Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Lenore Chinn, 2020 July 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lenore Chinn on July 30, 2020. The interview took place at Chinn's home in San Francisco and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LENORE CHINN: Oh, there's the red button. [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So this is Ben Gillespie interviewing Lenore Chinn at home in San Francisco on July 30, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Lenore, as a retired public health worker, how have you experienced the health crisis of 2020?

LENORE CHINN: For me, I draw parallels between what I witnessed as a health care worker, I would say, in the early '80s when we had HIV and AIDS sweeping through the GLBT community. And at that time, a lot of people who were not part of that community thought that it would not impact them or there was nothing to be concerned. And also, in those days, very early on, it was thought that it was something that hit primarily gay men. So that was another issue of um, uh, misunderstanding in the general public.

Uh, and at that time, also, uh, when we look back at parallels between then and now, um, there was a woeful lack of, um, adequate response from the government at any level to the seriousness of, uh, this pandemic. Uh, and there was a lot of, uh, misinformation about the disease itself. And, of course, we knew more as we went along, but also, it didn't help when we had people who had some serious homophobia going on, spreading misinformation about how you could get it by, for instance, maybe riding an elevator with somebody or, you know, being in the same airspace, you know, uh, breathing next to somebody, uh, sharing utensils at a restaurant or, you know, it was just wild misinterpretations. So there was that addition, um, and there was a lot of, um, anxiety about, uh, you know, how fast it was spreading, uh, and, of course, that the public policies were very shaky around that, uh. And adding to that, uh, was, you know, the, uh, reaction that we needed to close down the gay bathhouses. And, uh, that was a whole other issue because, you know, you had the owners who, you know, had difficulty, uh, understanding that there needs to be some compliance or at least some form of education. And there seemed to be some reluctance on that part.

On the flip side, you had people who were, uh, knee-jerk reaction, "Let's just shut everything down," and all of that, uh. And so that created a whole set of other issues. And it was quite a few years before, uh, any kind of medical treatment, uh, became available. But that doesn't mean that it's over because there are still people who are sick, um. In my personal life, after a while, I lost count of how many, uh, passed on. It was essentially serial loss in our, uh, community on a grand scale. But today's, uh, epidemic, um, it's—the tragic part is it's invisible. You know, in the—back in the day when we saw people who had gotten the HIV/AIDS and when they got really sick, it was visible. When you saw people out walking around on the streets or walking with canes or being, you know, um, pushed along on wheels—wheelchairs, you know.

And as they became more—as their health became more dire, it became more apparent. With this pandemic, unless you are working in a health care environment where you're confronting it day to day, or you have somebody in your personal, um, life who has been impacted by, um, you know, being tested positive and then getting sick and that kind of thing, you don't see it. But as a health care—as a former health care worker, I still get information from some of my friends about, you know, what they're dealing with, the level of stress, their frustration with the parts of the public that refuse to wear masks or think it's no big deal or it won't affect them. Some think that, oh, it won't affect them because they're younger, or they don't have preexisting, uh, issues. And so, therefore, if they do get sick, they'll just go to the hospital or whatever, and they'll get treated and they'll recover. Well, they don't really know what recovery means, you know? I mean, there could be long-term, uh, significant effects. And that's not something that

you really want to have to deal with if you can avoid it.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Right. And especially a crisis that we're seeing, um, alongside other racialized issues in the U.S. and, from San Francisco and as a public health care worker involved in activism for racial justice, um, and, more broadly, how have you witnessed that unfolding? And how does it influence your own experience of COVID-19 and life in America in 2020?

LENORE CHINN: Well, you know what? It's really forced a lot of us who are in communities of color—is to remember that, uh, while we're seeing a lot of, you know, uh, horrible things, uh, essentially coming out of the woodwork, uh, no thanks to our administration at the top, um, what it's done, especially in, uh, populations where there are, uh, significant groups of Asians, like San Francisco, New York, and, you know, any metropolitan city, but even some of the smaller towns where there are, you know, there are Asians there, uh, what it's—what this has caused is a lot of—an escalation in anti-Asian, um, violence, uh, anything from, uh, verbal, uh, assaults on the street to downright, uh, beatings, like I think it was about a week ago, uh, there was a bus driver. One of our muni bus drivers was, um, beaten, uh, while he was on his bus because—I think it was a man—uh, because he had asked three people who had boarded to put on their masks, and they refused.

Uh, and instead, they began spitting on him, uh, hurling verbal assaults, uh, and then they took a miniature baseball bat and started hitting him with that. Well, some days later, uh, it came out that that bus driver was, uh, Asian, uh. The person has not been identified, nor did they identify the three people who beat him. And those people, I think, got away. But that's just one example, you know. And so, you know, initially when, um, we were starting to hear about COVID-19, um, the one example of a response was that the Chinatown community got together very quickly, and through the Chinese hospital and their media and local—and neighborhood leaders, they were able to get onboard with the, uh, recommended guidelines, uh. And so even though they had already taken a heavy economic hit, uh, they went with the—with the idea, uh, and they—you know, they—it wasn't hard to convince this group to say, this is what we need to do. Part of it, I think, is also they remember what happened with SARS in China, uh, whereas I noticed the rest of the city was slower to come onboard with taking those guidelines. And, um, you know, in addition to the anti-Asian stuff going on, there was also the, you know—I mean, we already had the anti-Muslim thing going on. I mean, everything since 2016 was just a downward spiral, but now it's all converged. The positive note is, uh—if there is one, is that some of these communities have come together to offer mutual support. Like the Japanese Americans were really quick to come, uh, out—reach out to the Muslim and, um, Arab American communities in solidarity because of their history during World War II being interned. So there's positive, uh, notes in this narrative.

BEN GILLESPIE: It feels like a parallel between the HIV/AIDS crisis and the current COVID crisis, that it really foments a fear of one's neighbors—

LENORE CHINN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BEN GILLESPIE: —and in a time where we're all feeling so isolated, what are you doing to find a community?

LENORE CHINN: Well, um, some of us, especially in the creative community and various other communities that I'm—that I move in, we've just sort of transitioned to doing, you know, uh, more online Zoom presentations or Zoom interactions. Like yesterday, I had one with a core group of about a half a dozen, uh, Asian-Americans who are artists of one sort or another. And so we share, you know, some of our family histories, what they went through, uh, like one Japanese American showed, uh, images that I'm sure will eventually go to the Stanford Archives, uh, because it talked—she had pictures from when her parents were interned. And even prior to that, I think her parents actually met in internment, which was kind of interesting, um.

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And so, uh, I think that really speaks to the importance of documenting these historical events and everything, because they really are history lessons, uh, that are, um, important not just for now, but for future generations. So we talk about all of those things and also the kind of creative work that we're, you know, doing now and sharing all of those things. But as elders, I think we're seeing how important it is to pass this information on to the next generation.

BEN GILLESPIE: And in terms of passing down that information, your paintings and, uh, your photographs are so concerned with self-affirmation and preservation as restorative forces for a community and as a means of, um, seeking a claim to an identity in the face of incredible adversity. And how do you feel your own work changing during this time?

LENORE CHINN: Well, time will tell, but, um, I think—because I'm now doing more, uh, digital photographic work. I mean, I transitioned from painting to photography. You know, it was a variety of different reasons. But, um, [laughs] I just sort of ran out of room in my studio and it became impractical. Plus, because my, um, painting, uh, my income from my painting was rather sporadic, that's one of the reasons why, you know, health care was very good for me because it—essentially, it subsidized my art profession. But, um, I would say over the last, uh, 10 years, I began to transition more to photography, which was always part of my art practice. But now, you know, I'm more literally focused on that. Prior to COVID-19, I was doing a lot of street photography, or I was attending a lot of cultural events or political gatherings, uh, things like that.

So in a sense, I've become sort of a chronicler of our times as it relates to the communities that I'm involved with or interested in. That kind of came to a grinding halt in early March. I stopped taking, uh, public transit because I thought, well, you know, anytime I would catch a cold or something like that, it was usually because I had ridden, uh, you know, on muni coming home, uh. And then it—then when it became apparent that it's coming to California, you know [laughs], uh, one of the first things that one of my doctor friends, um, had recommended, and it turned out he was a gay man who had treated my dad when my dad was quite ill; my dad's gone now, but Greg Pauxtis was the geriatric, uh, neurologist who treated my dad. One of the first things he said is, "Stay out of enclosed places, uh, wash your hands, you know, uh, wear a mask," you know, all of the things that have become a mantra. And so I began to take that more seriously, uh, as time wore on. I haven't been to a Safeway or a Costco since probably early March, um. I usually go to a little mom and pop supermarket, grocery store, um, which was temporarily closed, and they reopen and, you know, they kind of reconfigured it. So it's a little safer. We all wear masks now, um. And so I was really hunkered down for those several months until Juneteenth.

That was when a Japanese American friend of mine, uh, who—she and her sister spent some years in an internment camp. She said, "Well, you know, the Japanese elders had been invited to join the African Americans at their African American art and culture complex because they're laying a second layer of paint on the Black Lives Matter that they had put in the street," and it took up city—three blocks, three long blocks. Well, come to find out, it was actually organized by friends of mine. So that worked out really well. And I thought, gee, I wonder if I could go over there. It's outdoors. I could—I could kind of scope it out from a hill and see if it looks safe, um, and it was. I had my gloves, my hat, mask, and all of that. So I went down there. I took a lot of photos, uh. It was it was good to, um, see my friends there, you know, and we're all in our garb and everything, uh, and in our community, and doing something we felt was important and affirming.

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And it's interesting that over the years, you know, uh, prior to all the, uh, upheaval, that a lot of people, uh, non, uh—white people, essentially, got really freaked out about the Black Panthers. Now, some 50 years later, we're celebrating, uh, [laughs] that the movement that people refused to acknowledge until George Floyd was murdered. You know? So, and the second thing that I went to was a, uh, a Japanese in solidarity with, uh, BLM in Japantown. And the third thing that I went to, and this was the last thing I went to, was in June on what would have been the day of our Pride March, which was canceled, um. Some friends of mine organized a, uh, people's march, uh. And it followed the original route of Pride from 50 years ago. And so, uh, it was organized by Alex Yuan and assisted by the transgender community. And they came down Polk Street from Washington and had a rally, uh, at City Hall, which was pretty well attended.

And so I stood back with Rick Gerharter, who's a local, uh, gay photographer, you know, being sort of the elders in our community. Instead of being upfront at the stage where we probably normally would be, we were on the lawn taking pictures from afar. So that felt safe, you know, because we could—we could do what we wanted to do from a distance and still be witness in that way. So that's what I've been doing.

BEN GILLESPIE: Those are really amazing moments of intersectional solidarity amongst communities. And I'm very glad you've been able to safely participate in those. And just by way

of, um, wrapping up, could you tell me a little bit about your specific hopes for the rest of 2020 or moving into 2021, um, for your own work and for the communities you're involved with?

LENORE CHINN: Uh, well, one, I hope we send a resounding defeat to number 45 and his cronies. I mean, that would be wonderful. We shall see, um. We really need to turn out the vote, um. But I think a lot of people, especially a lot of young people, are pretty fired up. So I'm hoping that the campaigns can strategize, uh, and get behind Biden, even if we might not—even if he might not have been our first choice. I don't think we have a choice, and we can't throw this vote away, uh. You know, now is our chance to, you know, rise up, essentially, and do something in that way, uh. In my own work, it would be nice to get out and about a little bit more. I haven't even gone to any of those outdoor, uh, restaurants that are—you know, I still am not comfortable with that yet, um. And eventually, I would like to get back on track with my, uh, limited travels. I had to cancel my trip to Hawaii, where I normally go because my brother and extended family live there, and I just felt that, one, I don't want to get into a Lyft at this time, just getting out to the airport, uh, much less an airplane. And then in addition to their initial travel ban that they implemented, they also had a 14-day quarantine. And so I thought, well, there's no point, even if I wanted to go through all those other risks, to jump from the frying pan into the kettle or vice versa. You know, uh, for me, I think I'm glad that I was able to do the things I was, uh, able to do prior to this, um. I was in a big *Art after Stonewall* show that started in New York, uh, and it traveled, and I was able to fly out to New York for the first time in decades. So that was—that was great fun and it was a great celebration. That was another 50th year anniversary or whatever. So we'll see, um. A lot of people are saying, well, we want to go—we want to, you know, be able to resume some of our freedoms. And some, uh, are also saying, we don't want to go back to the normal we had before because that wasn't so rosy either. You know what I mean?

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I think—if anything, I hope that this will give people an opportunity to reimagine how we want to live moving forward and what things that we might be able to do to, um, reconstruct, um, public policy and maybe how we reimagine, uh, safety issues and where the social worker might be more, uh, important to integrate into these ideas, rather than entrusting, uh, all of our resolutions to having the police come out and try to handle things that they're not well-prepared or trained to deal with. You know? I just want to hope for a better world down the line.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for speaking with me today. And I really hope that you get to have some, um, beautiful and safe celebrations in the near future.

LENORE CHINN: [Laughs.] Thank you.

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