

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive 康尼岛历史工程口述历史典藏

Interviewee: Yi Xin Tong

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Jiangxin Jin: Hi everyone! I'm Jiangxin Jin from the Coney Island History Project. Today we are talking to Chinese artist Yi Xin Tong.

Yi Xin Tong: Hi! I'm Yi Xin Tong. I was born on Lushan Mountain in Jiangxi Province. I'm 30 years old. I came to New York six years ago, in 2012. I've stayed here since then.

JJ: Let's start from your story in China. What brought you to the US, to the specific major in NYU, and to this (career) path?

YT: In China, we didn't always have the opportunity to choose the major we like. I chose Geology partly out of interest, partly due to other reasons. Maybe some people would consider Geology interesting and poetic because of its connection to nature. But the fact was, we spent most of the time on equations, Math, Physics and Chemistry. It's far from nature. Instead, it's either very microcosmic or macroscopic. So, after two years of study, I felt it wasn't a field I was interested in. I tried to change my major but there was no possibility, so I dropped out.

Then I redid my undergraduate studies in Canada. At the time, I was fearless. I went straight to Canada, even before taking the TOEFL test or applying to any college. I bought a ticket and headed there. Then I finished all those things in half a year and started my college life. The college I went to taught contemporary art. At that time, I only knew vaguely that I wanted to go into art, but actually knew little about contemporary art. As soon as I arrived there, I felt it fit me well both in terms of academics and art. After graduation, I started to apply to graduate school. Most schools I applied for are in Europe. One was in Canada and one in the US.

I didn't think much about going to the US, because it didn't seem to fit my art style. Pop Art is very important here. However, to me, popular art might not be a major direction. But maybe because when I first went to NYU for the interview, I felt the city was interesting. Another reason that I finally came here was that, I felt the US was like a sinking ship. The country was in decline. Lots of interesting things would happen in troubled times. So, I came to New York.

JJ: Which year did you come to New York for the interview? I'm wondering why you felt it was like a sinking ship.

YT: I came here for the interview in the spring of 2012. The US has many problems from many different perspectives such as from what people are saying, from my own experience, from the media and from history. For example, my first impression of New York City was that it was extremely or at least half paralyzed. Many things were very old. It's the same politically and economically. There are many problems. Isn't it true that many people are saying that the US is in decline, from a broader context? Didn't Obama claim to rebuild the US and Trump talk about "make America great again"? This means they themselves acknowledge that it is not such a positive situation these days.

JJ: Before you first came to New York, what did you think of it? What were your expectations? After you arrived, did the reality match your expectation? Was there any big shock?

YT: When I was in China, because there was a confrontational situation between China and the US, from the political perspective, the Chinese government would say the US had all kinds of problems. When I was in Canada, I had been to the West Coast of the US. Canadians would always joke that Americans were rude, proud of themselves, arrogant and did not care about other countries. After I came here, I found New York different from other cities. It's totally different from other places in the US. It's interesting that I felt New York was similar to China in that they were both dirty and chaotic. It's one of the reasons that drew me here.

JJ: Dirty and chaotic. That's more like Beijing, rather than Jiangxi, right?

YT: Actually, in recent years, China has become very clean. When I went back to China this year, Beijing was very clean, just like Taipei and Seoul. I wasn't used to that. Maybe because the weather was good on those days. Last year's urban environmental renovation and the cleanup of "low-end population" [and incident in 2017 in Beijing] might also have partly resulted in the cleanliness. But I love the sense of life in those alleys. New York has this sense of life in some way. It doesn't have much of the tidiness and design of western gardens.

JJ: Let's talk about your experience in art. Would you like to share your experience, from studying to holding exhibitions and doing projects? And why did you choose to live in Gravesend?

YT: I lived in Gravesend when I first came to New York. I was randomly searching on the internet for a place to live and was assuming I would only stay for a month. When I arrived, a friend said she had an apartment here. She lived in it and said I could live in the basement for \$300 a month. So, I went there and stayed for two years in the basement. During my time as a student, I lived there. The environment was pretty bad. Mold grew on the wall. It was very damp. Beads of moisture seeped out of the closet. It was unhealthy. But later, the room upstairs became available. Thinking that I would need to keep my works dry and safe, I moved upstairs to protect my work from the humidity. Then I stayed there for four more years. It added up to six years. Yes, at Gravesend.

JJ: At first you picked the location because of its low price. Why did you stay there then?

YT: It depends on how much credence I put in each reason. In terms of the price, I was not one of those wealthy artists or those rich people who came to New York. I needed to find somewhere cheap for sure. But I also did some work in the basement. The place had considerable influence on my work. I once did a music album, named *Basement*. Some of the audio was recorded there. Oppressive feelings also had an influence on me. For example, sometimes I would think, a basement was special because it's not

surrounded by air. In a typical apartment, there's air outside the wall. But in a basement, the wall extends forever. It's the wall outside the wall outside the wall. I would think about this. Another interesting reason was that, when many other people asked me why I stayed there, I would say because there were no artists. The area had no contemporary art. It's special. I didn't want to stay in a place crowded by artists, like Bushwick or Williamsburg. There are many other places like these. Another reason was that, its name was poetic. The end of the graves. Later I had an album *Gravesend Attic: The attic at the end of the graves*.

JJ: Since you have lived here for six years, throughout that time, have you noticed any changes in the environment, of yourself, or had any new thoughts about it?

YT: Yes, there are changes. When I first came, I went to Manhattan to work every day, so I didn't pay much attention to the Gravesend community. But later, at least after my graduation, I spent most of the time in Gravesend. There was a time when I worked in Sunset Park. It's pretty close. I would think about whether the surroundings would give me some inspiration, since I lived in a special place full of Russians, Ukrainians and Chinese. It's very non-mainstream. When others talked with me, I didn't feel like I was living in New York, because it's so far away geographically and so different culturally. So, I started my exploration. Once I went by chance to the creek in Gravesend for fishing, it opened up a totally new world.

JJ: Can you describe in detail how you felt there the first time you went? What did you see? What made you feel a new world was opening up, and what did you love most about it there?

YT: It was on my birthday when I first went there. I just wanted to wander around and I had my fishing rod and lure with me. I searched the map for somewhere to go and noticed a green field by the sea. So I decided to go there. I was surprised when I got there. The place I went was called Calvert Vaux Park, a park by the sea near Coney Island Creek. It was almost like some ruins. Buildings there were quite old and looked like they were in the Eastern Europe, with the dilapidated condition of those ex-communist countries. The park was overgrown with grass and weeds. It's weird. I felt as if I had discovered some unknown place. It's a place so different from the larger picture of New York. Then I started fishing there, but of course got nothing. Actually, I caught no fish in the year after. There is a lot of knowledge involved with fishing. Fishing methods differ from place to place. I found out later that I would never catch any fish at the place I first went, because the water was only three-meters deep. But I didn't know that back then and fished for hours. It's silly.

JJ: When did you start fishing? What made you start this hobby? Many of your projects are related to fishing and fishing trips. Why were you fond of it? What did you love most about fishing?

YT: I fished with my grandfather when I was young. Just by the lake. The Ruqin Lake on Mount Lu. But that was just following my grandfather. I also made fishing gear at that time. I have liked doing handicrafts since I was a child. For example, when I was young, my family never bought me toys. I made all of my toys. Maybe this has some relation to my interest in doing sculpture later. The real fishing experience started from that birthday. Then I almost became addicted to it. I even watched YouTube videos of others fishing every day, looking at how others fished, learning about the waters of New York, what fish appear in different seasons, playing with the fishing gear and studying how to fish. After spending more than a year, I finally caught my first fish in Jamaica Bay. The reason why fishing attracts

me may be that I can evade many things when I'm alone. Fishing is also something that can bring me back to nature. For example, even if I'm walking in the natural environment, I don't have a way to relate directly to it physically. Semantically, when I'm fishing, my hands are connected to the water through a fishing rod and a line. When a fish bites, it was connected, too. It is this physical connection. And it creates excitement. When a fish bites, I feel related to something. It's a kind of communication. For example, when different fish bite, you will know what type of fish it is and how big it is. It's very interesting.

JJ: How old were you when you first fished there (at Coney Island Creek)?

YT: In 2015? Maybe 27. Probably (laughs).

JJ: Let's talk about your projects. Can you describe one of your projects which you were most satisfied with or one that had special meaning for you?

YT: Let me talk about one related to Coney Island Creek, and also my first work of this *Fishing Project*. It's called *Water is in Front of the Bushes*. The whole project is called *NYC Fishing Trip*. One of the reasons I named it this way is, every time I told others I was fishing, they would be surprised and ask, "We can go fishing in New York? There is water in New York?" I think people really pay little attention to things they don't care about. Everyone does it. New York is an island. Manhattan is completely an island. Brooklyn, Queens are part of Long Island. But people only look inward and see those skyscrapers. It's land-based rather than aquatic. So, I wanted to do a series which could let me see New York from a different perspective. The work is called *Water is in Front of the Bushes*. It's shot at Calvert Vaux Park, which I just mentioned. It was a special time of the year. There were only about three days a year and the bushes were not being clipped constantly. Because generally there are people taking care of the grass. Only in summer time, around early June, the bushes go wild. Its purple flowers blossom. It only lasts for about one week and its fullness only lasts about two to three days. I planned to shoot the piece during that time. The bushes were almost head high. I held my camera and ran through it. The path was almost invisible. It's totally covered. From the inside, the so-called entrance of the bushes, I walked, walked, jogging through it, and arrived at a relatively open space. Shipwrecks appeared. Shipwrecks in the bay. It's like a roaring picture of those under-developed cities, those post-industrialized cities. Later I added some rap in this part, singing the names of different types of fish. Mostly those New York local fish. Later I found out that I had caught many of them, such as striped bass, summer flounder. Guangdong people call it "Zuokou," while we call it flounder. There was also porgy. It's like a process of pursuing something. For example, when I was walking through the bushes, I was murmuring the names of those fish. There were also sentences like, "when I arrive at the water, I could fish. Water is in front of the bushes, I could fish when I get there." It's like running toward the anticipated point physically, wanting to reach it. However even till the end of the video, there was no shot about fishing. There was only the desolate scene. One part I love a lot is that, when you arrive at the open space, you can see traces from some homeless people. They hung rope in the park to dry clothes. There were some pots and pans for cooking meals. The situation was similar to sculpture, in that context. Its existence shows the lack of management of the park. And the city has such a special space to let these things exist. Once I even saw some people performing a Shamanic ritual there.

JJ: Would you feel far away from home here? Would New York, or any other city, region in the US make you feel a connection to your hometown?

YT: In terms of making me feel a connection to my hometown, maybe only Coney Island Creek does, among those places in New York. Actually, the concept of "Home" has been absent for me for years. My real hometown has been changed completely in the name of the government's development. For me, my real home only exists in memories. Here, Coney Island Creek is the place resembles home the most. Because New York is a very urbanized place, while my hometown features its natural environment to a great extent [Lushan Mountain is a UNESCO World Heritage Site]. I always travel abroad to other places and would think that, when I get back to New York, I would go to Coney Island Creek, because it feels like going home. But I won't feel the same for other places in New York, like Manhattan, other areas in Brooklyn, or even Coney Island itself. At least in the US, in New York, I very much feel like an outsider. The strong alienation in society makes it hard for me to feel like home.

JJ: Do you spend most of your time in the US now? I noticed you often go to different cities in China to do exhibitions.

YT: Actually, I spend most of the time here. I don't do a lot of things. Maybe I have achieved a state of comfort, although it might not be a good thing. But it might be an inescapable part of human nature to some extent. I spend at most one month back in China each year. I would schedule a lot of events during that time. Just as you mentioned, I would go to many places. I might visit over ten cities in two-week's time. I might fly every day or every other day or take a train. It's a little similar to traveling, but still for work. To put it in an old-school way: to "caifeng" (travel for inspiration), and to experience. China is developing very fast. This time I went back, I attended all kinds of art fairs and exhibitions, from morning to night. I had no time to take a breath. It's very exciting, but also exhausting. The US feels very comfortable and slow. You can take a rest. But in China you can't. At least not in a city.

JJ: So, you have already settled here, and only go back to China for work?

YT: I'm an O-visa holder. The artist visa. But every time, when others asked me whether I liked New York, I said no or totally not. Maybe it's because of the reason you mentioned that there wasn't a sense of home. Or to say, a sense of existence. Other people won't recognize you. So, I have always been, not exactly considering leaving for somewhere else, but been open about this choice. Actually, I will go to Canada to teach for one semester in a college. Then maybe I will come back. I think I will, because I won't stay there. It's too comfortable to stay there. The social confrontation among classes and races is not as strong as that in the US. The natural environment is well-protected. People can live comfortably, but maybe I don't want to exist in that comfortable way. Yes.

JJ: I noticed that you taught video at NYU in 2012 and 2013. Are you going to teach photography in Canada?

YT: No. I taught video at NYU. It's a combination of video art theory and studio. The college I'm going to, is actually my undergraduate college. It could be considered a coincidence. I was already applying for my Green Card at that time. I've hesitated for about one year before making the decision to apply. During that time, my undergraduate professor asked me, was there any possibility that you would be willing to come back to teach? I thought, teaching for one semester could be a meaningful experience for me. Because that college influenced me a lot and I learned a lot there. The college was very student-friendly. This is a feeling absent in the US. I always tell others that American colleges, or to say graduate art

schools, are all scams. Because I learned much less here compared to what I learned in Canada. Students here don't pay much attention to studying and are very anti-intellectual. Let alone the commercialization. People take this for granted. However, the tuition fee is ten times higher here. So, I'm very dissatisfied with the education in the US. I think maybe teaching one semester could let me experience a different environment and help me figure out whether I should stay in New York.

JJ: So, you were on your own when you first came to New York, and when you went to Canada for study? Your family were always in China?

YT: Actually, I went to Canada because I had relatives there. My uncle was there. So, I turned to him. I was alone in New York. It's pretty good to be on my own. I have more freedom.

JJ: Can you share with us the feedback you got from Chinese audiences when you brought your art back to exhibitions in China, and your feelings?

YT: In general, because my art education is in North America, most of my works do not have a lot of content directly related to China, so on some level audiences won't feel these works are made by a Chinese. Some people will find it very interesting, while some people think it should be criticized. It doesn't matter. Lately I have been doing some work related to my hometown. This is also because of my feelings about my hometown, and also a lost feeling about the devastation of my hometown. In terms of bringing art back to China, it's related to Coney Island because I brought back works on Coney Island Creek and the *NYC Fishing Trip*. I remember an audience member said, ah, is this actually New York? He said that this was just like a small broken place in a second or third-tier city in China. Because I have many framings from the north to the south on Coney Island. There are no symbolic buildings like the amusement park. It's just high and low buildings in the city, and the ruins are in front of the buildings, in the foreground. It is hard for everyone to believe that it was made in New York. Well, this is actually quite good. In fact, it's similar to the reaction from audiences in New York. Because no one believes this is New York. For example, when they see the video with a lot of plants, they will believe it's shot in upstate New York or some other beautiful place.

JJ: You said you would talk more about your feelings and experiences of living at Gravesend, other than from the art perspective.

YT: I like my house at Gravesend. It was built by Italians. It looks gothic from the outside and is different from other buildings. Only a few people have been to my house. One who came said, oh, it's like you are living in a castle. Locked in a castle. It's interesting. It's poetic. In terms of the surroundings, most neighbors are Russians and Chinese, mainly Cantonese. Food is largely dependent on living conditions and the economy. For example, I spend much less living here. If I buy fresh ingredients in Chinese supermarkets and cook meals myself, it's much cheaper. The food there is actually fresher than at a good supermarket such as Trader Joe's. It's interesting because Chinese supermarkets restock and change their vegetable and fruit several times each day. I have some emotional connection with this, because I buy food there several times a week and cook meals myself. Sometimes I would also buy desserts at Russian markets. Their goods are very cheap, even cheaper than in Chinese markets because most of their stuff is preserved, rather than fresh. They are already preserved and packaged. I only drink Russian beer now (laughs) because it's cheaper and stronger. Yes. It's 8%. It's economical. (Laughter)

JJ: Throughout your art career, is there any main, core topic, or common topic that you are pursuing?

YT: For example, when I was studying in Canada, the social and art contexts were different. It's more aggressive and avant-garde there: the traditional avant-garde, which encourages every piece of work to be different, cutting-edge and innovative. But when I came to the US, it's different. It's market-oriented. Those who have a greater say are powerful. So, people try hard to form a uniformed style, to make their work unique and strong. As strong as a signature. I'm not giving in completely, but it does have some influence on me. I would consider digging in a certain topic. It might result in my thinking about specific problems more, such as marine animals. Also, a different relationship between human beings and animals. For example, what would happen if certain animals become dominant in the world. Most of this is constructing a different world in a virtual space. It's like memorizing childhood. But I haven't found a personalized style yet. I'm not in a hurry to find it. Maybe it's my past history that makes me unable to find it.

JJ: You mentioned the oral history project you have been doing in your hometown. Can you talk about it?

YT: My hometown is Lushan Mountain. There is a Lushan Mountain Zoo there. Construction began in 1953 and it was very popular for a while. Many tourists went there. It began to decline after the 1990s and then closed. The interesting thing is that when I went there a few years ago, I found some relics of people living in the cages. I learned gradually that it was after the animals were removed from the cages or died that some migrant workers who could not afford apartments because of the economic reforms, moved in to live in the cages. It's weird that human beings voluntarily moved into animal cages. They made some changes to the cage, such as putting in furniture. It's also strange to see children's coloring books there. When I saw it for the first time, it was already deserted of people, but traces of them were there. It felt surreal. From that time on, I wanted to do this project. I tried to get as much information as possible. Because of the Cultural Revolution and some other events, a lot of information has been lost. I couldn't find much documentation, so I turned to oral history interviews. With a lot of effort I found the designer of the animal cages. Another interviewee used to be a veterinarian. She was also raising those animals, and then did some research projects. In the past, many zoos would do some research projects. It's still the same nowadays. These people are very old now. They were all recalling what the zoo was like at that time, and some anecdotes. The government now won't open a zoo again, because the current government will only consider what kind of things can be profitable. And the government wants to achieve something politically so it will keep doing projects that the people disapprove of. Therefore, Lushan Mountain has been suffering destruction. Many other places are suffering as well. So, I think I have this desire to find a kind of liberation through this relatively fictional way. Because I feel it may be difficult to make the reality a better place. It may only be possible to create a better situation in an artistic and fictional space.