



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Nancy Hom, 2020
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nancy Hom on August 30, 2020. The interview took place in Nancy Hom's home in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Melissa Ho 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

MELISSA HO: This is Melissa Ho interviewing Nancy Hom on August 30, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic project. And Nancy is speaking to me from her home in San Francisco, California. Uh, hi, Nancy. Uh—Thank you so much for taking time to do this. It's really nice to see your face. It's nice to see anybody's face these days, um [laughs]. So yeah, as—but as I explained, um, you know, the—the effort of this project is to capture for the record how the pandemic and the other circumstances of this year are impacting artists in the United States. So um, I'll start just by asking, you know, how have the past months been for you? And how have you been caring for yourself and your family at this time?

NANCY HOM: Uh—It's been hard. Uh—It's been difficult to, uh, concentrate, frankly, um. I—I feel like, uh, I have two things on my shoulder, you know. One is, um, my normal health issues, which, um, for some reason, exacerbates the COVID, uh, symptoms. So, you know, I have a heart condition and I have high blood pressure, and all the things that they say, um, would, um, make me most vulnerable to COVID. So that's on my shoulder all the time. And, uh, the other thing that's on my shoulder is fear, uh—fear of what's happening in this country, fear of going out, fear of people not wearing masks and so I walk around with these two fears and, you know, issues on my shoulder all the time. And behind that fear is the big one that—you know, the specter of death always behind me, um.

And I've never—you know, I've—I've had this condition for about five years now. You know, I have a temporary—I had a temporary stroke, which thankfully is not, uh, permanent. But because of that, there has always been this, you know, specter of I could die any moment. But now it's very strong. And, um, it's been hard as an artist to—to work past that. It's like walking in mud, you know, to get past that and to move forward, uh, because I used to move forward with a certain optimism, and now it's, um, it's kind of dawning on me that I may not survive this virus, which is—you know, kind of pulls me back sometimes and rearranges my priorities, too, um. Those—that's just some days, um. Other days, I feel better and—and, uh, find the strength to go on. And what has been sustaining me is that, up until last week, I was babysitting my grandchild three times a week. And when you babysit a little baby, you know, it's very, very uplifting because you—you feel like, uh, your—your life is fresh, and all you do is play. Life is very simple at that age. So that's been really sustaining me. I don't know how I would have done it without her and—they moved to Sacramento, so we'll find out how I do without her.

MELISSA HO: Oh, so that's a big change then.

NANCY HOM: Yeah. It's—it's been a crazy month because it's helping them move; it's babysitting a lot more so that they can pack and move. And I'm trying to wrap my head around, uh, them being gone. It's not that far away. It's about two hours away, about an hour and a half if there's no traffic. But still, it's another city, and I—I just feel like, um, you know, we've bonded so much to my grandchild that it is—

MELISSA HO: How old is your granddaughter?

NANCY HOM: She's 10 months. You know, so it's a lovely age where she's just beginning to, you know, stand and discover things. And you really can't be sad when you're—you're around her. But it—it's been a—a real blessing to be close to my daughter and my son-in-law, you know. We usually have dinner together after the babysitting is done. And so that—that's been a real stable force in our lives and helps us, um, keep grounded. And—and, uh, and we'll see; we'll see what happens in the coming months. Uh—Of course we'll take trips often to see her. But, um, there—there are fires in this state, uh. There's—there's a lot of things that may prevent us from, you

know, going to Sacramento on a—a—a more regular basis. But I'm trying. I'm trying for at least once a month, so we don't miss any of those [inaudible].

[00:06:00]

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Babies that age, they change so much in a month, so.

NANCY HOM: Right, right [affirmative].

MELISSA HO: Um—Have—so we're—I'm talking to you at a moment of—of real, um, transition. You're just about—it sounds like you just sort of finished one chapter and—and the—the pace of—of week-to-week, day-to-day life is—is—is changing, um. Have you been managing to make art during this time?

NANCY HOM: Um—Yes, I have, um. Not as, uh—not as, regularly as I used to. I tried when the, uh pandemic first hit in March, I—I went into my regular mode of, um, okay, I'm going to make art and bring the community together and—and, um, you know, get us through this, you know, with some kind of grace. But, um, it didn't work. I—I have been doing for the past, oh, eight to nine years, these huge floor mandalas—

MELISSA HO: Yes.

NANCY HOM: They involve the entire community in, uh, helping me make it. And—and, uh, that's the whole idea behind it, that we all own this art piece. So I thought I couldn't do it in a pandemic, but I could—I could do the whole mandala and everybody just give me a—a little square to put at the, uh, outer rims as I usually have them do. And I thought it would be easy because they don't have to do it to a certain size. They can email it to me, uh, or post on Facebook and I would just size it correctly, and then show the finished piece. But I didn't get many, uh, participants. And it—it was surprising to me. And I figured that, uh, people were still trying to cope with this phenomenon [laughs], you know; we're not used to being so isolated. And so, um, so after several attempts, I—I kind of gave up on—on doing that. And I realized that my community artwork has to change.

So I created a mandala for myself, um, a little two foot one, um. And what I did was I—I had created a Buddhist mandala. It was all Buddhist iconography. It has Buddhist mantras and the deities, and a—a small Buddhist mandala so that I could say prayers every night for those who have died. Originally, it was going to be those who have died from COVID. But it has expanded to, um, whoever has died, um. And so then I asked Facebook friends to submit names, and people were willing to submit names of—of people dear to them or people that they've heard about, um, who have died. And so it becomes, um, interesting; it's—it's a perpetual mandala because they're always people dying.

MELISSA HO: Yes.

NANCY HOM: I—I change it every week, and I say prayers, um, for that, uh, group of people. And it seems to be, um—I've been told that it seems to be very healing, um, even though it's a small one. And I—I don't even show the mandala anywhere.

MELISSA HO: I was just going to ask you, what, you know, what—what are the means to—to share it, um, with others if there—if there—if there are means right now?

NANCY HOM: Yeah. I—I—I can show it, and I—I probably will, uh, because it's—it's a live, um, prayer, um. It—it felt real personal to me. So I didn't feel the need to show it as my artwork, per se, um. Whereas the other mandalas, it was my, you know, my artwork, my identity as an artist, uh. This time, it's more like it's my Buddhist, uh, practice, you know. Uh—But I—I, uh, I will share it because I finally have a good picture of it but only as an afterthought, not as the main thing. I feel like, uh—uh, having the names—I post all the names that I'm going to, um, say prayers for that week. And I post it on Facebook, so at least people know who I'm praying for. And it—it has helped me most of all because it—it grounds me. Every night, no matter what is happening, or [clears throat] sometimes I get upset at the news, but I will always end the night in prayer. And I will always end the night in connection with these people that—that, uh—these names that have been entrusted to me, you know, by people that I know.

[00:11:20]

It's—it's a different kind of community involvement, um. It's not the same as having a—a big

show or—or, um, it's—it's not like, uh, anybody's ooh-ing and ahh-ing over your artwork. And interestingly enough, nobody has actually asked to see this mandala, you know.

MELISSA HO: Hmm [affirmative].

NANCY HOM: They—they, uh, just trust that I had this mandala and that I am saying prayers. And—and I think enough people have seen my artwork. I've done several Day of the Dead pieces, um. And I've actually recycled those pieces. So they know about the changing of the names. They know about, uh, how I—I honor, um, the names and the people who have died. So I think they trust that my mandala will look similar, and they can visualize in their heads what I'm doing every night.

MELISSA HO: If I could ask you, um, another question about community, are—are you—I mean, it sounds like you are still connecting—finding ways to connect with people. Are you—are you seeing people? Are you staying very isolated, um, among your immediate family? Um—Are you finding new ways of connecting with community at this time?

NANCY HOM: Um, I—I, um, am mostly with my family. I, uh, I—I don't even go shopping. You know, I'm really into self-preservation at this point. But I do have a few, uh, Zoom groups that I'm part of. One—one is a creative arts group that I'm part of, um. There are 10 of us who used to get together. We're the kind that go to openings, you know, share each other's artwork. And so it seems natural that we would share on Zoom. And we meet, um, three—every three weeks or four weeks and we each do a presentation on Zoom. And we talk about art and, you know, um, some of us have writers and—and we also share writing. So I have that group.

I have another group, um, that's a movie group made of similar people, but we used to get together, mostly at my house, to watch movies, um. And now we have to see the movie and then we get together and talk about it online. So that's, you know, that's another way to at least maintain some contact that's outside of, um, my family. I have, uh, many Buddhist teachings and talks that I attend. It's been actually very good for the Buddhist community because I'm listening to—to teachings that I would normally never have the time or money to go to. And—and so the Sangha has really expanded.

I'm also part of another group, um, called Deep Chat, where we get together and talk about death and all its aspects, um, which may sound morbid, but actually is very uplifting to, um, get together and have a community that really can honestly talk about this taboo topic. And, um, because we all know it's in the back of our minds all the time. But it's from a Buddhist perspective, so it's—it's not, um, it's not something that we're afraid of, but it's—it's more making friends with this inevitable, um, thing that we're going to go through and trying to understand it. So I—I don't do a lot of Zoom, um. But other Zoom meetings are about listening to music, and, you know, they are more passive—they're, you know, us listening. But in terms of interaction, those are my three main interactions.

[00:15:45]

I'm also participating in a group art project, um, creating, uh, tarot cards, uh, for a deck. Uh—It's—it's organized by, uh, Adrian Arias. And, um, he gathered some artists to, um, create a—a tarot deck based on either the pandemic or, um, the—the racial tensions of the day. It's been kind of interesting. It's been very hard for me to do in between the babysitting and, uh—you know, everything else, but it's been a good exercise for me, um. Because I—it's, again, another connection to community in a different way. Group projects are one way to do it. And also, it helps me think about, um, metaphysical or spiritual iconography that can express this time, you know. It is very challenging, but when it's done, I always feel, like, empowered, uh—you know, by the cards and the message and the way I portray the message. So that—

MELISSA HO: So do you know which card you're, um, creating?

NANCY HOM: Uh—I—I did—I'm—I'm in charge for doing three. It was supposed to be seven, but I couldn't commit the time. So I already did, um, the Wheel of Fortune, um, but in—in a—in a way that, uh, shows the perpetual struggle that we are in, um. And I'm working on the Ace of Cups, and also, um, the Ace of Ones. So I got the aces [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Yes [laughs].

NANCY HOM: Wheel of Fortune is—is incredible, um. And it's—it's—it's been, uh, a very good exercise for me, uh. And it keeps me busy. I—I—I first said yes, because I wanted to take my

mind off the pandemic and then the news and everything. I find that I can't. I—I can't, uh, just not look at the news. So I'm trying to do this and, uh, have my mind occupied with, um, the news. And—and I look at pandemic charts, and we look at the air quality charts every day. So there's a lot on my mind, but, um, at least there's art that's going to come out of it.

MELISSA HO: Yes.

NANCY HOM: The writing that I do, um, that has taken a backseat. I—I thought I would write a lot more in this period, um. But the words, uh, I need some time to reflect, um, and I don't feel that I have that space right now. There's so much going on that you can barely catch your breath. And then the next headline will appear. So I am—I'm looking forward to a time when I don't do anything but just sit with all that's happening and then reflect. So that probably is what I'll do in the future.

MELISSA HO: And of course, you're a longtime activist, and as an artist, um, you know, your—your practice has been deeply engaged with social and political issues and realities, um. Perhaps you need this time to reflect, but I'll—I'll ask anyway, um. How does this compare to—to other crises that you've encountered and—and lived through? What—and does anything feel different to you this time?

NANCY HOM: Are you talking about the pandemic?

MELISSA HO: I'm talking about the pandemic as well as the, um, the actions, the call for—for racial justice which, um, of course, is not new but, um, it has—is having its own chapter right now.

[00:20:08]

NANCY HOM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, the pandemic, um, I've never encountered such a pandemic before, um. Usually other crises, and we've had, you know, many crises through the years, we've had each other to hold onto, you know. We—we would go and hug each other. And you know, there'd be ways to, um—just to find comfort. And I—I think that's what's most debilitating about this pandemic is that we're forced to connect like we're doing now online, um, but we can't really see each other. And so, um, I'm lucky that I—I do have a computer and I do have these resources, but I feel for the people who don't, because then you're really, really isolated. You can't even comfort each other at a funeral. And so I think this pandemic is, um, especially hard on all of us as a community.

And it's, um—I know there are marches. I know we can still organize, um. But for those who can't go to a march like I can no longer go to a march, it's—it's been frustrating, you know. So the only connection I can do is to post a lot on Facebook [laughs] or try to share information and—and use email and all these computer resources. But there is nothing like face-to-face, uh, to convince people or to, um, just rally for a cause. And there's nothing like getting people together and feeling the excitement of being together, um.

In terms of the racial inequality and everything that's happening in the world, um, we have entered a new chapter. And it's a very, um, terrible chapter. I, uh—I just posted today that, uh, people who have gone through, um, escaping from authoritarian regimes have taken it especially hard because it's almost like PTSD, um. And you know, before we could be, you know, just la-di-da walking down the street, the sun is shining and really don't feel it. But now we feel it every day, um, whether it's through, um, direct racial confrontation, or um, by looking at the news, and seeing that this racial inequality and all the racist acts are actually, um, condoned by the highest office. And so, um, it's—it's—uh, you can't say, oh, it's happening over there; or it's those people, or—You know, it will come around to happening to you, you know. I haven't personally this year encountered racial, um, racial slurs or anything like that, but I have close friends who have been victims of, uh, racial attacks. And so it's just one degree of separation. It's just a matter of time. And I—and I feel that, um, the more the administration condones this and actually, um, um—actually um, helps—helps it along with, uh, everything that people are saying, then, uh, I—I feel like it—it's almost like a green light for, um, this—these actions to happen.

So that's—that's the main thing I feel, you know. The tension is whether we can, uh, mobilize and stop it. And yet we're hampered by the pandemic, you know. Otherwise, there'd be millions in the street. But you know, a lot of people can't do that. So and—and yet, um, because, also, the—the, you know, ones who support these racist acts, they also don't, um, take the pandemic that seriously. So they are the ones who are mobilizing [laughs] in the street.

[00:25:11]

MELISSA HO: Yeah, yeah [affirmative].

NANCY HOM: So it's like this tension of, what do we do and how well can we do it? And I'm also worried about, um, our resistance to, um, the racial inequality because in the past, we would all stand together, um. But now I find that there's even a split, even with the progressives, you know, that some people are—are still fuming because they didn't get the right candidate in. Or you know, um, we're squabbling amongst ourselves; whereas there's a bigger issue out there and I really wish that we would, you know, get together and—and fight that issue, um. And now that we're so splintered, um, and it's—it's you know, it's also because of all these lies and the media, um—uh, kind of reporting, uh, even on the lies, and social media especially, you don't know what's true or not, uh. We've splintered into a lot of different groups, uh.

MELISSA HO: Yes.

NANCY HOM: We, um, have different things, so it's harder. It's really harder to, you know, form coalitions and, you know, march as one, um. I know we had all these differences in the past, but we were able to get together and march as one, uh. So I'm hoping that, uh—that as it becomes more and more blatant, that we will put aside our differences and—truly fight to, um—to keep our democracy. I mean, we're really at that point.

MELISSA HO: Yeah—yeah. No, we have to. Um, Nancy, thank you so much, uh, for talking to me today. Um, is there any last thing that you'd like to say for the record, um, while—while I have you?

NANCY HOM: Um, it's hard to think and I—

MELISSA HO: You've covered a lot of great territory, so.

NANCY HOM: Yeah. I—I, um—

MELISSA HO: I mean, maybe just to say quickly—I mean, what do you think you'll remember most from this time?

NANCY HOM: Uh—Well, I hope in the future, I will remember this as a—a certain anomaly of history [laughs]. Um—But I, um—if there is one wish I would wish for everybody, it's that, um, just like with my mandala work, what I want people to do is to, um, just take another view, you know. Pull back a little bit and take a bird's eye view of the whole situation, and to realize that we are all interconnected and interdependent in this society, so, um, we have to hang together, you know.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

NANCY HOM: Um—So that—that's the takeaway from my art and from, uh, the situation. I feel like we need to take a bigger bird's eye view and really see how we are interconnected with each other.

MELISSA HO: Agreed. Thank you, Nancy.

NANCY HOM: Thank you. [00:29:09]

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