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CONVERSATION WITH

LAURA FONG PROSPER

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Two black-and-white photographs of two faces, the shadow of the person taking the photos-of-the-photos, outlined as an oily gleam across the images. Followed by a flash of deep forest green, smudges of woodland on the side of the road shot from the plastic window of a moving bus; yellow sunlight streaming through the shadows, casting a glow on the grainy film; the fuchsia of a young girl's flower crown, leaning forward in her seat, looking out; and all along a whirr in the background, like a film projector—though, of course, we are not in a dark theatre, but on the white page of Vimeo dot com, watching Berlin-based Panamanian video artist Laura Fong Prosper's 2020 film, *Where he was born*.

Recounting Prosper's experience visiting China in 2012 and finding the family that her grandfather, Pancho Fong, left behind when he

travelled to Panama at the age of 12, *Where he was born* is the latest iteration of an evolving, multimedia project spanning the course of a decade. Faded photographs of Prosper's family memories in Panama are blended with vibrant, saturated clips of LEDs and tourist shows in China; the crisp, grayscale geometric lines of an airport runway are set against a dancing auntie and ghostlike passersby. When, having shown an address written on a slip of paper to a random motorcyclist in Zhongshan, Prosper finally arrives at a corner shop in a village, she says to the women playing mahjong there, *My name is Fong*. She is taken into the room at the back of the shop, where, on the worn red wall, hangs a shiny, garish poster of three Buddhas, and the solemn black-and-white images of two familiar faces: Pancho's parents, Prosper's great-grandparents. *I became completely paralysed*, she narrates in Spanish. I cried. I was

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out of words.

I first encountered Prosper's work when she participated in a roundtable discussion on contemporary Sino-Caribbean identity for *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures* and the *Americas* journal. In it, I was struck by the following quote by Prosper: "I like to use a lot of saturated color. I think that's my Caribbean heritage: the blue of the deep sea, the green jungle, the intense sun at noon." But on the September day that I Skype with her, she's in Berlin and I'm in the UK; both grey, damp places. As Prosper's son, Kian, vies for our attention in the corner of her screen, I ask her about color in her work and Prosper admits to me that it is during the colder months in Germany that she tends to infuse her work with saturated hues. "Non-intentionally, I will do color because Panama is colorful," she says. "It just came and somehow I cannot help it!" But, she stresses, she makes sure to balance things out—what she likes is the contrast.

Born in Panama City in 1978, Prosper got her start in cinema: her specialty was editing, which she continues to do today on a freelance basis. She moved to Berlin in 2017, and when she first pivoted into art, she made experimental video installations and video performances, including the whimsical *A Human Aquarium* (2011), where the fish are, in fact, edited versions of her acting out swimming motions against a greenscreen. In 2010, she began an MFA in media art at Bauhaus University Weimar and, in 2012, went on exchange to Shanghai, where she decided to begin the deeply personal project that was tracing her roots. "Everybody in the Master's was just like, 'Wow! It's a great idea,'" Prosper tells me, so she went ahead with it, not expecting that so many different artworks would come out of the experience, that each time she was invited for a show, she would discover some new facet and some new way of expressing it. There are smaller, quiet pieces like *Lazy Susan* (2012), where Prosper juxtaposes two family dinners in China and Panama, a kind of self-ethnography; and ambitious works like the video-mapping installation *Gen* (2014), where 22 photo frames were filled with projections of footage taken

while in China, coming together with soundbites to create an immersive atmosphere.

"With the China project, I kinda found my style," Prosper says. "When I went to China, I had so much material that I was overwhelmed." Prosper had been meditating on themes of identity and movement as early as 2009—when she made the video essay *El extraño conocido* about splitting her time between Panama and Germany—and the first idea she had was to explore the theme of circular time, these overlapping and interlaced travels across oceans and across history. "Even though it was in the future, it felt like it was going back to the past," she says. That idea became *Cerrando el círculo*, a 10 or 12-television installation arranged in, well, a circle. Prosper exhibited *Círculo* at the inaugural 'Panachina' exhibition in 2014, celebrating 160 years of Chinese presence in Panama. Of the six artists in the loose collective who participated, four were cousins who shared the same grandfather, named Choy Ming San, who left Guangdong at the age of 16 in 1930 and came to Panama, where he took on the name Pancho—just like Prosper's own grandfather, Pancho Fong. Prosper tells me that Panachina "was just a random thing that happened." She had been on her annual holiday to Panama when her friend, artist Samuel Rumaldo Choy, spontaneously decided to do a group show that would allow her to exhibit *Círculo*. "The first one was not in a museum; it was more in a club theatre. It was super cool because the opening was, like, there were DJs! It was super fun!" Prosper says. But for the second show, in 2018 at the Panamanian Museum of Contemporary art, Prosper was stuck in Berlin, and the formality meant that the others probably had less fun, so she doesn't mind not having been there. Besides, Kian was too young at the time.

Prosper's next goal was to make a film—where would she be born—

though she meandered towards it for five years. "I became a mother after I came back from China, so that also affected, in a good way, my work. I had less time to work on projects, I had less time to travel." It made her think about the different ways in which one could traverse time and space: her next project was *Inverted memories* (2017), where she and German artist Christin Wilke sent each other video letters across the Atlantic. "She spends a lot of time in Argentina," Prosper explains, "so she's going through the same inverted experience I have here." And the theme has returned recently, during the pandemic: she and fellow Panama/Berlin artist Ela Spalding sent each other voice notes exploring their experiences of motherhood. In the resulting artwork, *Vida* (2020), Prosper manipulated footage shot in Panama to bring out scintillating glitch effects and visceral, flickering color; Spalding, in Berlin, provided the sound. "It's this kind of digital... migration," Prosper says.

When the pandemic first broke out over the winter, Prosper and her family had been visiting family in Panama and had planned to return to Germany in February. "In the middle of it!" she says. "When we were there, we were on the beach. We were having a great time in paradise. Why are we coming back to the crazy pandemic in Europe?" So they decided to stay in Panama for three more months, where the children would be able to enjoy themselves in nature—but then the pandemic arrived there. "Things got very bad there," she says. "So we wanted to come back—here it was already fine—we couldn't. Everything... The airport was closed. I got ten flights cancelled. In June, we were able to come... only because we got on a humanitarian flight to Mexico City. Kian, *estoy hablando por teléfono, por favor*—" Prosper's son has been dancing in the background, and trying to steal her headphones so that he, too, can be part of the conversation. At one point during the interview, when we're discussing the multiculturalism of Berlin as a city ("I don't know if I'll ever be German," Prosper admits, "and I don't know if that's positive or negative, I'm not even making a judgement about it, but it's the reality."), Kian nudges

I SEE MY ART ALSO LIKE

THAT: A MEANS OF LIGHT. I SEE MY ART ALSO

LIKE THAT: A MEANS OF LIGHT. I SEE

his mother, saying, “*Mami, dile que hablo inglés.*” He then shows me his T-shirt, which has those double-sided sequins on it (very cool!). Prosper gently pushes him away. “But yeah,” she says. “That was crazy.”

“I have to say, something positive about being quarantined is that people really got creative,” Prosper adds. “This year, I produced so much work. I’m like, ‘Why? How?’ It’s weird, because even though I have kids, I have other responsibilities, I still found the time to produce things—because I couldn’t do anything else.”

A major new project that she’s proud of is the Panama Fem Art Coalition, a group of nine women artists gathered by María Raquel Cochez over the summer with the goal of building a strong contemporary art community—something like artists’ mutual aid. “It’s about us inspiring each other and also inspiring other artists, but also we want to give workshops to the general public.” She’s mentoring an intern, and they’re organising funding for artists’ COVID-19 relief and, in the future, scholarships. “The art scene in Panama is so small and so... There’s no money for that. The government doesn’t see any value in art or culture. It’s almost nonexistent. So we have to do it, for ourselves and for the rest of the community.” It’s what Prosper’s most excited about—especially because one of the collective’s members, Giana De Dier, also works on the subject of heritage by exploring her Afro-Caribbean roots. A curator, noticing the common themes in De Dier and Prosper’s work, suggested that they collaborate. “But she doesn’t know—the curator—and nobody knew that my... the other grandfather, the father of my mom, comes from Martinique. I’m Afro-Caribbean-Chinese... Afro-Caribbean-Indigenous, because my grandmother is also Indigenous.” Prosper still has so much of her family history to excavate—the China trip was only the beginning. “She [De Dier] does collage. I do video. Maybe we do something like a video collage!” But Prosper stresses that identity isn’t the only thing she works on, although it does come up as a main thread across all her work, even the ones that aren’t about Chineseness. “It comes to me,” she says.

As we speak, it quickly becomes apparent that Prosper is very much a practice-based artist for whom the process, with all the serendipitous outgrowths that might occur, is the most important and compelling part of art. Whether she’s shooting footage, editing new work, or collaborating with fellow artists, her approach is hands-on, and she learns and develops as she works, finding the most interesting project for each commission or exhibition. When I ask her about one of my favorites of her pieces, *Movable Posters* (2013), a TV installation piece centered on those plastic Buddhist holographic cards you can buy in China, her response is, “I just wanted to play with it.” She had actually conceived it for a party: “This club was closing, and they had so many TVs. So many. They were gonna put it on the street, and I was like, ‘No, no, I have to recycle it,

because I also like to recycle things—DVDs, equipment, synthesizers, it’s all recycled. And then we had the idea, ‘Okay, we are doing a party. Let’s bring those TVs to this place.’” Prosper recalls. She created footage to display on the TVs, and the resulting installation was popular with guests; and that was that. “Something that I like to do is to have, like, decorative videos... Some sort of ornament. You come and you see this painting hanging on the wall, or you have this lamp. I see my art also like that: a means of light. ‘We need some light here,’ you put this feeling with this, and it lights up...” Then she finds a phrase she likes: “an object video sculpture.”

An object video sculpture—like that early aquarium piece: a silent video of Laura-fish swimming about in the background; why not? Why must everything have to be ‘about’ things? Excited, because I too think ‘aboutness’ is overrated, I put on my art historian hat and ask to what extent Prosper identifies with formalism. “Umm...” Prosper says. “Yeah. Maybe the thing is that somebody else has to write about my work. I’m just telling you how it came out.” She isn’t philosophical, and she doesn’t like labels—she just *does*.

Even more concept-based works are still centered on process. Prosper tells me about what she’s currently working on: five years ago, a friend of hers gave her hundreds, perhaps thousands, of 60mm footage from East Germany in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. “I love the idea of the found footage. When you project them, they look amazing, there’s the grain. I love it... I don’t really know what to do with this, it’s not really my story, it’s not my heritage,” Prosper explains. So she invited Wilke, from *Inverted memories*, to collaborate with her—Wilke grew up in East Berlin, “so these films mean a lot to her. She saw it and said, ‘Oh wow, that’s how I went to school. Oh, that’s like my grandmother’s whatever.’” The working title is *Reminiscences of Red*, but they’re still not sure what form the product of their collaboration will take. “I’ve been collaborating for some years and I love it,” Prosper says. “It brings a certain dimension to what you do. You don’t stay too much in yourself.” It’s less selfish; more universal.

So what is the process? While the raw footage that Prosper works with always has some kind of autobiographical element, some aspect of ‘truth’, “I rarely use the footage as it is.” She is interested in mixing and messing with the boundary between analog and digital. “I like to call it creation by destruction,” Prosper says. She shoots in 4K because all the cameras these days are high-definition, but she’s not interested in creating high-definition art that just looks the same as all the other ads and movies we see in daily life. She doesn’t want to feel constrained by technology: “‘contemporary’ also means that you

can work with all the things we have available.” She likes it best when the analog becomes digital, and the digital becomes analog. “I like to work with an intersection,” she says.

And the way in which Prosper works, combining her aesthetic intuition and the negotiation of obsolete technologies, is fascinating: “I could easily not do it, but since I like that so much, I go through it, and it’s super... it’s a very long process. Basically, I take the images digitally and I put them in a computer and I edit them, I change the colors, I do something that the computer does. Then I burn that in a DVD burner, which the computer doesn’t have anymore, so you have to add an external DVD burner. So I have my DVD. Then, the DVD, I put it in the DVD player. And then that DVD player connects to a synth because the synth doesn’t have the USB. It’s just these old cables. So the DVD connects to the synth, through these S-video cables—old cables that computers don’t have anymore. The synth connects to the TV and then the TV with the synth... You get all this glitch and this damaged thing. And then you can see it on the TV. And then I have to capture that again. I have to record it with a camera. Because there’s no way I can connect that TV to my computer. It’s just too old. So then I have to record the TV again, and then I take that image from the camera—that is digital and is 4k—and then I put it again on the computer. And that’s how I do the layers. Sometimes I do that process one, two, three times, if I want to do different layers with different things. So that’s how long it is. That’s why my work is very process-oriented,” she concludes. Although she has ideas at the outset, the results always surprise her. “I never, never know what the outcome’s gonna be.” ☺

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