

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Cort Hartle

Interviewee: Kirk Ke Wang

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Cort Hartle (CH):

This is Cort Hartle, and I am here with Kirk Ke Wang doing an oral history interview for the HCC Art Galleries Permanent Art Collection. It's great to have you here today, thank you again for coming and doing this. So, I just have a few questions. The first one is, what is your story of coming into the world of art?

Kirk Ke Wang (KW):

Well, first of all, thank you Cort and thanks HCC Art Galleries. It's a great honor for my work to be included in the Permanent Collection, so I really feel honored. I appreciate it and of course feel humbled too. How did I get into the art world? It's quite different from many other artists. Most artists had a good art influence when they were young, or they just liked to do that in school. Maybe they got the inspiration from their parents or friends to make art. My story is different. As you know, I was born in Shanghai, China during the hard time of the Cultural Revolution... So the motivation for me to learn art was kind forced by my parents. Because during the Cultural Revolution my parents were sent to the countryside to work in a labor camp and there's no hopeful future for young people like us at that time.

Most people in our class at the time, which was condemned, were usually going to work in hard labor when they grew up. My parents wanted me and my sister to avoid that hard labor, so they thought maybe we should learn a skill and with that skill we'd be able to survive and not have to do this hard labor, which is sometimes very, very hard in a way... That was our motivation to learn a skill. So I was pressured to learn to draw and to paint at the beginning. Gradually once I did that, also as music, I grew to love it and I discovered myself. I realized that I did have these creative skills.

For many years I kept coming back to draw from and to be inspired by those skills to create.

CH:

Where did you go from there to end up where you are today?

KW:

So because of the pressure to survive — it forced me to learn hard. I pretty much did most advanced art classes when I was young. Fortunately, my parents had some good friends who were also condemned in the labor camp, who were also famous artists and professors, so and they trained me. When I was very young, I already had a certain level of art skills probably beyond any high school students. By the end of the Cultural Revolution—that means the death of Chairman Mao—China resumed to normal. And they started to recruit students because during the revolution, for 10 years, the colleges and universities were closed. At that time, I was 15 and ready to go to high school. Because I had the earlier education, I had the confidence to skip the high school. I asked my parents to give me some tutors and I basically studied by myself with great tutors who were also my parents' friends. Then I took the national exam and I passed. It was by luck and also because I just studied the subject and it's fresh for me, comparing to other older high schoolers who that hadn't studied for 10 years, and forgot most of it.

That year (1977, first year after the Cultural Revolution) the school I applied to—which is one of the top universities—10,000 people applied, and they only admitted 35. And later on they extended it because there were too many good students, to 45. My scores ended up #26. I was very lucky to attend college when I was 16. By the time I graduated and because for 10 years they didn't have college admissions, the university did not have enough young professors who were qualified to teach with a Master's or PhD degree.

When I graduated, the dean asked me what I was going to do. I said, well, I'm going to grad school and hopefully become a professor. They said: well, we have known you since you were a child. What if you just stay in the university and teach? Start becoming a professor and do your MFA at the same time. I was studying under some nationally renowned artists in the same university, and I thought that was a great deal. So, I became an art professor at age 20. At the beginning the school didn't really ask me to teach, because, you know, some of the students were older than me. Most of the time they asked me to do research and my grad school studies. At that time, I had many chances to travel. I was a city boy from Shanghai, and I was particularly interested in the countryside, in the fishing villages along the coast of the Yellow Sea. I lived there for a while and I did a body of work which was different

from my previous work, like scenes of the urban cities, still life, and models, all those academic stuffs. The new body of work was more of a neo-expressionist style.

After the Cultural Revolution the National Cultural Ministry resumed its quinquennial national art competition [that started] before the revolution. That means everybody could apply, including my professors. I was very excited. So I planned to submitted the body of work I did at the countryside, which was totally different from the academic work we did in colleges. I thought my work had a chance. I was lucky. I won the bronze medal (third place) nationally as one of the best Chinese artists in a country of 1.3 billion people at the time. I was 23 [years old]... of course I was in the media and the prized work is now in the permanent collection of the National Gallery in Beijing.

There's also a reward once you win the national competition. At that time you have three choices of awards. One was... you automatically become a professor teaching in the colleges/universities. I was a professor at the time, so I didn't take that. The second choice was to be awarded an apartment in an urban city. That of course was very appealing for other artists because at that time China was very poor. If you have an apartment in your city, that's [worth] more than anything else. But I was too young to settle in a place, so I didn't take that. The third choices was to give me permission to do cultural exchange abroad and money would come with it. So I always say I took the money and ran out of China as fast as I could.

That's how I came to the US. At the time my sister was doing her PhD at the University of Chicago—and now she's the Dean of Adelphi University in Long Island, New York. I initially studied at The Art Institute of Chicago. But the Art Institute of Chicago's tuition was very high, particularly for international students, so my money ran out very quickly. I was frustrated, so I met the grad school advisor who was from the University of South Florida and then she said, why don't you just go to a state university, which you will get a tuition waiver, and you can do a TA or GA and get a stipend to live on. I thought, that's a great deal. So I transferred to the University of South Florida and I finished my second MFA. Then when I graduated the Tiananmen Square incident happened, which if you know the history, was part of the democratic movement in China. It also happened at my university. The Dean at the time advised me to stay and wait in America for a while before coming back. That's one of the reasons I decided not to go back to China right away. But I had to survive. So, I moved to New York City close to the East Village and Chinatown area, while looking for jobs.

I still kept [going] back and forth in Florida. My artist friends and I found a studio space at Ybor City in one of the cigar factories. At the same time to survive I was doing designs and art projects for Disney, Busch Gardens and other venues in the

entertainment industry. Eventually I became an art director for a design firm which worked mostly in the entertainment industry. So I did a lot of projects for Disney World, Seaworld, and other theme parks. Basically, my job was theme park design, or scenic design. Working for the commercial world, the pay was great, and I was happy with that. But the only thing I was not happy about was the lack of time for me to do my own artwork. At the time my wife was doing her doctorate degree at USF and she was about to graduate. Then we discussed that I should move back to the academia because I want time to focus on my own artwork, rather than works for somebody else. So that's why I started to do adjunct teaching at The Ringling College of Art and Design in the Illustration department, until 1993 when Eckerd College across the Skyway Bridge had a full-time tenure tracked position open. Then I joined Eckerd as one of the full-time faculty members and it's been 30 years.

CH:

You have an amazing life story, a lot of great accomplishments. So pivoting a bit, what does your artistic process look like?

KW:

Maybe because I'm a teacher, I learned a lot of artistic skills. As a teacher you must teach anything. When the college opened this competitive position, they wanted to have the "value added" candidates, particularly it's a tenure tracked position. I remember my colleague, who's on my search committee, said: there's over 380 people that applied nationally and internationally, and we only need one. So why have we decided on you? Because we see the potential that you not only can teach what you're trained for, which is in painting, but also you can do sculpture, photography, and Asian art, etc. The college at the time was also trying to develop the computer art program. I didn't know anything about computer art because my generation didn't even have computers... that's how I trained myself and started to teach computer art. My teaching allowed me to have a lot of tools on my belt, which means I could use those to approach my art practices.

I usually do not focus on one media, as some artists do — just focusing on one media throughout their entire career. I'm more the other way around. Generally, my artistic approach is to have a concept first, and then to come up a technical solution matching that concept.

I like reading and telling stories. If you stick with me long enough, I got all kinds of stories that I would like to tell. That's really my passion. For that reason, I usually like to come up with a concept, say, a concept of a story. Then I'm going to look in my toolbox to see which media I could use. Could it be an installation? Could it be a video project? Could it be photography? Or could it be painting or sculpture? That's

how I practice my art that way. To me, concept dictates what media, what methods I'm going to use for my art creation. So that's my general artistic process.

CH:

Along that line, do you have any specific goals with your art, and if so, what are they?

KW:

That's a very good question. **We always have goals, but goals change when your life does, when your life experience does.** My life experience was transitioned from living through the hardship of Cultural Revolution to the journey as a migrant. Asian Americans or Chinese Americans, we are outlier from the main society, who are a kind of invisible, but somewhere. So with time [as] my life changes, my goals also move. But in general, my goal—also what I like to do in my art—is focusing on my reflections or reactions to my surroundings at the time, and that will change my way of seeing the world and also that will change the way I'm making art. So that will shape my goals. I'm kind of goal oriented. I need pressure so I usually set my goals very high. If I can achieve like 50% or 60% of it, I'm happy. At least I pushed enough.

For example, a few years ago when we were dealing with migration issues all over the news, my work started to set up a go to focus on addressing those issues... like my [Landscape of Human Skins] project, which is basically using clothes from working class migrants donated by wealthy people. I collect [clothing] from the thrift stores and then use them to create work, to deal with the issue of class dynamics. It's not just classes in terms of segregated from one to the other. What I'm trying to investigate for is any connections between these classes in our society. I found these donated clothes have connections, because they're worn by the wealthier people first and then eventually were funneled to the lower working class, to the poor people and immigrants. I saw the connections. Through my work, hopefully I could address the issue of who we are, and the world is all interdependent, from one to the other, from the natural world to our human society.

For my new series *Snow in September*, my goal shifted a little bit. It's still mixed media, but it's more about the history. Because when I'm getting older and when you have experienced so many [things], you usually become more nostalgic. That's why I started to question history. That's why I'm using 9/11, one of the most important historical events, as the subject of my project. I'm using it as my goal to address how do we see history. When we think about history, we think about the story of history, which may not always be the fact. Sometimes, lots of times, history is our interpretation of the facts, of which someone told you, maybe by your history professor. But the books the history professor read may not be accurate, so it's subjective. But at the same time, that's how us humans deal with our knowledge of the world, based on our understanding, which may not always be true. It's a little bit

back to Foucault's idea that a historical event can be interpreted by different people from different angles. That's the concept I'm trying to deal with in this project. I create the images with 9/11 historical photos, and at the same time I'm trying to disguise it, trying to cover it up so that people can't see.

As artists we are not philosophers or social scientists. We really do not have the answers. But our goal, if we're thinking about goals, is more to raise the questions, or the awareness for others to think about the question. So we're more the questioners. Maybe scientists, social scientists and philosophers may work out answers towards the solutions. But for us artists, it's more to start the inspiration, to ask the questions. That's how I deal with my goals and plans, and it changes.

I'm still thinking about my current goals. I've been tormenting right now, because I just finished the project [*Snow in September*], and that means a break for now. What's next? As artists we're never going to fulfill our goals because our targets keep moving. Now I'm thinking about the new ideas. With that I have been contemplating what's next since the last couple weeks after the show. I usually like to find the inspirations from books. So far after the Snow in September show, I've already read three or four books. Last night I stayed up to 2:00 am working on a book, that hopefully could help for my new projects. So yeah, I will keep feeding myself with books and gallery visits in New York, and hopefully I'll set my new goals, even I do not know it yet.

CH:

That's awesome. And wow, I do not know how you have the energy to already be like, okay, what's the next show? What's the new thing?

KW:

Yeah, it's constantly moving. Most artists do it that way, which is once you have the work on the wall and you sit back to let your gallerists and other people take over to show it to others, then as artists we start to think about, you know, what can we do from this point? Can we move forward? Are we going to continue that series? Lots of artists do. Or are we move forward to something new. So that's like getting ready for another baby. And that's really a challenge. Giving birth a baby is challenging, trying to conceive an idea for your next work is even more challenging. But I like it. I enjoy it. That's probably one of the reasons why art always attracts me back, different from things in other fields. You know, I've been doing many other things in my life, like being a software developer. But that's different because I had more concrete goals. Once I finished the software and applied it to the school system that used it, I've done my job. That's it. But for art, you will never have a finished product because you're always going to refine it, always feeling like there are some flaws in there and keep moving and moving. Which is also exciting.

CH:

I want to ask next about the work that we have in our collection called *Yellow Stone*. Was there any specific inspiration for that piece?

KW:

Yes definitely, as I said before, most of my work starts with a concept and then I move towards the medium. The concept I originally started [with] for that particular series is from my teaching because I'm also a professor teaching photography. When you teach photography, of course you got to start from history. I am always very impressed by and admire all these classic works, like Ansel Adam's — all those classic landscape photographs. I also want to do some of those landscape photos. But when I do that, I do it with more contemporary approach. So doing landscape photography is one of the concepts for this project.

Another concept is about dealing with the capitalism and global industrialization, particularly the manufacture of toys. As we all know, most toys are, or were, made in China. Not anymore. Now, probably more in Vietnam or other places of the world. But at the time I was doing this project most were still made in China. I was very fascinated about toys. The reason why I'm interested in toys because they were made in China, but never lived in China. Toys are always designed by somebody of another culture somewhere else, and then produced in China. And then they were shipped out for somebody else to play with... Then I think about my life that despite I was born in China, but most of my time I wasn't living in China, mostly outside of China at somewhere else. I'm like a toy myself, made in China and played or being played with around the world. That's another concept I'm very interested in developing.

For landscape photography, many well-known photographers went to places like Yellowstone and Grand Canyon, where dinosaur bones were found. That's where the dinosaurs lived before. But today dinosaurs are plastic toys. That made me think, today at Yellowstone, we discover the real dinosaur bones from many years ago. But 2,000 years from now, if they dig up the Earth we probably find a lot of plastic toys, the plastic dinosaurs.

With that concept I called Walmart, where did you get these dinosaurs? They said, we got these from a distribution center in California. Then I called the California distribution center. They said, we got these from a place called YiWu, the main distribution center for all toy manufacturers in China. So I went there and visited many toy factories and companies. From there I also bought many toys for my art projects, including toy dinosaurs...

Then I went to Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon with those plastic toys. (That photo in the collection was specifically from Yellowstone). I tried to find the same places from the photos of these famous photographers, and hopefully from the angles where they were shot.

Different from those famous landscape photos which are in black and white, I'm using a media format digital camera in color. I have these plastic dinosaurs on top of these rocks. I didn't want to make them too obvious, so that people can see them right away. I placed them discretely, at somewhere people may not pay attention. People may initially think it's another Yellowstone landscape photograph like you will find in a National Geographic magazine. But when they take a close look, they will find these plastic dinosaurs living in the photos, with a little humorous of course. At the same time, it also makes people to think about our living environment today. And what we're going to deal with tomorrow. The photo is addressing the artificial reality of our natural world today rather than Ansel Adams' type of photography.

So that's the concept. That's why I took this colorful landscape with those plastic dinosaurs in there. I really enjoy photography. I took a series. I had the dinosaurs in lots of different places, like in the river and mountains. The dinosaurs were somewhere else. I really like that piece and that's why I chose that one, when I was asked to send a piece for the permanent collection of the gallery.

CH:

I just have one more prepared question for you. How do you identify or interact with the local art scene, however you define the local art scene for you?

KW:

Well, Tampa is my second home. I would say probably my first home now. I just came back from seeing my relatives in Shanghai and Taiwan. When I was there, people always asked me when I would go home. When they meant home, it's not Shanghai, my birthplace, more my home in the US. I spent most of my life in Tampa. On and off I've been in Tampa almost 37 years, so this is my home. So, I have definitely seen the growth of the art scene since when I was first here. Well, think about it. Tampa is not isolated from the rest of the art world. We have USF Graphic Studio here, and many other reputable art venues here. We have great museums here. The art scene in Tampa Bay is continuedly growing. That really makes me feel proud of living in this area, and I also hope other people will come to this area to appreciate the arts, besides the weather.

Personally, in the early days when I moved in Tampa, I had a studio at Ybor City, and it became part of the history of Tampa now. We had an artist group, most graduate students from USF, called Titanic Anatomy. We rented one of the cigar factories. We



shared the rent. We worked there and it became an art “commune” for us. We showed art films there. We did studio critiques. It was really very lively until we got too loud and the landlord didn't want that attraction, because people who are interested in art all came out to our events. Eventually the landlord kicked us out. And then I moved my studio to Seminole Heights until the Covid pandemic, before building my own studio at the backside of my home.

I'm trying to stay active in the local art scene. I'm currently a board member for the City of Tampa appointed by the mayor as one of the members of the Public Art Committee. The Public Art Committee is overseeing and approving art projects for the City of Tampa. At the same time, I'm also serving my second term at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota. I just received the official appointment letter from the President of Florida State University, which Ringling Museum is affiliated with, for my second term.

I try to stay active and at the same time, and I hope more artists, particularly artists who are underrepresented, and artists from different ethnic groups, to have more chances and voices.

That's another goal of mine. Hopefully I could help to promote that. Also bringing the communities from these underrepresented groups to the museum, so we could see more diversity of visitors in the museum and in the galleries. So that's my goal.

When I talk it seems like I'm talking a lot, and maybe because I'm a teacher. But personality-wise, I'm a very shy person. I'm not a socialite going to every party and every events. But I do keep connected with the community and I've been enjoying participating the *Skyway* exhibitions. I was lucky to have my work shown twice in the museum exhibitions showcasing local active artists. It's also a good chance to get to know other artists, because the art scene in Tampa Bay area keeps changing. Every *Skyway* show we always have new talents and artists from other places are moving to this area. I hope to have more engagement locally.

CH:

Is there anything that we didn't cover already that you would really want people to know about your artwork or your story?

KW:

I think you covered everything and of course my art keeps changing. I would say I'm very honored for *Yellow Stone* being included in this collection, as I know many artists in the collection are doing great art and I am humbled to be part of it. I am sure this collection will be appreciated by the student on campus here. I think that's a great approach to have these works become part of the history of the college. Most importantly it's an educational instrument for the next generations, because they're going to carry the history, a legacy extended to the future generations.