

interview: Xyza Cruz Bacani

Edited Transcript

Interview with **XYZA CRUZ BACANI**
Interviewer: Nicole Martin Nepomuceno

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N: Like most people in Hong Kong, you came here as a migrant. Do you consider yourself a Hong Konger and a Hong Kong artist?

X: I do think that as someone who came to Hong Kong with another purpose and [then] discovering my practice or my love for the art [of photography] in Hong Kong, I consider myself as a Hong Kong artist. And when I have an exhibition or when I do something [they're] always cited as [by] an artist from Hong Kong who's based in Hong Kong, so I got used to that. And because I spent so many years in Hong Kong, with my formative years and even my creative years being developed in Hong Kong, I consider myself a Hong Kong artist. But then that's the thing with identities, we don't have a singular identity anymore. Our identities can be layered. It's so difficult now to be identified as one person or one "this". We have so many identities.

N: Do you think there are certain criteria that you need to hit in order to say that you're a Hong Konger, you're a Hong Kong artist? Do you think there are certain boxes that you need to "check"?

X: I never really liked boxes. I think they're stupid or they're silly. But if there's a box I think for me it's that fact that I've developed half my work in Hong Kong. [In] the past 10 or 15 years my work [has been] about Hong Kong. So the fact that most of my work is about Hong Kong that's how I "check" myself as a Hong Kong artist. And because sometimes I feel like I understand Hong Kong more than I understand my own country, the Philippines — which is sad by the way, that's how I call myself a Hong Kong artist. I never thought about this labeling [...] I never really thought about it.

N: Hong Kong culture is very rooted in Cantonese and they're almost very difficult to separate from each other. How did you navigate this new language and culture?

X: I speak Cantonese fluently so I do think that opened Hong Kong a lot to me. To understand Hong Kong, you need to understand Cantonese. To understand Hong Kong people, you need to have a sense of the language [...] So I think one thing that makes me a Hong Kong artist is my [grasp of] the Cantonese language because if I don't speak the language, it will be very difficult for me to understand Hong Kong as who it is or the identity of Hong Kong itself. Speaking the language saved me from a lot of trouble.

N: In a sense, it is something that has enabled you to be where you are a bit easier. If you hadn't had that knowledge it would've been harder.

X: Yes, more difficult. It would've been more difficult to get where I need to be or be in a place where I can actually create something because I will not understand Hong Kong culture without the Cantonese language.

N: This research and your work parallel in many ways because it's about migration, labor and class and we're seeking to magnify the same voices and the same groups of people. Why was it important for you to focus on these stories?

X: First of all, it's important for me because it's something that is personal. Because it's something that I experience every day, something that is a part of me. [The] second part is [...] it took years before I even accepted the thought that I'm in a very unique position to actually do something to tell our stories. I'm not saying that I represent these people because I don't represent them, it's more [that] I was given a platform to actually tell the stories and to create art out of those stories for my people. Because if someone who doesn't live the experience tells our stories, they wouldn't do it in a way that they would understand it that well. Maybe some will understand it well but there's something about understanding the nuances of leaving, the experience of a minority, the hardships, the joy. They can't tell our story really well because they never experienced the little things that make life harder, the microaggressions. They've heard of it but they've never experienced it. [This is] something that's really personal for me and I'm given this really important platform [so] might as well use it to elevate our culture, who we are and celebrate it.

N: Let's talk about *We Are Like Air*. Could you tell me more about the process of organizing this show, from how WMA Commissioned your project to Hong Kong Arts Centre curating the exhibition and how the public reacted to it?

X: It was wonderful. There's a lot of processes when you do an exhibition. I like everything to be according to how I envision it but what I love about working with WMA Commission and Hong Kong Arts Centre is the support that they've given me. Sometimes I tend to go really big, crazy, and they just know when to talk to me and [say] we don't have to do all of that. [...] They supported me all the way. They're amazing people, they became my friends and the experience, all in all, was great. I'm still very much connected to these people. They became my friends, not just colleagues, not just someone I work with because we spent a lot of time together — way too much.

The public reaction is also good because the exhibition was extended. There were a lot of people who went there and checked the exhibition and the reviews were great so all in all *We Are Like Air* in Hong Kong for me was a success. A lot of people came, not just Filipinos, not just Chinese, not just white people, but it somehow connected people who you will never think of being seen in the same area experiencing the same thing, experiencing art at the same time, breathing the same air in that same space. I don't know if I'm explaining this well but it's like seeing an employer and a domestic worker enjoying a piece of work together, not because they're connected by a contract but because they're being connected by this piece of work.

I think for one moment when I was looking at people going in and out and checking the show I was like this is why Hong Kong is beautiful. I made sure that it's open for everybody and I can see how a person who's lived a different life with another person has been connected by a piece of something that I created and I love that. I think that's the beauty of exhibitions. You can see the first-hand experiences, there's electricity that pulls people together.

N: How did the WMA Commission commission you?

X: I applied for it, they do it every year. WMA is one of the few organizations in Hong Kong that actually support photography so it's a big commission. I applied for the commission and got lucky because Dr. Anthony [Ng] actually believed in the story so he thought this is a project that everyone needs to see. That's how it all started and also I'm one of their scholars, they're sending me to school so that's great.

N: There are very few exhibitions in Hong Kong that feature non-Euro-American ethnic minorities and two of those exhibitions feature you, including *We Are Like Air*. The other one is *Afterwork* by Para Site in 2016. *Afterwork* was different from *We Are Like Air* since it was a group show and that it featured works from outside Hong Kong. What are your thoughts about the exhibition and the way that our communities have been represented there?

X: *Afterwork* is a very powerful exhibition, have you seen it?

N: I only saw it online through the documentation.

X: It's a beautiful and very powerful exhibition, I think Cosmin [Costinas] and Freya [Chou] did a great job with it, but are there other ethnic minority artists there?

N: I think it was only you who was a Hong Kong ethnic minority shown in the exhibition.

X: It was a powerful exhibition. I think they did a great job. Para Site is one of the longest art institutions in Hong Kong so I think [*Afterwork*] introduced me to the art world a lot, because it's Para Site, you know? That opened a lot of gates or doors for me in the art world, especially [the] Hong Kong art world. Photography is still not considered as art by others but when Para Site did this massive exhibition and then they gave me an artist talk, an artist residency, it kind of opened a lot of doors. When it happened it was also during *Art Basel* so curators and art dealers and everyone who was coming to Hong Kong to see art went there to see the exhibition as well so it introduced me to a lot of people.

I always supported Para Site and I always donated my work to them, except in the last couple of years because I felt like I had nothing worthy to donate. Para Site did a great job in that exhibition. I still remember my talk, it was funny, it was a funny one. I love Cosmin. Cosmin is a friend, a personal friend too, so that's the thing about them.

N: Even though I wasn't able to see it in person, *Afterwork* was an exhibition that had something to say. But even though they were presenting our stories, there were still very few of us presented as makers so I began to think that instead of institutions not wanting to include ethnic minorities, maybe there simply aren't a lot of ethnic minority artists, but why do you think that is? Why do you think there are so few of us who are in this field or who want to pursue this field?

X: One biggest hurdle is financial, socio-economic. This is just something personal but when people say, "If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere," I always say, "No if you can make it in Hong Kong, you can make it anywhere," because there's a lot of hurdles you need to pass through. First, socio-economic, and then the second one is language, third is class. One of my curator friends said [to me], you have the golden ticket: an amazing story, fantastic talent, you're very charming. You have the ticket. But not everyone has it. There are a lot of things that make it difficult to be an artist.

[...]

There are a lot of art exhibitions in Hong Kong, there are a lot of artists but it's difficult to be an artist in this city. The rent itself would kill an artist. I've been in Hong Kong for 15 years and when people ask me "Do u have a studio?" I'm like what studio? I use a rooftop, I use my room but a studio? Are u kidding me? The rent itself will kill an artist. So there are a lot of layers to the difficulties and unfortunately for ethnic minorities, it's difficult to go through from one layer to another.

N: Yeah, because in a sense there are more layers, it's like a bigger onion.

X: Yeah, it's like a big onion. It's gonna make you cry when you think about it.

N: When publications talk about you and your work, they often highlight your previous occupation as a domestic worker, how do you feel about this? And where do you think their continuous interest in your background comes from?

X: Of course, at first I was like why do you keep talking about my background? What does it have to do with my work? Then as I grow older, I realize that my background is who I was and everything that I create centers [around] it so why not [highlight it], you know?

I know that talking about it can give people hope, even though sometimes it's [almost discouraging], because you're one in seven million. So of course people will keep talking about it, it's not even one in one million, it's one in seven million. It's a stroke of luck maybe, but for me when people talk about my background and talk about my work it's okay. I'm fine with it... as long as they talk about my work as well not just about my background.

N: Where do u think this interest comes from?

X: I do think that it makes the story sexier, so it's all about clickbait. But I do think that the interest is coming from the fact that in a city of seven million people - or maybe we have eight million now - a domestic worker actually made it. So there's a bit of tokenism, a little bit of exotifying. They put you in that very exotic place because they can't believe it themselves. I think that's where they're coming from, like why did this good luck happen to her? They can't believe it, that's why they have to write it again. And maybe when they read it they're trying to convince themselves that it's actually possible, it's actually happening, we're not dreaming.

I was reading a book [by] Trevor Noah. He said something about language [...] [and how] when people [who] have prejudice hear someone who doesn't look like them sound like them, their brain just cannot process those two together. Why is this person different [from me] but actually sounds like me? Their brain cannot put it together. That's why it fascinates them that a person who's brown, who doesn't look like [them], who comes from another culture, sounds like them, can create something like them. That's why they write it over and over again to convince themselves that... it's actually true, it's actually possible.

N: They need to keep saying it more to themselves than to us.

X: Yeah, it's not for us, it's for them, so that's why I've accepted it in a way that well, you do you, make your life easier.

[...]

X: It is tokenism. As I was saying, it was a struggle at first because why are you talking about my previous work? I'm more than my former job, [but] I realized they're doing it for themselves, they're not doing it for people like me. They're trying to explain it to themselves, they're writing it for themselves for them to be able to believe that this actually happened. Some media friends are now more educated. For me, when [I] see it over and over again, that's when [I] realize it's not for me, it's not for my people, it's for them.

N: It suggests the idea that it shouldn't have been possible, that this isn't supposed to happen. The way that our education and support systems, our economies, have been working isn't for this to happen and then it did.

X: Yeah, it did. That's why they can't believe it.

N: Given all that, have you ever thought that you would've made it this far?

X: I've been doing photography since 2009 and I only got discovered in 2014 so it's something that I [have been] doing for myself ever since. I never thought I'd be able to be where I am today. I never think about [that] because I just love the process of doing it. I work, I just work. I always believe that you build and they will come. I didn't think about this, it's something that really happened organically.

[...]

Luck needs to happen as well, you need to meet the right people. Good people, you need to have good people in your life and I have them so I got lucky.

N: What was the hardest part of this entire migratory experience? From growing up without your mother to migrating to Hong Kong to work yourself and until now that you are an acclaimed photographer.

X: The hardest part is growing up without a mother. I always say no child should be left behind by a mother or a parent, so that was the hardest part. Migration is cruel, it has always been cruel, especially forced migration. It's not only cruel to the children, it's cruel to the family. Separating families is a cruel, cruel thing to happen [...] so that's the hardest part for me. Even though I've grown up and I've been traveling myself, I've become mobile, there's still the residue of the cruelty of migration inside me that I need to work on all the time. And it's not just me who needs to work on that. What's sad about it is that it has now become [a] typical story of a Filipino child to have a parent or another person in their life who left [home]. If you ask a Filipino child nowadays if they know someone in their family who works abroad, they [will] always know someone.

N: It has been normalized in such a way that it's just something that happens.

X: It's not supposed to be normal but it's been normalized for a long time since the 70s.

N: There are so few of us in this position right now. There are very few ethnic minorities in Hong Kong who have permeated its art world, its visual culture, not just as artists but also as scholars, critics and curators. What could be done to have more ethnic minorities like being a part of making Hong Kong culture?

X: I think the biggest hurdle for artists in Hong Kong is the socio-economic part of it and I do think that what needs to be done is to provide living wages for artists. The cliché that artists are supposed to be fucking hungry and surviving all the time is just not acceptable anymore. Artists need to live as well for them to be able to create. Artists need to get paid decently and I do think if we take away the socio-economic factor, then there's going to be more of us [...] It shouldn't be about survival for art, it should be something about making beautiful things and things you want to create and not having to think about being hungry tomorrow. But with artists, you can't really switch that [need to create] off and that's the thing that's being abused over and over again. [...] If we take away the socio-economic hardship then I do think that there's gonna be more ethnic minorities in Hong Kong in this [field].