

Interviewee: Erica Cheung

Interviewer: Ann Shi

Interview Date: April 6, 2021

Transcriber: Ann Shi

Reviewer: Lia Stallmann

Track Time: 51:55

Background:

Erica Cheung was born in New Jersey to parents of first-generation immigrants from Hong Kong; she was raised in New York, and currently based in Houston, Texas. She is an artist, poet, and environmentalist. Her practice explores Asian American identities and the tensions that arise through these identities' various intersections with popular culture and media, traditional immigrant family values, the environment, and race relations in America. Her work manifests itself in a range of media, including photography, text, collage, and experimental sound and video.

Erica is currently an Assistant Director at Foto Relevance, a contemporary photography gallery located in Houston's Museum District. She is also involved in archiving the work of photographers and FotoFest founders Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss for the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. She received a BA in English and Visual & Dramatic Arts with a concentration in Film/Photography from Rice University.

Setting:

The Zoom interview centered on Erica's identity as a second-generation Hong Kong-American artist, art administrator and curator, explored her journey with art and how her background, culture and identity informs about her artistic and curatorial practices, and the interactions and resonance she had with the works of art, the artists, and the art community. Erica's latest show which she curated at Foto Relevance in fall 2020, "Now You See Me," featured six Asian American artists that offered a glimpse to the complexity and nuance of Asian America through photography art. She talked about her curatorial practices in detail via this show, its challenges, and the reckoning through her own Asian diasporic experiences as well as inspired by Cathy Park Hong's reckoning, through the book "Minor Feelings: An Asian American reckoning."

Key:

EC: Erica Cheung

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 Mar-April 6, 2021. My name is Ann Shi. I'm interviewing Erica Cheung for the Houston Asian American Archive's Special Collection, "People of Art." Thank you, Erica, for joining us tonight.

EC: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

AS: Yeah, to start, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

EC: Yeah, so I am currently the assistant director at the commercial photography gallery Foto Relevance. And I also work part-time with documentary photographers and FotoFest co-founders, Fred Baldwin, and Wendy Watriss. And I'm helping them archive their own personal collection of, you know, film negatives, prints, papers, like everything possible that they have amassed over their years as photojournalists. And we are working to send those off to UT Austin's Briscoe Center to enter into their archive. Yeah, and I—I mean, I am a Rice alum, so it's nice to kind of come home and get to speak here in this space. And, yeah, my bread and butter is really photography, but kind of all contemporary art interests me and the notion of what art can be, and what connections it can create are really important to me.

AS: Yeah, that's amazing what you're doing. And to kind of unwind back a little bit, can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing, like how you came to Houston? And where were you born?

EC: Sure. Um, so I was born in New York, and I was raised in New Jersey, with my family. My parents are immigrants from Hong Kong, they came here in like the 70's and 80's, maybe, for school, and kind of, you know, went to school, travelled around the country and settled in the northeast. And, I mean, it was classic like New Jersey suburbia, which was great. I think, like a lot of Asian parents, my parents kind of tried to push me in the direction of the sciences. For a while, I thought I was going to be a hematologist oncologist. And then it was an anesthesiologist. And then it was like a whole other assortment of things, I think, like lawyer was thrown into the mix for a while. Just sort of like all those, like dreams that high schoolers seem to have. And I got to Rice. And my dad was the one who actually suggested Rice, I think I was sort of lukewarm on the idea of going to Texas because I think having no prior knowledge of Texas and the Gulf Coast area in general, I sort of thought Texas was around a weird place with a bunch of conservatives and a bunch of cowboys, and, like, you know, every kind of trope you can think of, I thought of; because I was a Northeasterner, and that's kind of all I knew at that point.

But I came to Rice, was pre-med, because that is what everyone around me was doing. And Rice is, you know, sort of quite well known for its prowess in the STEM fields. And I was really bad at gen chem and all of the courses we had to take. And I realized that I was absolutely miserable. But I was also at the same time able to take some poetry classes. And I sort of fell into a photography class too, while I was there. And that started sort of picking up momentum just because it was continuing a thread of interest in those fields that I had kind of sort of had in high school, but sort of never really gave much thought to. So yeah, so then I ended up kind of doing a 180, sort of to the chagrin of my parents, and studying the arts. And then from there, I think I've just been working on building a career in the arts.

AS: Yeah, amazing. Thank you for covering the very comprehensive journey in arts. And I'm also—I'm also wondering in your early, earlier life, what—who were kind of the more like mentors or people who influenced you towards this decision, this journey on art?

EC: Yeah, so I think I've had a really great kind of slate of teachers, whether in high school and in college as well, who sort of kind of kept pushing me in the direction, even though I thought that it wasn't a viable path. And, you know, it wasn't just my parents who were kind of worried about it, you know, just all of society is generally kind of suspicious of people who want to go into the arts. And I mean, with good reason maybe, I'm not too sure. But I was really lucky to have some mentors along the way who kind of, you know, picked up what I was putting down and kind of nudged me in that direction. Yeah, I don't know if that really answers your question, but...

AS: Yeah, sure. And I'm also curious how your experience with Rice University, as our very own alum has been for you.

EC: Yeah, I mean, Rice is a great place, and I really enjoyed my four years there. And I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world. I will say that it was maybe a little tough being a humanities major. And I—things are shifting now where the humanities are sort of getting traction, which I'm really thrilled to see. I can see the departments both the art and the English departments that I was a part of, both of them are really trying hard to expand and really trying to bolster the foundations that they have, and turn them into something that is comparable to, you know, a lot of rigorous art and humanities programs across the country.

But I think at the time, I felt like a little bit of imposter syndrome. Because who was I to be at a STEM heavy school, a really intelligent STEM heavy school, studying literature and studying poetry and studying photography. And I think that was sort of a double edged sword, right? Because on one hand, my classes were so small that I was able to form like genuine deep connections with professors and I, you know, to this day, I owe a lot of my postgraduate opportunities to my professors. But it was maybe a little difficult to not have as large of a community around me who was sort of able to speak my lingo, I guess. And I think that was a little bit tough. And, you know, with that comes the difficulty of sort of not having necessarily a robust network of Rice alums who were in the arts, even though I'm sure they are here, and everywhere at this point, and I'm sure you've interviewed a chunk of them as well. But, yeah, I mean, I think it was a mixed bag. But also, I'm really grateful, because I think I've probably got a lot of attention that I might not have gotten elsewhere. Yeah.

AS: Great, thank you so much. And next, I'm wondering, since as a transplant for Houston or Texas yourself, what were some of the initial, like, cultural shocks?

EC: Yeah, I mean, I think I—I mentioned a little bit about my own kind of biases before coming to Houston and coming to Texas. And I mean, for better or worse, some of it is true. Some of the conservatism, that kind of Texas is known for runs deep here, even in kind of unexpected places. And, of course, there is the ever present issue of Houston being a very sort of blue city in a very deeply red state, and the tensions that arise with that. I think I was kind of unfamiliar with car culture, and the nature of like, how everything is built. Without sort of, like, a plan in mind, if that makes sense. Like Houston is a very not manicured city, in the way that you have San Francisco and in the way that you have pockets of New York City and, you know, architecture in Chicago, and like kind of these more deliberate ways of building that just kind of goes out the window in Houston, which is a good thing and a bad thing, right? It's a good thing because it offers you, like, crazy strip malls where you have like a taco stand next to like a pho place next to like, a boba shop. Like, it's, it's amazing. But it's also I think hard because Houston is a really diverse city. But then at the same time, I think I wasn't really quite prepared for the fact that it is so segregated still at the same time, and that you have to really make a concerted effort to visit other neighborhoods and visit other places outside of your own bubble. And I think that was something I didn't really start doing until I graduated from Rice. But I mean, I love the city, I really do. It—it just has its problems. Yeah.

AS: Thank you for sharing. Next, I'm curious, like since entering the arts and—sorry, I forgot what year, after you graduate—and then what, what do you think of the Houston's art scene? What surprised you about it?

EC: Yeah. Well, I forgot what year, I graduated for a moment too, it was 2018. Um, but yeah, you know, I think some of my impressions of the Houston art scene were and continue to be that it is maybe a little bit easier to access than some of the art scenes in larger cities, like kind of the cities you think of when you think of art. So New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, I think it's maybe a little bit easier to get a foot in the door here, at least I found it that way. Because I was able to, you know, have opportunities and have jobs and not be living in a shoe box here, as opposed to kind of what the trope is for people who move to LA and live on friends' couches for a couple years, until they kind of piece together, what exactly their role in the future is going to look like. So I think that's really important.

I think, too, in my head, Houston's art scene is unique because it is just so manageable too, at the same time. And by manageable, I think it's really great that larger cities, or I guess Houston is as large as some of these cities at

this point, population wise. But compared to, like, the New York City's and the Los Angeles's of the country where you have arts organizations, like, stacked on top of each other, and they are everywhere, and they're all doing really great work. I think it is just almost so overwhelming to be able to keep track of, you know, everything that's being shown and who's being seen. Whereas I think in Houston, we have some really high quality and high caliber institutions, and we have fewer of them. So it's a little easier to keep tabs on what's going on, which is really great.

And I will also say I get the sense that Houston as a city and the Houston art scene is really good to their students. So people coming out of University of Houston and people coming out of Rice, and people coming out of like all the different schools in the area, I think, do well in Houston. I think Houston as a city kind of wants to support its own kind. And that is also very much also a Texan thing, but I appreciate it nonetheless.

AS: Yeah, great. And next, I guess we are slowly pivoting towards the Asian American side. What do you discover about the Asian American art scene in Houston?

EC: Yeah, I mean, I have to confess, I'm probably not the—the expert on Asian Americans in the arts here in Houston. And I—I kind of lament that fact. I, you know, I mean there are some great places around town that do kind of pay attention to work coming out of the AAPI community. I mean, you have Asia Society, which is kind of like the number one go-to place that everyone might think of. And I mean, that's really great. I think maybe I'm just not quite in the loop enough to know where everybody is. And it, you know, it—it very well maybe that they're a part of the arts, just not within my sphere. Yeah, that's maybe a little bit of a non-answer, but...

AS: But I—I remember you curated a really amazing show last year, last fall, "Now You See Me," which the title actually resonates so well with what's going on last year and this year. And you read—I—I read your curator's essay on that, on that show, and you reference so beautifully, Cathy Parks, Cathy Park Hong's bo-book, "Minor Feelings," and just wondering how has the, this year and last year, like rising topics and discu-discussions and conversations around the social justice has been for you. And, yeah, and—and your work in it, 'cause you're definitely part of it.

EC: Yeah, well, thank you for reading that essay. There were a lot of, like, tears that went into that essay because I was struggling to piece it together because that is, that's a hard subject, I think for anybody to write about. It's a hard subject for me to write about, because it was coming from, like, a very vulnerable place. Um, and I think, you know, I curated that show at Foto Relevance, "Now You See Me," which you so graciously saw. I put it together because I think I was sort of feeling like, you know, it's been a really long time since I've seen an art exhibition with Asian American artists. I think, in this country, we still tend to really, really like to focus on, when we focus on Asian artists, we tend to focus on art from abroad. So art, like international artists who are working abroad, which there's nothing wrong with that. I think that's wonderful. And, you know, some of the most talented artists are international artists, turns out. Um, but I think I've seen sort of like a lack of artists from the Asian diaspora being presented in a holistic manner. And I think I was really looking for people to kind of fill that niche, partially out of selfish reasons, because I kind of wanted to see my own stories realized, and my family's stories realized, and, like, my community stories realized into something tangible for me to know that I'm not crazy.

And I think, you know, that resonates today, because I think a lot of people within the AAPI community are sort of thinking like, "Oh, well, you know, these experiences that are all of a sudden coming to light in media, have been happening to us for a while. And it's painful." I mean, it's—it's amazing, I think, to see all of the writing that's coming out around it, and all of the conversations coming out around it. But it's also a little traumatic, at the same time when you're having to watch everybody else like, quote, "discover" racism, against Asian people for the first time. And I mean, this is not exclusive to Asian people, because, of course, many minority communities in this country have kind of faced similar waves of like, essentially, white ignorance. And that's hard. And I think, putting together an exhibition of Asian American artists, or putting together an exhibition of anybody, any group,

any marginalized community, is important, because it is a way of sort of defying whatever vision people have of what is like canonical in this country, like what is traditional, and what is sort of like the historical narrative that has been perpetuated over the years.

And so I think a show like "Now You See Me" was really trying to say, like, "Hey, there are other stories that are outside of your own, that are still true, even if you haven't experienced them." So I think that was a really big part of it. And then on top of that, I think "Now You See Me" was important for me, because it was also kind of an imperfect show. Because it was professing to try and start making sense of Asian America, while fully acknowledging that Asian America is kind of everything and nothing at the same time. Because it, like the moniker Asian American, as Cathy Park Hong kind of brings up in her essay, in her book, "Minor Feelings," is very much like Asian American was a political identity sort of generated by students at UC Berkeley. And so it wasn't really meant to be the sort of demographic marker that it has become today to refer to a really, really big population that is growing, and kind of exploding across the country. And it is at once a good thing because it gives us sort of a community to come home to and to identify ourselves as such. But then it also has a problem of turning us into this big monolithic entity, which kind of erases all of the different nuances between us and all of the different, like variations in culture and background that exist. Yes.

AS: Wow, there's really amazing sharing. And, yeah, I'm also really curious about how you came to think about the—the title in the show. Like, "Now You See Me," like, it has an undertone of previously we weren't seen, and what were some of your own, like stories or impressions that like in your upbringing, like you mentioned, you're a second-generation with first-generation parents from Hong Kong; and coming to Houston—I mean, New York first and then Houston—like, how does that diaspora, diasporic experience yourself, inform you about this exhibition and the practice?

EC: Yeah, I think the genesis for that title was really thinking about what it means to be seen. And that is, like a very common concern in a lot of art, and in a lot of photography, in particular, is sort of this question of who is being seen, who is allowed to be seen, I think, to who is doing the seeing, and on whose terms are people being seen? And that, of course, is like a complicated mix of, like, who is providing the work? And who is doing the work? To what audience is the work being distributed to? And who has, who is able to access the work as well? And I think, you know, a common trend that I will echo here that we kind of hear from members of the AAPI community currently, is that we've sort of been feeling invisible for a really long time, where we kind of exist in this in-between space where we are not white, and we are not black as the kind of weird duality tends to always be posited in the media, in terms of race relations in America. And that's hard, because, of course, we are caught. We're in a place where we're, like, almost white enough to be considered like the model minority, right—that is, again, a really common phrase being tossed around right now. Like, we're so close to being white, but of course, that proximity to whiteness comes at the expense of black and brown communities. And you know what, black and brown communities also interl-interlap— overlap with our community too. And that is, like, something that I think we always tend to forget as well. And so it's, it's weird, because I think Asian Americans and the AAPI community in general have often been afforded a lot of privileges, but have also kind of experienced a lot of the similar, like, experienced a lot of similar discrimination to other groups.

And I think... Yeah, I mean, and I think right now, of course, we are thinking about how Asian and Asian American elders have been targeted in a lot of recent events, and how that kind of hits really close to home, I think it would hit home for any community, but it hits harder, I think, in people with Asian backgrounds, because filial piety is kind of drilled into us from the very beginning, where we are supposed to be responsible for our parents, after a certain amount of time, and we, even if we don't necessarily connect to them, even if we don't necessarily—you know, my parents were born and raised in Hong Kong, and I, for all intents and purposes, I'm a super American person, because I was born and raised here, and I'm in the arts, and I care about things that my parents don't necessarily understand, or know how to care about, I will say. And I think in part, the show, and the naming of the show was for them too, right? Because I think I grew up over the years, sort of watching them

swallow their own pride, and keep their heads down, and again, do all the things that good immigrants do, where you work hard, you stay quiet, you don't complain, you don't rock the boat. And I think because they did all of that, now it's my turn to make sure that nobody ever has to do that again. And I think part of it too, is like reworking my own feelings towards my parents where I think growing up, I was also maybe a little bit of ashamed-ashamed of them., and I hate to say that. Because I was—I think I tried really hard to kind of push down maybe, the, my connection to, you know, my family in Hong Kong, and my connection to the foods that I liked, and my connection to—just like the place, the places that my parents came from. Because of course, you know, assimilation is the number one goal for immigrants and their offspring. And that, you know, I still regret that, like, years later, and I'm still working through that. And I think a lot of members of the diaspora, the Asian diaspora, as well as other immigrant diasporas, are kind of contending with that same thing where we're not even really sure what like “American” looks like anymore. And I think we truly are trying to reckon with the fact that “American” is not what it has looked like for the past century, millennia, centuries and millennia. Yeah, I don't know. I'm—yes.

AS: Wow, that's amazing sharing. Thank you. And I guess as we are on this very topic, that we, I—I would like to share the word, "artivism," like art and activism; or another name, "socially engaged art." This notion of art can be like, artists can be warriors and, and people can use art as a weapon as well, to defend and attack. Like in your show, what are some of the—the “artivisms” that you see in the artist, the six artists that you were working with?

EC: Yeah, I mean, so... so I think maybe the easiest one to kind of understand at first glance was the work by Jerry Takigawa. Um, so Jerry's parents and his grandparents were interned in the Japanese internment camps, essentially concentration camps in the US during World War II. And his work is really kind of interested in delving into that personal family archives that his family has. So they, so after his parents passed, he and his brother discovered a bunch of photographs that his family had taken during their time in the internment camps. And it was the kind of experience that his parents and his grandparents never really spoke about with him and his brother. And I think that was really common among a lot of the Japanese families that were interned, where this kind of collective shame that they were made to feel by a suspicious US government and by a suspicious country. Suspicious, and quite frankly, racist, I will also add. How that was, I don't know, how that was really detrimental to their existence, both while they were interned and after. And so Jerry is kind of taking those old family photographs and is kind of layering different memorabilia and artifacts from that time on top of the photographs, and then re-photographing them to create this kind of visual archive, and visual memory, too, of what happened there. And I think that's really striking, because I think about my own experience, you know, going through a typical, you know, education track and thinking about what I learned, when I learned about World War II, and its global impacts. And I think Japanese internment was always something that was a little bit glossed over. Like, I think I always knew that it happened, but I'm not sure we ever actually fully discussed the ramifications of it, the reasons behind it, and the fallout, and its consequences, too, at the same time. And I think that's, that's sad to me that the history of Asian Americans, like the history of Black Americans, and like the history of our Latinx community here, is not taught in a similar way that like typical, like, Western European history is taught as sort of the norm that we should all aspire to memorize into our brains. So I think, Jerry, I think when he does his talks, he kind of mentioned this notion that like documentation is resistance, and the personal is political. And I think that both of those sentiments are true. And I really appreciate the kind of vulnerability that comes with sort of sharing his own personal family, narrative and archive with the rest of the world so that we don't forget that these things happened. And we also don't forget that, like, Japanese internment also paved the way for a lot of other atrocious acts against minorities in the US. So that's Jerry.

And I think, I think maybe the other artist from that show that comes to mind pretty quickly is Jennifer, Jennifer Ling Datchuck, who is kind of creating these ceramic pieces that sort of have echoes of traditional Asian pieces. So a lot of her work is sort of that very stereotypical blue and white that we see in Asian ceramics. But of course, she's also thinking about how those patterns have been traded across global networks for years now. And so you know, the Europeans had their own version of blue and white ceramics, and blue and white ceramics have kind of

crossed and transcended borders. But I love that she's kind of creating these kind of traditional looking, or she's applying these traditional looking patterns onto very contemporary things. So you know, she has her "Basic Bitch" piece where she has like, basically knuckle rings. And they say "Basic Bitch" on them. But they are like blue and white and very pretty and flowery. And she actually gets those patterns from Jingdezhen in China, also known as, like, the porcelain capital. And I love kind of that marrying of like this traditional sentiment with a more contemporary, like American capitalistic attitude. Because I think that very much is in line with sort of, like, the clashing of cultures that happens within communities in this country. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, thank you for sharing the works of the artists that you worked with. And I'm also curious—so as reference to your title again, "Now You See Me," and I'm curious what you think, how can Asian artists be seen? Like, what is there to, for us to do as workers in the arts?

EC: Yeah, that's, that's a big goal, and a big task. Um, but I think my answer to that is that there has to be representation across the board. And I'm not speaking solely, again, of just Asian and Asian Americans, because, of course, our presence and our representation in this country is tied to the presence and representation of all other minority communities. I think I would love to see more of us in all aspects of the arts. So not just artists, but also curators, and people who are fundraising for organizations and people who are writing grants for organizations and people who are directors of organizations. I just, I just think it has to happen, where you need to have more members of the BIPOC community kind of spread out throughout all facets, and not just being the ones who are trying to be shown, because until we get enough people on all sides of like the art process and the art exhibiting process, nothing will really shift in a meaningful way, I think.

And on top of that, I think it would be really great to be able to try and bring art to communities directly, right. So instead of putting art by Asian artists in a museum, where you have to pay a fee, and you have to walk in, and you have to, like, you know, you have to drive there, if you're here in Houston, and you have to like commit to spending like a couple hours at a place. I think there are better ways to bring art out into the world. And I mean, I was thinking about some of your questions when you had emailed them to me beforehand. And I mean, here in Houston, there's part of me that would love to see just like art, by Asian artists, but by all artists, like out in Chinatown, just in H-Mart, or, like, in boba shops, or in all these different places that people frequent, where you normally wouldn't think to find art, I think that's really important. And then at the same time, I think being able to translate exhibition statements and being able to translate press releases and wall texts that you might have in shows to better accommodate the communities that you are trying to serve. So I'm thinking of like, you know, captions for our pieces that are in Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog of, like the whole range, as many languages as you can find. Yes, and I think once you do that, maybe our parents will stop trying to get us all to be doctors and lawyers; if they too, can also have access to and understand a little bit about the art.

AS: Yeah, that's beautiful. And I actually just talked to someone else that was saying—about something that's similar, about bringing art outside of museums, bring them to like schools and hospitals and help people to, yeah, enjoy art as, like, something in their life, not just in the museums. That's definitely great sharing. And I'm also curious about the way representation has been in many people's work. Do y-, would you consider that to be something of a phase for many artists, or curators; or would that be an ongoing conversation?

EC: Sorry, will you repeat the question?

AS: Yeah, sure. Sorry. I wasn't phrasing that very well, like, as a, like Asian American identity representation, like, being identify as Asian art and having the advocacy, I guess for, for Asian Americans. Would that, with the socially engaged aspect be a phase, like a short period; or do you consider that could be a long term, like a conversation?

EC: I think definitely long term. I mean, I think—yes, I mean, I, you know, and I think right now, in, in kind of just mainstream media, we are seeing kind of a lot of attention now being put upon Asian and Asian American artists, and that's really great. I think it can't stop there, right? It has to continue being a thing until it is no longer significant that Asian Americans are excelling in the arts. So like, Yes, I love that *Crazy Rich Asians* was such a big deal when it came out. I love that Chloe Zhao and *Nomadland* are attaining so many accolades, because that movie is phenomenal. I'm glad that *Minari* has kind of worked its way into popular culture as being a phenomenal film that everybody, not just members of the Asian diaspora, should be watching.

At the same time, I think we have to eventually progress to a point where it is no longer an anomaly for us to be seen. Like I want, I almost want people to be like, sick of seeing so many Asian American artists out in the world. Because yeah, the hope is eventually like, yeah, I want landscape photographers, and I want people who photograph people's pets to be Asian American and Asian, like I, it is an ongoing mission, I think, until it no longer has to be a mission. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, that's super well said to be so much that we can, we couldn't have more of. And I'm also, next, I'm curious, with your own work, like you're a poet and an artist and photographer yourself. Can you share with us some of your own experiences in making art?

EC: Yeah, you know, and I think my, my experience making art is also tied to Rice. And I think some of my more established bodies of work, or some of my more finished bodies of work, we will say, came out of academia. And I'm really grateful for that. Because of course, like, there is no time like academia to be able to sit and just work on something, which was really, really wonderful. I think, at the same time, some of the growing pains I experienced as an artist, as a writer, as all of those things came about, because Rice, I think too, is going through some growing pains in terms of trying to fill out its faculty roster. And so I think while I was at Rice, you know, I was in both departments. But both departments I was in, both the English and the Art departments were predominantly white, if not all white. And that didn't impede their ability to teach. They were still all wonderful professors. I just think sometimes there were things lost in translation, because the focus of my work towards my senior year started to be my own feelings about, like, my Asian American identity, and trying to work through some of that and trying to figure out my place in kind of like the scheme of US history in general. And I think I had a lot of encouragement. But I think at the same time, there was something missing, right, because I was sort of creating in a vacuum, where I wasn't sure that I was necessarily—again, we come back to this notion of being seen. I wasn't sure that I was necessarily being seen and being met on the same level that I maybe needed to have been met at. And so that was a little weird. It's, I mean, it's always a little weird kind of getting feedback from my work up, about my work from maybe an audience member who it wasn't intended for, if that makes sense. Um, but, yeah, I mean, I think my work is all really personal. It's been maybe a hot minute since I've actually worked on my work if I'm being completely honest. But I think it was really important for me to sort of work through my own feelings towards my identity. And I think, yeah, I mean, just hopefully something I will come back to.

AS: Yeah. Thank you. And if you happen to have an artist's statement, what would it be? [EC: Ooh.] Or a curator's statement?

EC: Yeah, I think the curator's might be a little easier. But I mean, I think it's... I think I am really interested in helping traditionally marginalized communities, like communities who have been often left out of regular public discourse. I'm really interested and set on helping those communities be seen and be heard on their own terms. And I think I'm really committed to trying to do all of the research and have all of the conversations, and talk to all—and talk to all the right people and the scholars who are doing that work in order to be able to do mine. Yeah, and I think a lot of what I've been thinking about lately, too, in terms of like, what I would like a future curatorial practice to look like is again, really thinking about making art accessible to as many people as possible, and not just to a few wealthy people who can afford it. Yeah.

AS: Yeah, that's really admirable. And I'm also wondering, some of—would you be willing to share some of the stories or experiences around your most memorable, like, art studio visit, or exhibitions, or your own moments of making art?

EC: Yeah, it has been a while since I've done a studio visit, given the time we are in. Um, yeah, I, you know, I think one of the biggest things and experiences that I continue to think about and I know we've already covered it is that show I think I tried to put together at the gallery, the show, "Now You See Me". And I think that was a really big learning experience for me, in a lot of positive and also a lot of negative waves, you know, I think it was really incredible to be able to connect with six different Asian American artists and get to show their work and get to be proud of their work on their behalf. And get to kind of experience people reacting to the work in person. I really loved that. I really loved, like, being able to talk about the work with a—not an authority, but like a different understanding of the work, because it was coming out of a community that I identify with. That was really, really great. And I would not give that up for anything.

I think on the flip side, it was a really big lesson in trying to understand the different metrics of success that kind of a show can be measured by. And by that I mean, because I was curating the space for a commercial gallery. I had to think about, like, financial viability for the show, right? Like, the goal is to sell pieces at the end of the day when you work for a commercial space. And sometimes that drive to sell work does not align with social responsibility of showing work that you think matters and is important. And so I—I had a lot of back and forth in my head about that. And I think that is just a very practical, very, sometimes, sad reality of the art world and the art market. And I think that was maybe a little bit of a learning experience for me where I had to decide if moral, like the moral high ground was worth the lack of payout, I think, for the gallery. And I think that those are kind of questions that people in the art world have to negotiate all the time. And so I think it was good that I went through that experience, even though it was exhausting. And I think too, it was a learning experience in terms of thinking about who my audience is, right? And like, who am I, who am I trying to bring in? Who am I trying to bring in to have a seat at the table, really? And, of course, you know, the clientele at our gallery, maybe it was not that clientele, I have to say, and that's not a good thing nor a bad thing. That's just another fact that I think I had to add to my toolkit in terms of what I'm learning, and what I'm trying to take away with me.

But yes, I mean, and then like, I got to do some artist talks with the artists. And I think that was also a learning curve, because I am not necessarily the most extroverted person, I have a little bit of a hard time on Zoom. Um, but I think I really appreciated getting to do them, because I got to, again, connect with artists who are kind of working with narratives and with stories that align with and resonate with my own.

AS: Thank you for sharing that story behind the scene. It's definitely amazing to see you strived through the difficulties. And I'm also curious, but I mean, no pressure in case, it's not a question that you can answer—but in regards to gallery and sales, is there any discrepancy between like Asian art shows among-amongst like other art shows like, like group shows of like a mixed race, a group of mixed race artists instead of an all Asian cast?

EC: Yeah, I mean, well, the truth be told, I don't know. Because I mean, I haven't been in the business for that long. But I think maybe another discussion that is related, that I think I've been thinking a lot about is sort of—and of course, this is specific to what I've seen happening in photography, and this is not specific to any one gallery, or any one part of the art market. But when it comes to photographers I've seen—and I think I found out about this, or I was thinking about this, when I was trying to find artists to include in this show. Because it turns out, you can't just type Asian American photographers into Google and come out with very many hits. But, you know, I was kind of struck by how there are artists of color who are being represented and who are being lauded in some of like, the very same circles that like some other really high caliber, like white artists are being lauded in. And that's great. But what I'm finding, or what I found is that there was sort of like a weird gap between, like, there are very few mid-tier artists. And I mean, being an artist is not necessarily a hierarchy. But the artists of color who I kept stumbling upon were people who are like international rock stars, right? Like they are so well known, like

their pieces sell for, like twenty grand, like, everybody wants a piece of their portfolio, they are incredible. And you know, that's amazing. And I love seeing representation that, like, kind of like the blue chip, the highest rung of the ladder, like that part of the art world.

But what I kept finding was that you had those artists of color at the very top, and then you had artists of color who just like, you know, struggle to be able to afford to print works, let alone work with a gallery. And so, I think a lot of like the mid-tier artists, like you know, the artists who can afford to print their works and can afford to have them framed and send them to show around and galleries, can afford to go to portfolio reviews, and can afford to go to all of the events to schmooze with people and you know, have conversations with curators and have gone to, you know, art schools, or have had really long established careers in which they are able to speak for themselves... A lot of those artists tend to be of a more homogenous pool. And I have kind of pondered that, of why there are the token few artists of color who ended up at the top, and that includes, you know, some Asian and Asian American artists. I mean, the one that comes to mind Asian artist is Ai Weiwei, he's like, international rock star. Everybody loves him. But I—I wonder, like, about—where the mid-tier artists are? Where are the, where are the ones who are, perhaps commercially viable, but just haven't gotten into the right circles quite yet? And I wonder what that barrier to entry is all about.

So yes, I think that is maybe a—a tangent, but maybe kind of on the same topic.

AS: Yeah, thank you for—for sharing that. And also, I felt like, I mean, we could go on for-forever about, like, the slightly dark side of the commercial art market. But, um, yeah, I guess that's all of my questions, as we're also coming out to the hour. I'm really thankful for your presence, and you're openly sharing. Is there anything you would like to add, that I probably haven't touched on?

EC: I don't know. I think that might be, that might be it.

AS: Yeah, let me know in case you think of something, and we can also add that to the, to the end.

EC: Yeah, I will. Thank you very much. It's like, it's a very big honor to be able to interview with the, yeah, with you all. And to be kind of recorded with all these other really incredible people in the Asian American community in Houston.

AS: And you're part of it. Yeah. And your work is amazing too, like, bring so many artists to the light and bring their voices upfront. Thank you.

EC: Thank you.

[Interview concludes.]