

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

Interviewee: Sherry Tseng Hill
Interviewer: Ann Shi
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Transcribed by: Ann Shi
Edited by: Sarah Kong
Audio Track Time: 1:23:20

Background:

Sherry Tseng Hill was born in Taiwan. She moved to Houston with her family at the end of 1970. Six years later, she entered Rice University to pursue her studies. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art and Architecture, as well as a Bachelor of Architecture degree. She is an artist and practicing architect, and maintains wide-ranging interest in the fields of mathematics, science, and literature. She is particularly interested in matters related to the cosmos. She has owned her own architecture practice, "Sherry Tseng Hill Architects" since 1994 and for the last 5 years, she and her husband, Howard Hill, have practiced together doing light commercial and residential projects. She is also president of "Hill & Swart Architects" through which the firm specializes in institutional projects. She worked for I.M. Pei in New York City during a one-year preceptorship; since then, she has pursued her career in Houston.

Sherry is actively engaged in the Houston arts community, through organizations such as the Archway Gallery and the Visual Arts Alliance. She was a member of Watercolor Art Society-Houston, National Watercolor Society, and American Institute of Architects. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Houston and appears frequently in local newspapers such as the Houston Chronicle, Houston Art Tribe, and Arts Insight, among others. Her artworks reside in private homes, offices and the City of Houston civic art collection. Sherry lives and works in Houston, TX.

Setting:

The interview was conducted online by Zoom video conferencing in each person's homes during the covid-19 pandemic.

Key:

STH: Sherry Tseng Hill
AS: Ann Shi
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

AS: Today is April 3rd, 2020. My name is Ann Shi, and I'm with the Houston Asian American Archive. Here we have Sherry Tseng Hill for our interview. Thank you so much for being on our interview!

STH: You're very welcome!

AS: So can you start by telling us when and where were you born?

STH: I was born in Taiwan in the southern port city of Kaohsiung, and I left and came over to Houston in 1970 when I was 13 years old.

AS: Great. Can you tell us about your neighborhood you grew up in Taiwan?

STH: So, I actually, I was born in Kaohsiung, and we lived there for many years. But then we moved to the northern port city of Keelung, when I was, I believe, first grade. And so, we lived there from first grade to third grade. And so, my memories of Taiwan take place in both cities, so they're very different in both culture and climate. So, Kaohsiung was much, was a much bigger port city, very vibrant and my parents —my mother was, my mother's family was from there. And my dad's family also lived there, though he, their family hails from even the more South, southern part of Taiwan. So, so when we moved to Keelung, that, for even the short period of three or four years, my memory of it was more vivid. And I think it was just because of my age or something.

And so, let me begin by describing Keelung because when I, when we were moving, and we asked our parents what it was like, and my mom said was, it rains a lot. So that's what it was like they're humid, extremely humid, and more mountainous, as opposed to more flat of Kaohsiung. So, my memories of Keelung was we lived in... Well, my dad worked for the Taiwan Power Company, so we always lived in these company compounds where the houses are surround, and central courtyard— in the courtyard. Some, like in both places in- in Keelung, it was paved and had a tennis court— or a couple of tennis courts in the middle. And the company showed cartoons and movies, like regularly on weekend nights in the courtyard, and the neighborhood neighbors who know each other, the men work together; and the women were you know, they were very close, like a little community. So we would drag our chairs out to the middle of courtyard, watch cartoons. And- and sometimes they were be classical Chinese opera shows with real people, and Marionette-like skits, the people will come in and entertain us. That was a real treat. A lot of my memory was about living there.

And I remember the teachers living further up the mountains; and there were times when I had to go see them just for social or whatever. And just climbing up the really wet slick stone steps, up the mountain; and smelling all the flowers and the leaves and touching the leaves... that would, you know, that would, close up when you touch them... and I don't know what they're called¹, but it was fun because we would just climb up, and jump and touch those leaves as we go up. So that was a big part of my memory there. It's just the colors and smells and the flowers and the trees.

In Kaohsiung, it was more... my memories of Kaohsiung was more people oriented. Because when we were there in the summers, especially when we would go back from Keelung, we stayed with my grandparents. And they were, there was a market, not like today's Night Market. It was just like an open market, there we would go to, on the way back and forth from church. We would stop there. And then all

¹ *Mimosa pudica*.

the little vendors along the way, that my grandfather used to give us a yen or two yen's each, and we would stop and get a snack. And so those are like really, really nice cool memories.

AS: Wow, that sounds like heaven for us in quarantine. [Both laughs]

STH: But... and food was great. I remember the food.

AS: So, what triggered you to immigrate to the US?

STH: So, I didn't come by myself. My dad had always been kind of a w- had a wanderlust. And he- he... I don't know he... When the war broke out, he was a kid. And he actually went to Japan as a young kid, and stayed there until the war was over, and found his way back. And I think he just always wanted us to go places; or he wanted to go places, but he was stuck with a family. So, he had to take us along. So, he was the one that wanted to see the US. And the way for him to do that was to come here as a grad student, and so he was already in, you know, late 30s. And I guess yeah, late 30s. When he got into the graduate program in electrical engineering, that's what he was. He was an electrical engineer at U of H. And so, he came here and got his degree in masters, and then father's over two years later. And that's how we ended up here. So.

AS: Did you know English before you came here?

STH: I did not. I was, I had half of a year in middle school in Taiwan. So in Taiwan, the education system is that everybody eventually got educated in English, learned English as part of the curriculum. So I had the, like, three months... was four months of English in middle school. First year of middle school. So I kind of knew the alphabet but not very well. So I had just gotten started. So no, I did not know any English. And it was pretty tough. [chuckles]

AS: How was the cultural shock?

STH: Extremely intense. Remember that I was a young teenager, so you know how teenagers go through not just the... I mean they go through a lot just internally. Then with the additional added burden of a different culture where you didn't know the language was pretty tough. But my parents were pretty tough parents. They just, you know, basically said go to school and learn. [chuckles] And that's what we did. I actually started at, I think it was called Patrick Henry Middle School, then I think that's changed. The name has changed since then. And I did not know *a word* of English.

And that first semester, it could be, have been the rest of that year I was put in the classroom for ESL kids, and they were probably around nine of us and most of them are from South America, from Chile, Argentina and places like that. And so, I picked up Spanish probably faster than I picked up English. That first year.

AS: Great. So how did your parents support you? Or... just let you, like toughen up yourself?

STH: They basically. Yup. They basically did that. You know, if you— my mother since passed away— but if you had asked, they were probably doing things behind the scenes that we didn't realize. But definitely I felt like they kind of just dropped us off in the foreign place and say, take care of yourself. I'm sure that wasn't quite all true, but that's how it felt. [chuckles]

AS: So having been here, almost 50 years now, can you share your— you share your perspective about how Houston's change in all these... 50 years' time?

STH: Sure, oh my gosh, it's just changed leaps, by leaps and bounds. When I first came here, and I was just talking about this to my husband because he didn't quite realize that. But my, I'm from a family of four kids, including myself, I have the older brother, two years older and my sister. Next in line, I guess it's two and a half years younger, and then I have a younger sister as seven years younger than I am.

The... so in 1970, is when we've got here and during those time, they weren't a lot of families from Taiwan. It was mostly grad students or, yeah, mostly grad students or people who have been here a long time, and so as young teenagers for me and a teenager for my brother. There-there wasn't any other Taiwanese kids our age at all. We, my parents went to a Taiwanese Presbyterian Church and at their church, it was us; and then they were the grad students or a little bit older grad student who had gotten, who had gotten married and had little kids. So, we- we didn't have any other kids our age to hang around. So, it was pretty weird.

So Houston has obviously changed in terms of the number of Asian Americans and, and the reason the, the age of these immigrants and the reasons why they came. They aren't all students anymore, grad students anymore. They're, you know, professionals and traders and artists and all-all kinds of people. And I'm really, really glad of that progress because for me, it was really lonely. And I, for instance, when I finally got an—I don't remember middle school much anymore. So, from Patrick Henry Middle, I went to Pershing and then went to Lamar High School and at Lamar High School, I would say there have been, there were maybe just a handful of Asian Americans. And then after first year of high school, we moved to my, that my parents bought a house in Kingwood. And we moved to Humble, and Humble was just a newly developed like, while the Kingwood was a very newly developed community. And so, we, my-myself and my sister, my sister went to Humble High. And I remember through the hall of Humble High, they were my sister, me, and one other Asian American student and that was it. So, it was- it was you know, I, I think I integrated into the-the typical teenage American society maybe a little quicker, because I didn't have other Asian Americans to hang around, and share that kind of culture and spend time with them. So I basically was kind of forced into assimilating quickly.

So I'm... [**AS:** How about..] Go ahead. I am actually, I'm really envious of young Asian Americans here now, because they can have their feet in both places in their own heri—you know— heritage communities, and the regular open mainstream American community.

AS: Yep, we are much more privileged nowadays, I guess. Speaking about the cityscape in your... [**STH:** I'm sorry?] Speaking about the Houston cityscape, and you are an architect. How does that change? And how do you feel about it?

STH: Um, although I so... for me... When I graduated from Rice and got jobs, it was difficult for both women and, not- not as bad for Asian Americans before women was not readily accepted. It was a male dominated industry and that's really changed. Even though when I went to Rice, and Rice was very advanced in this way that they accepted equal number of female applicants and the male applicants. And I talked to younger generation, and they all tell me that I think there are more women applicants into, you know, to go get into architecture schools; now at the end of graduating more women architects, that's really changed from my time.

So when I went, I don't know whether the number of-of acceptances now; but when I applied and got in, it was 16 women and 16... 16 girls and 16 boys; and when I graduated after basically six years— because I did four years of undergraduate degree and then one year preceptorship, and then one year of the professional degree. When I graduated, I think they were maybe one to three women that completed the program. And I would say, that was maybe only half of, a third of, the total number of kids are graduated with a professional degree. So that's now very different.

AS: So before we moving on to your career, can we also talk about the demographic of friends at Rice, and how has it changed?

STH: The friends at Rice? [**AS:** Yes.] Is that what you're...? Okay, at Rice in architecture school. I wasn't, I wasn't very social. I was like super hyper focused on architecture. So, besides my roommate and the few friends at Jones College, which was an all-women college back then, my friends went out, or the other architecture students. So that's- that's how it was.

AS: Got it. Was there someone who's like a mentor or a very important person that impacted your life decisions during that time?

STH: Well, all my professors work, have had great impact on me on—both positive and negative. And I really, I think that my education in architecture school of Rice was really excellent. It was not all wonderful and happy all the time, but I had a- I had an okay time, let's put it that way. I was a little impatient in that I wanted to be done and out of school and start doing the real architecture instead of just theoretical stuff, I'm probably by the end of the third year. Like you know, I need to be done and be out in the real world and practice real architecture of architecture on paper. But I think that professors were all excellent, like I said, and they did guide me in supporting me. But I also understand and heard from other students that, that wasn't always the case. So, I don't, I don't know.

AS: And you double major in art history as well as architecture, right? [**STH:** Yeah.] What was your decision? I mean, why was your decision?

STH: Oh, it was easy to position in that. A lot of classes overlap between architecture and art department. And I actually really wanted to do studio art. But I took a couple of studio art classes and was not impressed with them. So, I switched my— pivoted my focus to art history. You know, our architectural school, required a lot of architectural history, art history, and so on and so forth. So, they just overlap. So, I mean, it wasn't like I really loved art history. It was just something easy to get at the same time. But I did love doing art as a studio practice. But I just didn't feel that Rice— at that time anyway, they, their student classes were anything that I wanted to pursue.

AS: So, at what point did you start making art for yourself?

STH: So, I started art when I was probably six or seven years old. And I've, I did art through my life basically. My mom was my first art teacher. We weren't wealthy at all, so paper and pen, and pens or paints were really hard to come by. So, my memory was that my mom showed me how to paint a tree on old newspaper. And she— I remember her mixing different colors to paint the leaves. And that was like my “aha moment” because I was doing just green for the leaves, and she was adding pinks and reds and yellows and browns and blues. And I was like, and she said, you know, if you just look closely in, in the real world leaves are not just green and that applies to like, a lot of things. And that's, I think that was the moment I got hooked.

So I started doing art and it just, it comes really naturally and started, you know, having my art been selected for shows and things since kindergarten on, and so I've been doing art my whole life. Intensify it, it got intensified in high school. I remember staying up all night without my parents knowing, and just staying up all night doing art, this painting away. And there's once I got to Rice, that's when that kind of took a sabbatical. I focus on architecture. And that followed by getting married and having a family and trying to start an architectural practice. So, art was put, yeah, put aside. Until probably 2007 or 6, when my kids finally, finally left home. [chuckles] It's like, “Oh, I can do art now, I have time!” [chuckles] So that I picked up art again. You know, it became a good part of my life since then.

AS: Did you receive any formal training during this time?

STH: I took a summer, a couple of workshops from the Houston Watercolor Society. So, before then, when I said I did art, I did a lot of watercolor. I experimented with oil. I did acrylics, and I actually did pottery, which I loved. And so when I decided that it was time for me to get back into art, I thought I chose watercolor because that was my first experience ever as when my mom— when my mom started showing me, well, at that time when she showed me how to paint and as a grade school kid, that's the medium-medium I used. So, when I said you know, it's time to go back to art, I thought I would be more comfortable with watercolor.

So, I took a couple of watercolor classes and workshops from WASH [Watercolor Society] and learned how to fix mistakes. You know, I don't know if people know how tricky it is to use watercolor. I would say my previous experience was, if I made a mistake, well, there goes a really nice expensive watercolor paper! But these teachers actually showed us how to save a painting just, you know that one mistake isn't the end of the world. So that, I learned a lot of great techniques and discipline. But watercolor is a medium is also something I still do, but I'm just all over the place.

AS: So, do you work on other mediums?

STH: I do. I do. I have done mostly acrylics recently. The only medium that I have not gone back to is oil. And it's... I just don't have enough patience. So acrylic, watercolor, casein—which is very much like watercolor. And I also do three-dimensional objects and three-dimensional work on flat surfaces, like paper.

AS: So, from your perspective as both an architect— and a practicing architect, and making art at the same time, how does that impact your art?

STH: So that's a... that's something I've been thinking about a lot since I started back in art. And because of architecture for training for almost for more than 40 years now, I can't help but being an architect, so it keeps cropping up in my art. So, my art has a tendency to be very geometric, and about buildings and built things.

So, I've been the last few years conscientiously trying to get away from that. And to put more organic subject matter contents and ideas in my work. I also read a lot. I love science fiction, and I love I read a lot of nonfiction books like history, philosophy, religion, and all this stuff. And I love anthropology and just all kinds of stuff. Like E.O. Wilson is one of my heroes. But so all those things influence how I paint now, when I said I'm trying to get away from the very geometric shapes, forms of architecture, I am also trying to incorporate these things that I love, like science and math and music and all that stuff so.

AS: So yeah, I remember you have a really interesting expression on the cosmic world. Can you tell us about your, so your understanding about concepts like the singularity or the parallel universe and all these science fiction has taken us into?

STH: So, I'm really into the concept of, well, some people call “string theory”, but I've heard people painting it the idea; but the, the multiplicity of things of our society and religion, and even the way of looking at science and literature. It's ... I like thinking about different ways of looking at one specific thing and that includes the idea that time can coexist, in you know, in some-some world I don't know. But even here now, at my age, I constantly think about my past and... Because the books I read, and I just I have... I constantly think about the future. And you know, what's happening now with- with the coronavirus. It makes us think about the future too. And, you know, like what we, how we have faced pandemics in the past, and how we're going to move forward.

So, we exist not in just our time now because it's, we exist in all these times. So, I've been trying to- to express that, I guess in, in, in my art. I'm sort of borrowing something or referencing something from the past. And where we are now and imagining what our future could be in different ways. So, it's a challenge to me in that content-wise on my artwork, it's kind of hard to figure out. Because it's a lot of thinking and a lot of planning and a lot of, I guess pre-planning, which I'm not very good at.

AS: So, would you introduce any, say digital medium into your art, like digital dimension?

STH: I don't know, I haven't thought about that. That's a good question. I'm not really good at digital things. Because that came much later in my life. To illustrate that, for instance, in architecture school, I was way too old for any CAD program or anything. So, it was maybe my third job when I had to learn how to do AutoCAD. And actually, the first program Computer Aided Drafting program that I taught myself was, and I can't remember the name of it, but it was a different program than all the CAD. And I, you know, like, wow, I trained myself to use this and I was so proud and then of course. I programmed in last and got replaced by AutoCAD. So, I had to teach myself AutoCAD all over again. But nowadays, you know, that's all what students do is they design on computer I did not get any of that. In fact, I understand that architecture students use laser printers, 3D printers and laser cutting to make their models. We had chip boards and X-Acto knives. Oh, yeah. So, some of my art comes from that period of my life. Still very good with an X-Acto knife.

AS: So, why are you so attracted to the cosmos? Can you tell us about your resonance to...?

STH: ...It could be because I read a lot of science fiction and watch a lot of science fiction movies. But no, it's come from all sides. I am also a gardener. I have a wildlife certified backyard garden... and it has to do— I think— with our current environmental crisis. And, you know, humans are a nomadic kind of, group of species, why they go from place to place to place a place. Like we, you know, humans came from the Middle East to China, and someone went to Europe, and some went to Taiwan; and from the very southern tip of Taiwan, they went to all the islands in south in the Pacific. And then, you know, on to the Australian or that South. That's, you know, they- they know this through language studies and cultures and stuff like that.

So, we're always constantly exploring new territory. So, I think that we're not bound to earth. And we, for certain, we are going to be going out to the stars because that's... where else to go? Except to the star. So, I think that's inevitable. I'm personally really excited about that prospect. And since I'm also a gardener I— you know— I do, I grow my own vegetables. And I do so, I also study seeds and- and methods of disbursement and- and that's how I think of as humans, is what receiving the cosmos. And I don't know that maybe that's not all so good, sometimes when I think about how we could kind of destroy a place, but hopefully we learn from our past. And what I was going to say was, because of my studying gardening and things like that, but I'm also really interested in how the space station, and how they're growing, how they growing edible greens in space in the- the ships, and how eventually we might be able to, you know, with different farming methods we might be able to grow these plants.

So the series of paintings that I did recently one is called, let's see, "On Seeds and Stars", and another one is called "On Tendrils and Journeys". And then another one is called "On Shoots and Generations". It's those they reflect, I guess my internal exploration in possibilities of what eventually could happen, but it's not like a prescribed future. It's kind of like to sit out there for us to think about.

AS: So, what is the process of transferring what's in your mind to what's the paper in front of you?

STH: So, it's twofold. It's both the idea and the materials I have at hand, and not what I'm interested in the materials. I'm interested in doing at the time. Recently, I've started doing using paper, both two-dimensionally and three-dimensionally. And so, I wanted to, I guess, intertwine the materials, the medium I use, and the ideas on exploring. So, it's again, it's like every day is different. I don't know. I mean, tomorrow I may be doing something else.

AS: Do you think there are aliens out there?

STH: [chuckles] I hope so. Right now, I don't think so. But just because we don't. We haven't heard from them. But I really do hope so.

AS: And what's your favorite piece of art that you've created so far?

STH: Oh hmm. So, I probably like my three paintings that... I have the three-dimensional, dimensional shapes on canvas there. One is called Ode to, "Ode to Butterflies". One is called "Pan to Moth" and the other one is called "Adagio for the Loading Moths". They are all similar and so I have a ten- I have a tendency to move from one thing to another. But I, when I'm doing that thing that seemed to work, I do multiples of it just to make sure I cover everything. So, these three are an experiment in that. I'm using the cut papers forms on and gluing them on canvas and also strips of colored magazine pages, on like a collage to explore that idea. And so that those three I really like.

But there is another work that I really like that I made recently and it's there are three in the series. And they're called "The Tree Bark" series where I, again, it's a three-dimensional work on two-dimensional surface. In this series, I actually tore out pages from a couple of books I've read. One was called "The Science of Good and Evil". And the other one was... no, I can't remember the name of it. It was not a very good fiction book. So, I didn't mind cutting that one up. But I tore the pages from those books and cut them into strips, and painted them to make them look a little "antiquey", and then folded them and then glued the edges with the folded edge on the kit on canvas, along with painted undertones on the canvas already in strips of- of pages for magazines and things. And the strips of books is very textural and three dimensionally. And the idea was to... it was a maybe... it was just an idea on trees. Because I, like I said, I'm a gardener. And of course, I love trees. And you know, trees can save-save us, help save us through this crisis, our environmental crisis. So, we need to plant more trees. But I was looking at tree barks, and different kinds of tree barks and textures, and how long they live. Like we all know oaks can live a long time. But did you know pecan trees can live more than 300 years too? Things like that. So, I was studying the tree barks, and I decided to use these books to mimic the textures of tree barks, that at the same time, tell the story. So, the whole idea was not just to illustrate or try to mimic the textures of the tree but using the books as a way to say. Well, we usually used to— anyway before in the digital era— we used to make books and print books and newspapers out of trees, right? To impart knowledge and books...make books out of them, and books are very old and very current. Even though they're not very future, there will be some books that would live on, right? Live on forever. So that was "The Tree Bark" series...one is called.

They have, I won't tell you, what they're called, because they have very poetic names very long, and poetic names. But it's just- it's kind of the, trying to unite all these identified all the ideas with the materials and make them something that's cohesive. And what's really neat about the series is something that I did not realize what happened when I'm done with it. And so, it was when I finished them, and I hung them in my studio. And with the spotlight shining on them, I walked from one end of the first one, to the other end of the last one. And because of how the light shone on the photo, the pages of the book, there was a movement in shadow and light, that I did not know what's going to happen, that just, it just sort of happened. I thought, "Oh, so cool." I didn't know.

And so, it was more of an active engaging piece of work than just a piece of art. That's, you see, and, and that's it. This was like depends on where you hang it, what the light condition is and where you're standing. There's shadows and lights that will be different in every- in every situation. So that was really neat.

AS: And I'm actually curious, what are the poetic names and where do you draw them from?

STH: Oh, names are very important. Names are very important for abstract paintings. I think without them, a viewer may not understand what the artist is trying to do. So, the names are exceedingly important. And I spend a lot of time, I spend a long time thinking about names. And for this one, it's for this series, it's like I had to go back and examine the reason why I started wanting to do it, and how I did it and why.

And so, one is called... the fact is they're very long. One is called tell, let me see, "Show Me the Secret Beneath your Skins"; and the second one is, tell... "Tell Me All That You Have Seen"; the third one is called "Oh, Tree Gather Up All My Thoughts for Me". And so it's about how trees, some trees have been there for hundreds of years. They've seen a lot. They've heard a lot. And we're just... So, we- we have such short lives, you know, we're just in and out. And they're kind of sturdy and strong; and they- they have seen and, you know, they know the history of like, some, especially, you know, at least some of them and how trees are really wonderful in that way. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, that was beautiful. Thank you. I really enjoyed that. You kind of have this embodiment of tree and human, that's a little bit like the Taoist— like men, human as one, well, "man and body as one" I guess. Yeah. And did you have any influences in your art from your earlier years in Taiwan? In Keelung?

STH: Sure, I would say my dad was a huge influence, and also all my art teachers. I think my dad was a big influence because he bought me my first set of, a lot of watercolor paint and brush, and one of those things that you can carry on, to do plain air painting. And I remember getting that when I was in Keelung, like maybe third grade and our... we would have field trips, art field trips. So, people carry students who carry these equipment up to the mountains. I remember one time we went up to a mountain and we kind of set up our thing, our paints and boards and look down into the, onto the city. And we painted that scene.

So that was very, you know, left a huge impression. But my dad would take me to art galleries and museums. And when I was...since I was a little kid. And among all of our siblings, I was the only one that he would take to go see these things. That I guess he sensed that I, you know, really liked art. But I was like, wowed by the art that I saw as a little kid like, "wow, you can do this!" Or you know, like, "Oh, that's a cool way to mix colors" or, you know, things like that. So he had a huge influence.

And along the way, I guess a lot of, almost all my art teacher saw something, and so I had a lot of encouragement...a lot...all through my life. In Kaohsiung. At my grandparents' house, this is a kind of a neat story, I guess. My grandparents' house, you know in Taiwan, the houses are butting up against each other in the city. And so, their house was butted up against this...they had a three-story house. And next door was a two-story house, and the two-story house was an old fashioned —what they call Japanese style house where everything was made out of wood, and they had a sloped shingle roof. Well, my room was where I hang out. We didn't have like private bedrooms or anything; but we lived in what we call it new house, as to, versus the old house. Because they had so they were living in the old house. And then they sold that and build the new house next to it. So, it was three stories and there was a room, where there was a window that open onto the roof of the old house. As a kid, I and I don't think any of the adults knew this, but I would crawl out of that little window, onto the rooftop and sketched the scenes of the streets

underneath. And they would always be things going on, funeral processions, or, big wedding parties and just, you know, things. People lived on the street. So, I did that a lot.

AS: Wow. That's a beautiful scene itself.

STH: [chuckles] It's a really wonderful nice memory for me.

AS: And- and how many say, local galleries or institutions that you have been involved with? I know you mentioned that the Watercolor Society has helped giving you some lessons. And I learned from your material that you're involved with the Archway Gallery. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

STH: Archway Gallery? [**AS:** Yes. Absolutely.] Sure. It's a gallery owned— artists owned gallery. And it's for me, it's a... So- so art doing art is a very lonely thing, right? It's easy to create art by yourself most of the time. And so, Archway Gallery is like a family to me. It's a group of like-minded artists who are, we- we exchange ideas, we critique each other's, we... other's work. We encourage each other, we promote each other. It's more of a- artists family than the art gallery. Yes that, though we do sell our art through the gallery, it's a community. Most of them, I would say a lot of the members have been there more than 10 years; and some have been there more than 20 years. It, Archway Gallery was created in 1976, I believe and it, the first space they- they have probably, I think it's like... I think '76, almost 40 or 50 years old, 40 years old. So, their first space. The first group may have been only like six artists; and their first space, they borrow the— rented from the Jung Center. And I don't know if people are familiar with the Jung Center. There's a series of three arches in the front of the building. So that's where the name came from. So, ours is the third location, I think, or fourth location.

But, so we, all the artists, own the gallery, and we run the gallery. So, we're intimately familiar with each other's work and with... how the galleries run. So, if anyone walks in, you're going to meet that real life artist, not a salesperson or gallery owner, you're talking to an artist. And so, it's, it's, it's a really cool concept, I think. And we, you know, we have autonomous decisions on our own art and our pricing system. Each artist has his or her decisions on those things; so, I, the control is in our hands, not someone who's selling art for us. So that's a very cool thing. I think.

AS: So, would you identify yourself as a- an Asian American artist, or an American artist in general?

STH: Ah, I never thought about that. I would say I'm just an artist. I happen to be Asian American and I happen to be in Houston. A Houstonian. No, no, it's because my art doesn't really reflect my heritage necessarily; because, and actually, some of it does, and it changes you know. For instance, when I went back to Taiwan, five or six years ago, for the first time my life, I came back. I created the body of work that was called "Dreams and Memories". And so, I did half of that before the trip, that was more like dreams in my memory, and memories of what I remember Taiwan was like— when I was there and how I felt and stuff like that. And then after the trip, I finished the whole body of work, and it was more like going back, and then we're not reliving, but everything's changed, right. And so, so that was the "Dreams and Memories" series. So that one had more of the, I guess the Taiwanese influence or Asian influences, some of those was- were of Japan, because we also went to Japan, and my life growing up, there was a lot of big Japanese influence.

AS: So, flipping to the other side of your identity as an architect, can you tell us a bit more about your experience with the I.M. Pei's office that you had interned in?

STH: Sure. So I was in New York and I would say, I met. I saw I.M. Pei only once. But boy, everything— everyone that's ever said about him was true. He was this big shot architect. While then, a lot of big shot architects behave like architects, but not him. I worked on a big office hotel project that

was in Singapore. But I mean, I was, our team was based in New York. And I was just a, you know, an intern from school, right? And so, it was a team of maybe 20... 20 architects and plus me the intern, not an architect then. So I, you know, did things like I drew bathrooms and things like that, you know, real architects didn't do.

But there was a piece of the design that wasn't figured out. And so in architecture, you have to design and then in the process, you have to design, and then the design gets carried into the construction documents phase, or the contract documents phase, where you're doing drawings that like in the plans and elevations and nuts and bolts, things like that. So usually, like for an intern, I was in the production side of the project. And because most of the time, most of the design phase have been finished. Except there was this big lobby space that was designed, it was I don't remember why; but it was a big empty bubble that no one has figured out. So, as an intern sitting there just doing door swings and bathrooms, I had— I, and I don't remember how this came about— I had a chance basically, of putting my two cents worth on the design of this lobby. So, I did a quickie sketch, gave it to the top designer. And so, we had a team meeting — the designers did— the- the designers and I.M. Pei himself, and some of the bigger met. People, managers got down for a meeting. And they invited me in. And I.M. Pei was going through all these suggestions and space and the saw my sketch and he liked it. And that from there they developed, you know, the final design from. And he was so personable and so humble. And he spoke to *me*, the little *me*! And I was like, Wow. [chuckles]

So that was, that was really special because he, you know, just because you're a very good and famous architect doesn't mean you have to be so stuck up or anything. You could be very well, be like him. And it was- it was just wonderful, wonderful. And then of course, living in New York was pretty exciting to me because I'm from very provincial Houston, right? So, New York was very exciting.

AS: Are there many Asian or Asian American in the office?

STH: There on my team, there was me. And that's it. There was a Greek girl and there were and somebody... I think she was Polish, but no Asians on my team. But you know, you have to remember that company then was huge. It was, we were in the on more than 100 people working. So, I wouldn't have seen the others really, because our team was pretty isolated.

AS: How about male and female ratio?

STH: There were more females than males. And there was, it was, the team was more international than what you would have found here in Houston. It was just back then in New York. It was more diverse. I think, maybe I don't know about New York now. But Houston has become really diverse and I'm really, really glad of that.

AS: Yeah. So yeah, I also want to touch on what we spoke briefly about that being an Asian American and female. Did you experience any sort of discrimination during your career?

STH: [chuckles] Probably... but might not have known it; and if so, really not to my face. But I know that... well actually, there have been a couple of instance- instances. A long time ago— things, hopefully things have changed— or people would say things like, “Well, you know, maybe you should calculate this. You know, you- you know, you guys are good at math”. Things like that or, or that, “Asian, female Asians are more subverse—submissive, so they take orders better. And so they do what you tell them to...” which did not sit well with me. [**AS:** Yeah, definitely.] Yeah, but not so much directly to me.

AS: Got it. And when... How did you start your own company?

STH: In 1993, and it was, so my husband was also an architect. And so, when a recession hits, it's like, we're not—you know, we— both are doing well, we're doing both doing poorly. But in 1993, my... I've two kids, two sons, and they were... want to say six and eight, or seven and nine, I can't remember now. And they had gone to the daycares because I've worked and my husband worked. And so we found ourselves in a situation where we would get home tired from a full day's work and you know, after picking up, after working all day, picking up the kids on the way home, and it was like cooking dinner and do homework, take a bath and you know, do this or that. And we were doing that just like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And it felt like we were just running from one day to another to another to another, and we weren't living a life. We were just doing routine stuff we have to do in order to make it to the next day.

So, we, my husband and I sat down. And I never really enjoyed my jobs. I enjoy the people I work with. But I don't know. My husband says, I have to be in charge, had to be in charge. So we talked and decided the, you know what, we just need to, kind of take a chance and for him to stay working; and for me to basically hang my shingle out and so I could have the kids at home, when school is over and not. So, the whole family as a unit, we're not rushing from one thing to another. And so that's our decision, I...

In 1993, I decided okay, you know, we, it's time to do that. So, I was working for an architectural firm in Houston that specialized in schools. And I was, or I can't remember what I was doing. On this particular project and it wasn't done, I was hoping it would be finished before I decided to take off. But we have planned to for me to quit, so we can take a driving trip out to somewhere. I think we went west, and before school started so it was August, and September I quit. And then took off with two weeks of vacation and came back to this firm. Because I didn't finish the project, and you know, I mean typically they will go to someone else right, to take over. And so, they call me and said, "well since you're not here anymore, would you— do you mind doing, working as a contract architect for us?" Since I said, "sure." so that some money was still coming in.

So, I actually from that project, went to another project, and I helped them and then just I never burn bridges. And I have a network of other architects I know. And they started referring me projects that were too small for them that they didn't want to do, or bad timing or whatever. And I said yes to every one of them. And so, it took off from there. And I've never looked back.

AS: Wow! Moving on to slightly more contemporary topics, do you think AI will be able to take over any of the jobs or either...

STH: Already. They are already doing that. So yes. So, I'm already in architecture, and in my, you know, being a little soft. So, in the old old days, you had architects and then you had draftsman. And then when we were younger, you had architects that both did drafting and design. And nowadays you have architects that are doing only bins, or that's like a three-dimensional software program that puts buildings together. So, you don't even need draftsman anymore. You have people doing the computer work, but that's all integrated. So, it's not architects anymore, that's the program is integrated with say, can be integrated with what a contractor does and what the client gives you. The program, in terms of program, so it's already happening. And so now there are no draftsman, but architects are doing that kind of things.

And unfortunately, a lot of architects are also designing using software programs, and not really looking at the real tactile things and that influences the design. We see so many buildings, especially houses that it's so funny we call them all the CAD elevations— because they look like they are computer generated.

AS: How about the artists side? Do you think AI can replace artists?

STH: Probably not. [**AS:** Mhm.] [Both chuckles.] I don't think so because I think, I think art is more— it comes more from more from the soul. Whereas architecture you're responding to a client's program. So, it comes from a different... they come from different places. So yeah, unless we become sort of what Kurtzweil said, you know, the 21st century men that we evolved to be part human part droid. I don't. They, if-if that happens, who knows? But if that doesn't, I think art would remain an internal, personal, soul-based form of expression.

AS: That's great that artists that has better employment in the future.

STH: [chuckles] I don't know about that.

AS: How has technology... Do you think changed the way we enjoy art? And how do you think art will be defined and perceived in the future?

STH: Well, so I am seeing a lot of installation work that is computer based. And I think that's really cool because the viewer, so the participant can be part of this make-believe world or in the art that was something. And I think that was harder to do before computer and programs and AI and all that stuff. And I'm... so... I don't know, maybe one day we can actually smell things, for instance, which we- we can't do yet you know, not- not an interactive sort of way; but we experience light movement and all this stuff through digital technology and already. So, I think it's just going to go much further and further. I'm afraid that I'm old enough that I won't be in that wave of creatives doing that. Just because it's really still kind of new and strange to me. But who knows? I think everything anything is possible. [chuckles]

AS: How about your community involvements? Like are you spending time volunteering? I know you mentioned that you are...

STH: Yeah, I do some volunteering through my church. I'm First Unitarian Universalist of Houston and we are very humanist—I guess— based kind of organization. So, we do a lot of volunteering. I and I sign up for any, like we do the... I think it's called "Rebuild Houston". Like we fix up houses that need fixing and we feed the needy, we tutor students. So, whenever opportunities arise, I sign up for them. And the "grace meal" thing is something that I have done for a while, and that it's sort of the regular volunteer thing, and so I do that.

Um, and you know right now, I'm just kind of trying to transition from that, from architecture to more art, so I'm kind of gearing up to doing a lot of art, to try to make that happen. So, you know, time is always [chuckles] very limited. I wish I could do more and do more.

AS: And do you sell most of the work that you made?

STH: I would sell most of my work eventually. And if they don't sell, I've, you know, I also give a few away to good friends. But that's, it's nice to be able to pay for your, you know, equipment and paints and canvases but it's not my sole purpose. For doing art. It just makes me happy. It's a therapy.

AS: And do you mind if I asked how you met your husband?

STH: At Rice! Yeah, yeah, he's a year ahead of me. And he took two years, between fourth and fifth, his fourth and fifth year and I... So, when we went back to school in fifth year, we were in the same class. So that's when we met. And we, I don't know, he's, yeah. I mean, I kind of knew of him before then. And he knew me. I don't know if he knew about me before then. But. So, it wasn't until fifth year that we kind of say, "Hey!" you know, and so we started talking and became friends first.

AS: Sweet. And how old are your children?

STH: Oh, boy. So, I'm so... I love math, and I'm really bad numbers. So, I have to calculate even my own age. So, I want to say that they are probably 31 and 33 or 32 and 34. I'm not sure which. I have to go back until 20. This is 20... 20...
—33 and 31.

AS: Right. And when they were growing up, did you try to expose them to more like Asian side of the culture? Do you try to help them to speak Mandarin?

STH: So, I try to. I don't speak Mandarin that well anymore. I speak Taiwanese. And I try teaching them Taiwanese when they were little bitty kids by speaking Taiwanese to them. But I gave that up. You know, pretty quickly. Because it was for me, we have very little time together at home, because of daycare and school and work and all that stuff. And so, the evenings were spent sort of barking orders at them, and so I tried for a short time to speak to them in Taiwanese. But it was like after you know, a few months you're still met with blank stares ... And that was the extent. And my parents tried also to speak to them and that, but that did not work either. It's just...

Yeah, but they are. Even though they didn't get the language. I think through... through our families and food, and our table discussions of topics, and history and culture, and cousins... and things like that. They are really plugged in to the Asian culture, the Taiwanese culture. They both are. So, besides the language, they are, they are kind of identify themselves as Taiwanese, even though they're half and half.

AS: Do you take them back to visit with them?

STH: When we went back? We did.

AS: And I was so happy to receive your recipe. Can you tell us if you cook often and what...?

STH: It's one of my favorite dishes because it's very quick, easy and delicious I think. So. The memory of that dish, as I was talking with you, was a big part of why I liked it. Because when we lived in Keelung and would go and visit my grandparents. I remember my parents putting us kids in the train by ourselves and I would say my—I was probably only, you know, eight or seven. So, my brother was probably the oldest, he could have been as probably ten. And then you know, like ten, eight, five and a half, and the little two or three year old. And they would pack, you know, bags of snacks and oranges, and just send an luggage and put us on the train, so there you go. And my grandparents will be at the other end to receive us. But I'm remembering of course, my brother was put in charge, but the-the so that the train trips were an important part of my memory- memories in Taiwan. And then just on the hugging and calling by the vendors of food of this and that, you know, was very important.

And so, I-I think, I don't know about my siblings, but we all have adapted some of these recipes to our own— for our own families. And my kids, especially the older one, loves this dish so much. He makes it for himself and for his Taiwanese and a— Chinese friends, and he, when we were in Taiwan, he actually went and actively sought out this dish. So yeah, it's... it's... kinda... I think we saw them on the train. Now, when we went back, and now they of course have the vendors pushing the carts up and down inside the trains and so selling them on that, on the platforms. But they're packaged in bento boxes and lunches. So that's what that dish is.

AS: Yeah. Is there anything else that you really missed from Taiwan?

STH: So I- I miss the food— *cheap* and *delicious*. I miss the- the night market and so that didn't exist when I was growing up. But so, we had these open grocery markets that you know, we used to go to. So, I think those turned into the night markets. And I was just blown away when I went back, by the night markets, how many of them they were, how popular they were and how *delicious* and *cheap* the food was. So, I missed that a lot.

So you know things have changed. And I don't know what 40, almost 50 years. And I like it the way it is now. Of course we all always miss things from our childhood, but I kind of, don't dwell on those things. I look forward to the new and improved versions.

AS: I guess can you share with us a moment in your art creation? Like what is the one experience or one memory you had that's when the magic happened?

STH: Well, that story about my mom showing me the, that the colors of the leaves are made up of multiple colors, not just green. That was the “aha moment” for me. That was the first time I’ve, you know, picked up the brush and painted. And it just that was- that was, I was hooked, that was what changed. And so, I also do a lot of other kinds of crafts other than art. I knit and I crochet, and I've done quilting and I sew— that though I don't like sewing very much. I did pottery in high school, but recently I picked up doing air-dried paper clay. And what else do I do? Like garden? I guess that's kind of an art.

But so I don't know if this is an “aha moment”. But I've realized that artist creates the work to reflect himself or herself. And I'm that. And so, I'm a person looking at the depth and breadth of my artwork would say, well, you're doing like watercolors and acrylics, and this and that, and you're doing super real— hyperrealism to totally abstract. And you know, what to focus? And so maybe the, I realized that this is who I am, I'm constantly changing. And I'm bringing all that's *me* into my artwork. So, I'm, for instance, I've, you know, done the three-dimensional paper on to the surface that. Since I've picked up the air-dried paper clay, I've been thinking that I want to bring that into a two-dimensional surface as well. It's kind of like what they call a music modulation. I think it's not a 90 degree turn but a steady progression of one branch to another. And so, I-I guess I'm trying to embrace that— this is me, I'm gonna call it... I don't know, crazy or off the wall bouncing off the wall. Manic depressive, maybe.

But that was one thing that I struggled for a while, like, trying to have an artistic identification of myself. Like this is what I do. This is the style. This is the content. This is the method. But, that to me seems really boring to be stuck with same one thing only. So, I tend to go into something and just do it to death; and then move on but not forgetting what I have just done, but maybe incorporate into this new thing. I guess that's kind of an eye-opener for me that, that maybe, that's what I need to do, that I should. That's what, that's my identification as an artist.

AS: I guess before I conclude, can you like, share in front of the screen if your grandchildren or grandchildren's children and so on, found their great grandmother's archive in our Houston Asian American Archive at the Fondren Library— which I hope they do, would you like to share something with them?

STH: Oh wow! I never.. Jeez, I would say that ... Be your true self and where you come from is always going to be part of who you are. So, celebrate it. Whether it be, you know, racial or geographical or, you know, philosophical, just be, be open, be curious, be embracing of everything and everyone and be kind and nice, and our world will be a better place.

AS: That's very heartwarming. Very appropriate for our time right now.

STH: Yes, strange times.

AS: Well, that's all I have. Would you like to have anything else to share with us?

STH: No, I just like to thank you so much for contacting me to do this. It's a, it's been fun and a pleasure and if this helps somebody.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. I'm sure it will. And, yeah, thank you so much for your precious time and your really, really upbeat and positive messages. Your life stories are wonderful.

STH: Thank you so much, Ann.

AS: Thank you.

STH: Bye-bye.

[Interview ends.]