art? And he's like, yeah, I'm making art. I'm like, *hey* you're probably one of the few people who are still making art that I know from that time and so... I was like, hey do you want to do stuff together [laughs]? I've—I'm—It's like I don't really know like I—I was away from Houston for a while. He was more like, he knew a lot more people than I did. So I was like hey, like... do you mind like... letting me tag along and see what we could do together? [MT: Hmm.] Mm, yeah.

**CW:** Um, can you describe how you make art or how you come up with your ideas?

**IC:** Ideas? Um... I usually just, I don't know, I start with... just looking [CW coughs]. I look at a lot of the—I look everything—at everything like from corals, to gems, to buildings and it's usually really... or even like, I just—I just look at a lot of things and then as I go through them like they just kind of come together. And then I would go on Photoshop and like maybe—'cause I don't *sketch*. Like I—I feel like I don't need to, like if the images are there and they're specific and they're what I want, like... I can't draw. Like honest, I can't draw [CW and MT laugh]. So, Photoshop really helps like it gives me a rough idea between the image that I kind of compose... through Photoshop and the painting, it—it sort of filters through because like what I see isn't really what my hand wants to do. Um, and then, in terms of like having, oh uh we're gonna—it's—I never really approached making art with oh, this is exactly what wanna do, this is what I'm trying to say. Like it's not that, it's more of like, well, my body interpreting it and then me kind of breaking it down again like in terms of like writing about it. So once you—once I have the work and I'm looking at them and I kind of dissect what I was thinking about at the time and why this was so interesting to me and it's, you know, like I think that's how it is? 'Cause I think if I—if I control it too much it doesn't wanna, it doesn't—it doesn't work. It'll take me years to make one thing if I

*force* it, but most of the time the work sort of dictates itself and so it'll kinda just come together? Sometimes it takes a while but sometimes it's pretty fast. Those little oblong ones came really fast, they're like oh... and they're fun 'cause they're small and I usually work like big. So, I'm doing more of that now 'cause it's an easier sort of... cycle, I guess.

**MT:** Um, was it hard to try and convince your parents to let you like start exploring art more?

**IC:** Um, considering Asian parents? [**CW** and **MT** laugh] Um, I think my dad a little bit more but not *too* hard because I think they... they can see it too? Like I wouldn't have chosen it if I didn't have a couple of successes before that. You know? Before the choice of saying, hey, I'm gonna do this. Like, I—you know, winning juried shows a couple—you know like getting invited to do things. I was like, well maybe you know there is something here that is—that feels more natural, that feels like, you know, so. But I had to like sit them down and be like, hey... like are you willing to fund this? [laughs] I—you know, like it's—it's—it's not something you'll get your money back from right away, probably not for a while, but it's you know like... and I feel like I'm good at it. I feel like it's a natural fit, and so like it wasn't so hard. I think my parents generally just wanna be supportive, but if I chose a field where art is on the side, they would have liked it better. But I think art is a practice and you have to keep practicing, and the only way to get good at it is to keep—do is—do it to like really make it a priority 'cause otherwise it's never going to go anywhere. Yeah, yeah. So, so that wasn't so hard. I think they were pretty open to it. My dad just comes to my shows and like just stands there for a while [**CW** and **MT** laugh] and then he wants to go home. Doesn't know anything about it. He doesn't know.

**MT:** [coughs] So regarding your art, how much [coughs] sorry, how much of your Filipino identity informs your work?

**IC:** I think, n—naturally it just does because I *am*. You know what I mean? Like [**MT:** Yeah.] it is a part of me. I think what I've experienced, my idea of color, I think dictates it. And so, and that I learned from... you know, I learned color from being in festivals when I was young or, you know, these things like th—the things that I associate with colors are just sort of naturally from wh—how I grew up and where I grew up. So, it's—it's, you know, that's part of like letting it be what it is, like its nature is that. But in terms of like the feel—the—the... the genre of art that I do, like geometric abstraction isn't necessarily associated with being Filipino. It's, you know, it's very old white male. It's very, you know the people who have started and are successful at it *are* old white males. So, the field itself isn't... I think I'm approaching...uh, a traditional field with a perspective of a Filipino. So I [**MT:** Mhm.] *that's*... that's where that comes in. Like... and that's where us Filipinos, or like minorities, we struggle with um... putting that type of work out because the—the expectation like if you're Native American the expectation would be pottery and it's gonna look like, you know someone with a headdress and so, that's not really contemporary. That's more of like, well... the—you are the stereotype. But we as artists today as, I guess a younger generation, we're breaking all those rules of like we're not trying to be stereotypes. I'm not painting water buffalos. I'm not painting forests. I'm not doing that, but I am referencing it. Like it's never that far away from me, the—the titles of our show are always Filipino or like... the sort of... exploration of what that even means. Especially being out of that country and out of that culture, like what does that even mean, like, you know, like... How much of you is *that* and how much do you let yourself be that *while* also living in—as an American and, you know, trying to survive that way. So it's—it's like I think psychologically it's a little, it's... hard. It's a lot of things to kind of face... and being female. So that I mean, you know, like there's so much like stigma you gotta fight before you can even like say anything. You know? Like people will even like look at your work and you gotta be like... hey. I'm like all the things that are not what is expected. So, you know. It's hard to kind of be... sometimes taken seriously, I think.

**MT:** Yeah. ... Um, so why did you decide to go use like geometric abstraction in um, in your work?



**IC:** Um... [MT coughs] I wanted to go into painting because I wanted to be da Vinci. I wanted to—right? Like I want to be able to paint like a photograph, like, that was it. And I... really struggled [MT: coughs]. I—I didn't... as much as I wanted it to be, I just couldn't get there. It wasn't—you know as much as, I mean I can draw an owl as fine as someone else. I can paint a bird, that's fine, but like...it's never gonna be, uh, a bird that's like photo-realistic. Which is what I wanted, right? That's the pinnacle of our art expectation that you—you're a good artist when you can imitate an—a photograph versus like a photograph imitating, you know what I mean? *So*, I struggled with that for a while. Um, until, like, we had this one project where we had to pick from a list of artists and it ranged from, you know, people and like s—um... landscape and then abstraction and I was like, hey like I'll try this abstract thing, this looks easy, that's fine. And then...I realized as I was making it that oh, I understand this. I didn't know how, I was just like there's something about *this* that I understand; that is, that I've connected to and I don't really know why. I didn't—you know, so—but from then on I was lucky enough that one of our professors did geometric abstraction and pushed it because otherwise I would have just—just really really struggled.

Like, I just didn't have, I had a friend who *could* do that and I was like, oh [sigh] she paints like *beautiful* like porcelain skin on women and the way she puts like glossiness in the eyes, it was just fantastic. I was like, but I—I knew. Seeing her...and being in the same program, I saw the vast differences of what it really is if you're really gifted in that and what it is to not be, which is me. So I had to, I had to like focus on the things that I knew. And I had to allow myself to be okay with that 'cause who wouldn't want to paint like the others [MT coughs] who wouldn't want to paint like a photograph? Like, that would be so great, but I'm like well I can do this one and I'm good, and I was the only one who was doing it and I was doing it really really well. And so, I mean, you don't usually get into grad school straight of under—straight out of under grad as an artist, like but I got into a few schools that at least I could choose from. So, I was like okay then there's some successes here that sort of points that I could do, I could focus on it and be eventually, hopefully, successful. You know... yeah.

**MT:** So, wha—which artist are you most like inspired by for geoma—geometric abstraction and just in general?

**IC:** Um, it's the artist actually, it's—it's an architect like it's not even a painter. Well, I mean I do like some painters but I—I love Frank Lloyd Wright who did um... midcentury architecture. He's—his work is a lot about the home and family life, and I love that. But he's crazy, he's literally crazy. Um, he was...ridiculous. And I sa—I want to go see one of his um buildings in Chicago, it was *great*. And Chicago is all about art nouveau and all that stuff and we did all the architecture. So my favorite artists are actually architects and, um... who else? Um...yeah, like... I think... it helps to, I mean, it helps to know who your peers are who does the same thing but it also—you also have to look at everybody. And so, I am mostly inspired by uh Michael Taylor who works with like glass sculptures that are like beautiful like, I'm like I always just look at his work because his work is naturally working with light which is what I try to imitate with my paintings because there's no real light there. There's no real transparency, but I have to look at transparency in order to try to render transparency and light and color. So, a lot of glass sculptures, a lot of buildings, a lot of like um, high rises because they're a combination of architecture *and* glass *and* reflection *and* color *and* nature. So, it's like really more the buildings are really what I look at. So, when I drive around I'm like, when it's a stop light, I'm like I look around and take pictures of just random buildings in the city, so yeah.

**MT:** Um, so which or your pieces, like, do you like the most? Like, which one speaks most to you?

**IC:** In terms of like, from the show?

**MT:** Just in general.

**IC:** Just in general? Um, my favorite piece is actually one of my first geometric abstraction pieces that I did in undergrad. Though I still have on my—well it's still my favorite piece. [**MT:** Mhm.] Like out of everything. Um, I s—I... I... it was—it's different from what I'm doing now. It's a lot more handwork, which was when I still was like, do I really want to do abstraction? And I knew I really wanted to do hard edges. It was still me deciding that I wanted to do it and it was just a little project that our professor wanted us to do on the side. But, until now it's like still my favorite piece. I can send it to you guys if you guys want to see [**CW** and **MT:** Oh yeah! Absolutely.] it. Yeah, I'll send it. It's—it's still on my wall. It's like, I look at it every day [**CW** and **MT** laugh]. I'll never get rid of it.

And then I have this one piece that's like, I also did in undergrad that my mom *absolutely* like, there's like a few people that have been interested in it and she's like, no. No one's getting this. I'm like, but why do you even like it so much? It's like, such a weird piece. She's like it's—it's like an airport. I'm like *what?* There's no airport. But it—that's what she sees and she—she says she's never letting it go so I think... I think those two pieces came at about the same time and so...it's kind of telling. Not that I don't like any of my work now! But I think if I was to keep one piece until like I died or something it would be probably those two things. Um...yeah. And then the—there—there's another one that I *like* that uh started the oblong pieces. Like it was one that I made that I, I sort of didn't even think about until this show and I was like, hey I think doing these oblong pieces are interesting 'cause they're—they're kind of a little bit of everything. They look like people, but they're also really architectural and they remind people of traveling 'cause everyone says it's like an airplane window. And I'm like, well that's fine [**CW** and **MT** laugh]. You know, so there's the—the—the beginning piece of that was one, also kinda one, of my favorites but... yeah.

**MT:** Um, so, what are some of the highlights of your career so far?

**IC:** Um, uh, doing uh the Biennale in the Philippines was really fun. Um, doing the residency there. I—I think a lot of, well if I can do something to encourage art in the Philippines, *that* for me is a highlight. You know? Because...I, that's one of my really really like long term goals is to bring what I'm learning here back. So, it's nothing like oh you know I showed at the Whitney or anything. I think for me, what I'm really working on is just learning enough knowledge, learning the—to meet the right people, to make being an artist in the Philippines an okay career because it's, you know. Unless you're like old and you know like go to Manila like you're not really... eh, you're just doodling. And... and I *know* there's a lot of like *really* good artists because there's so many good Filipino artists here! And really good Filipino artists in—in Europe. Like, w—we're we're all capable. But we're just not there in terms of like...our country.

I think we have to go back and improve it because that's where we're from. That informs our work and if we're not going to help improve it through the coming generation then what are we really doing? Like what is it really all about? So, I think that's the *super super* long-term goal. Um, but in the mean time I really have to learn as much as I can, you know... yeah. There's a—so I mean I've met some and just not even in the field of like painting it's also in video art and performance art. There—I met this um artist who does video art who's like pretty—he's like pretty prominent in his field. He's like one of my favorite artists are Filipino film makers in Europe and I was like, *wow*. You know? Like, I wanna know who they are and like we should do something. You know like, and being—we're now part of the Filipino-American directory of you know and that for me is a great start in learning who I like. I've met people through it that are you know, that have... um... led to shows and, you know, and all these other things. But it's—it's I think really for me the pinnacle of my career as like does a little show there and you know having to do a residency there and [**CW:** Mhm.] promoting all that stuff is really where I feel like a personal goal at least you know.

**MT:** So what's the [cough] art scene like in the Philippines right now?

**IC:** [sigh] [MT laughs] How do I explain? There's some interesting art—but I th—from what I see... eh I don't... The thing is like I'm a little bit separated from how people are feeling in terms of our government. Like our president *now* is ridiculous like we—just as bad as Trump like you know his whole this is like um... trying to get rid of like drugs in the Philippines, and his way of doing it is like killing people. Just like s—like executing them in the park or something like it's *crazy*. He's been um, like the UN has tried to intervene like it's really like a thing. So, I don't know if that has anything to do with it or our history of our previous presidents who have not been so good and there's corruption and but the art there is from what I see it's a lot of like... [phone vibrates] um... like bleeding and like [MT: Mhm.] grotesque and I don't know if it informs the work or it's just about the shock value of hey you know your idea of paintings are these beautiful seaside pictures but here I am bringing this like really grotesque mutilated body as art and like bringing like saws into the gallery. But if you do that here it's like, well what else? Like we've seen this. Like our art history has gone *way* beyond this. We've had, you know, mainstream um movements pass this.

So, I don't, that's what I'm saying like I don't know. I don't know if I necessarily like the work. I think I'm—maybe because I've seen a lot of it? And studied a lot of it and, you know, it's not for me it's not interesting. For me it's like just the shock value and it doesn't really... say anything to improve society or environment or anything or political it's just, well I mean it's fine if it is just that but if you're going to put it in a context of like the world, the world's understanding of art, it's just not—or at least American understanding of it, it's just not there. Which, if they had art history they would know. Or they would learn from like past artists and what different ways of expressing themselves, you know what I mean? Like there's, you—you'd be more open to being geometric or building or like sculpture or other things to really exp—because art is a language so the more you are articulate at it, the better your—you'll get your message across to your viewers. So, it's you know, it just feels like they're toddler talking versus, you know... someone who's a little bit more educated.

So that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to get them from like the babbling stage, not that I'm like I'm *deeming* them that but from my little experience of it, I think even a little bit of art history would really inform a lot of their work. [CW: Mhm.] And it's not just like we—we have this tendency of like it all has to come from me? And that looking isn't a thing, like looking at other artists. Like that it's—you know or reading other people's articles or whatever is being written about it. Like it to us it's like oh why would I—why would I do that? I have to do it on my own and I have to create my own ideas. But then you're starting from the beginning when everybody has already invented the wheel, like why are you reinventing the wheel when you can *learn* and make the wheel do something else? You know? Or put it in a bigger project or whatever it is, so... so that's... I sound like a snob but it's [CW and MT laugh] true. I'm just trying to...

**MT:** So, wha—do you feel like you try and push like any kind of message in your artwork?

**IC:** I think, I think right now it's more of... telling a story. It—I—I'm always always about telling a story, now I'm not... setting any rules or anything or breaking anything. It's more of like I always loved storytelling, folk—folklores I read a lot of fiction and so it's more of... the immigrant story but like... ah, it's—it—but not as *obvious*. Or it's, you know, it's just an expression of my experience and if I'm labeled as an immigrant and if I'm labeled as all these things it'll sort of come out? And if it's not, it doesn't come out it's okay 'cause they're... pretty [laughs]. I like pretty things and telling stories. So, you know, like both of those things are I think where I... I try to go from or try to pull from, but it's... it's... yeah, telling a story more than pushing anything. And if you don't see it that's okay 'cause then you're looking at something pretty anyway, you know.

**MT:** [coughs] So, are you pre—well connected with the Filipino community here in Houston?

**IC:** Um, not really. I think not as much as other people. I—I... um... I try to support it when it is available? You know? Like but to say that I'm like oh do I go to like festivals or whatever, not necessarily. I think I'm just... used to just keeping my head underground, which isn't really helpful. Which is something I really should change. Which is why I'm with Matt! Working with Matt helps because he's so into all of that stuff! Or he—he knows more people, so he gets better information.

**MT:** Just reading [inaudible] the questions. [**CW** and **IC** laugh]

**CW:** Um, do you have any other goals for the future or for your work or just in personal life?

**IC:** Yeah, I mean, um... I think... Eventually I think the big dream is, right, like you want a show in New York or you, you know, you want to be written about or, you know. But it's not that it's the thing that drives me, I think... I think, just... making work and getting better [**MT:** Mhm.] at telling, right? Again like it's a language and it—the more you are learned and articulate about it, um I think that's where I am and if... I've don't really turn down opportunities if they come, and so I'm very, I am very open I am always very like grateful for them. So, um, [**MT** coughs] big goals in terms of like, just like, crossing my fingers and hoping it'll happen is yeah, being part of the Whitney biannual and representing Filipino artists. Um, you know, going back and... doing, maybe, like the one in May—like just any sort of biannual where we can represent ourselves. I think that's a goal and it should be a goal and, you know... and being a good role model for... and I encourage it.

Like, you become so much more socially active, not that you have to go to every festival or anything, but when you know there's—you can be—you can share information, and you can share a possibility. Which is really... you know, every Filipino I know is a nurse, and... my brother who is, you know, who is studying to be a physician assistant is also, on the side, a photographer and a carpenter and that's a thing. You know, like he's always also looked for a creative aspect for his life, and so... that's great, he's a better photographer than me, I don't know how that happened, [**CW** and **MT** laugh] but he is. Um, he's built me benches, you know like, he—he collects art and I—I feel like maybe I help, I influenced him [**MT** laughs]. Um, so you know, like he... I think it doesn't have to be that you—I'm doing this so that someone else can be an artist. I'm doing this it's in terms of like saying that hey you can—you can do what your parents tell you and have a stable life and—or if it's something you want that's fine, but you know like you can also enjoy all these other things with your time. [**MT:** Mhm.]

And you know, and if you're gonna invest in anyone like there's people who are trying—you know, like who are speaking about... you know, we don't—we don't necessarily need an Australian coming to the Philippines trying to save the whales. You know, like we are also—we also have to be responsible of all those things, so... so that's one of the things. I love going back there 'cause there's thi—there's this little island in our big island that is... I was there before, before it was like a thing [**CW** and **MT:** Mhm.] and it had all these, you know, it was you—we didn't have electricity and we were camping on this island, but now it's like a—a—a—a marine reserve or something and they're trying to bring back all the corals and they have like these giant clams and you can go diving and you know, it's—it's *great* and it's beautiful and people come in and like they bring in kids to learn about the environment. So it's like it—it can be *that*, it doesn't necessarily have to be like I have to be the one that saves the whales [**CW:** Yeah.] and you know... stop all these ships from shipp—whatever it is, just that's you know... I think being part of a... part of the machine is not a bad place to be, or you know, I try to take it as a responsibility otherwise... I'm just selfish [laughs] or narcissistic [**CW** laughs] 'cause I'm just like looking at myself in the mirror, painting. Like [**CW** laughs] it's—it's—it's—it's sad otherwise [laughs] you know. Yeah.

**MT:** Um, so do you do anything on the side besides your, like, your art?

**IC:** Um, my I—I help my mom out sometimes for uh, if she wants to have like days off I'll come in and help her but it's—it's really like uh short. Maybe two days out of the week [**MT:** Mhm.] and just to like pay the bills and [**MT:** Mhm.] the rest of it is like I have... you know... At least they're okay with me doing that 'cause it's—it's—it's... it's hard. I think, you know, like there's times when you're like how am I gonna—how am I gonna put gas in my car tomorrow? Like and so—but you know if you believe. You gotta, part of it is faith, I guess? [**MT:** Mhm.] Yeah.

**CW:** Um, how do you think that your race or your—or your gender has affected your ability to be successful as an artist?

**IC:** Um, I'd—I—I think it *informs* the work? Um, I used to think when I first got into this. I used to be so proud of my—like it was something, okay it's—it's something that I said to myself that I was like, I'm—if I—if I was just looking at something that I made, uh I'm looking at a painting. I would think... like if you didn't know me, if you didn't know who made it, you would think it a guy did it. And I for some reason felt proud of that—that my work looked like a *male* artist's work. And... that was when I was like I didn't really understand what that meant, that it was better somehow to be male. And so, from that, and like learning and like reading because we—we don't know about feminism in the Philippines. There's no feminism, it's like not a thing we didn't know that happened, you know, like it's just not a thing. So, for me like I... learning about feminism and learning about my mindset about it I was like, wait why would I want that? Why would I want... why would I want my work to look like a—someone like a male did it? Or a guy did it? Like why would that make me proud? So, I think it's more of I don't necessarily think it's about... trying to get success because it's, I don't know if I'm successful. You know like I—I don't, I can't deem myself successful. I can if it was from my standards, like that I love what I do and then, you know, and then like people like it sure but like I can't really deem myself as doing it for success.

But I think... being able to represent and be proud of what I do as a female and—and show it the places that I've shown I think it's... *those* are uh like ways that I look at it. [**CW:** Mhm.] Um... yeah, because like... you know there's only really been a handful of really good artists out of so many men and who were just as informed or... I, mm, feel like we're more complicated like, you know like we—I think we have a balance of nurturing and drive that is really nuanced and really brings a different perspective. So... I think it's more of fighting against being, you know, like put down. Not necessarily put down, but like we you know like we have something to say and it hasn't been in a long time that we have this opportunity to be able to say anything. You know we've all—we like there's a lot of stories about... female successes that males have taken um glory for, you know like, [**CW:** Mhm.] we—we have to exercise that right I think to be part of... society and... just as equal in society. So, I think that's what it is and um, I've never really I—I don't think I would—I haven't really compromised in that aspect, so I don't think I'm planning to.

There's... um there's this story I tell, I—I remembered it recently and I didn't know what it meant at the time until maybe like a year or two ago? When I was young, I went to a Chinese school because my mom thought—figured, you know learn a different language that's good for you later on. Uh, I was in kindergarten [**CW:** Mhm.] and part of uh, the morning routine was that, you know, you play the—the national anthem and then you pull the flag up [**CW** laughs] and there's always a girl and a guy [**CW:** Mhm.] and I'm like oh *so* excited, one day it was my turn. I'm like, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna pull the rope! I wanna be the one that raises the flag, 'cause the girl's job is usually just to hold the other side of the string [**MT:** Oh, yeah.] so that it doesn't get tangled. [**MT:** Mhm.] I'm like, I'm not gonna do that. At kinder—as a kindergartener I was like, I'm not gonna do that, I'm gonna pull. I went straight up to the thing, stood where the boys were supposed to stand, and grabbed onto the—onto the string and then my teacher like moved me. And I had to hold it and I didn't under—I was *so* mad. I—uh—I don't, know why

I was mad, but I was *so mad*. Like why couldn't I do it? So, I think recently I've really been focused on that, like why can't I pull the flag? I'm just as capable as the guy that's shorter than me [CW: laughs] that's pulling the flag. Like, you know like I'm pretty tall for my age and for be—for being Filipino and so I'm like, I don't get it. Like I don't know why I was only in the supportive... non-job job that's like, you know, so for... so it's not really, you know I don't really see it as like doing something to achieve anything. It's more of like, well how do I approach making work and because it's so much more personal and so—so mad. [CW and MT laugh] I still tell my parents I'm so mad [CW and MT laugh]. Like how—how is that okay? That's not okay [laughs]. Yeah. They just laugh at me, but [CW laughs] ... I was so—I remember being *so mad*! I still feel it, like now I'm like I'm so mad again [laughs]! I'm like, how *dare* they! I should write them an angry letter, when I was in kindergarten in the eighties, this is what you did to me [MT laughs]. Yeah... so. Yeah, so it's—well, I don't know. How are you—have are you guys born here? I'm—I'm—I'm flipping the table here. [laughs] [MT: Yeah, yeah.] Were you guys born here?

MT: Yeah, we were.

IC: It's fine. I mean [CW laughs] it was just like a random question. I was—I'm wondering if it was something that you guys experienced too and what your experiences were.

MT: I guess sort of, like [IC: Yeah.] I kind of like when I was growing up I was kinda like, um, I kinda wanted to be a tomboy. But I don't know how much of that was just like 'cause I was very close with my brother or if it was because like at—to a certain extent you're like oh I kinda—being a boy is like you get better privileges and like something like that. [IC: Right, right.] Yeah, so...

IC: Yeah, you get to stay out more, like [MT: Yeah.] a lot of the things my friends were like complaining about—my parents are, are pretty liberal. [CW and MT: Mhm.] I could hear them talking about like taking LSD or whatever. Whatever, mom and dad! [CW and MT laugh] You're—you're more like experimental than I ever was! Okay, I get it! You know, but um... yeah, a lot of my friends were like yeah like my brothers can go out at night and I was never allowed to and then so like *yeah*, I can definitely like relate to that. That it's... like why can't—I mean we're just as capable, you know? [CW and MT: Mhm.] So we gotta change that conversation.

MT: Yeah we do. [all laugh]

IC: [laughs] So yeah. What else? What else? I have—I feel like I have another story, but I can't remember it right now [laughs]. A lot of crazy stuff.

MT: Um, just switching it up a bit, I—not—well, but going back. [IC: Yeah.] Um, do you have, are you well connected with like your family back in the Philippines?

IC: Yeah! I mean, we're you know like we... I still talk to them and you know we have a group chat, like [MT: Ah.] with like a hundred something people. [CW laughs] [MT: Wow!] It's like, okay I gotta turn this off somehow, but it's nice like 'cause they remember our birthdays and like they always greet each other, we—we always greet each other. And so, like if something happens, everyone is—there's ways to communicate. Um, so, yeah like it's—it's I think it's a... but I think technology really allows for that and, you know, it's good. We're always aware. And my mom is very good at like, she's... her passion is, you know, she's very spiritual and so she supports a lot of things going on there because we are aware that it is a third world country and a lot of people do need help, so you know. Our—the rea—our resources usually just we try to... take it back. My mom's like really social and that's good for her. I never got it, but I try! I'll—I'll help her but like um... I'm very... about myself I guess. [CW and MT: Mhm.] Yeah.

MT: Chelsea, do you have any more questions?

**CW:** Mm... No, I don't think so.

**MT:** Okay, then. [**IC:** Yeah]

**IC:** I hope it was entertaining. [all laugh] I'll send—I'll send that image of my favorite piece and you'll see, it's different [**MT:** Yeah.] but it's like—

[interview ends]