

Wing Young Huie, photographer

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center, Oct. 11, 2010

Q Tell me a little bit about yourself.

A I'm the youngest in my family. I'm the youngest of six and I'm the only one in my family that was not born in China, so I'm the only non-immigrant. I was born and raised in Duluth; I'm a native Minnesotan. I grew up wanting to be a writer because I read a lot as a kid and when I got to the University of Minnesota I enrolled in the Journalism Department. Not photojournalism – I was training to be a reporter. But when I was a sophomore in college I bought a camera and became fascinated by photography. Took an Intro to Photography course and considered switching majors to photography, but decided to stick with the journalism major and that I could combine my photography skills – or self-taught photography skills – with my journalism degree and become a freelance journalist, which is what I ended up doing. And so I worked for a number of publications regionally and eventually quit writing and stuck with photography. Became a commercial photographer, did all kinds of photography to make a living – from weddings to editorial photography - and then decided to focus on my own projects, which is what I've been doing for the last 15 years.

Q What initially inspired the University Avenue project?

A The University Avenue Project is a culmination of really 35 years of work – that's how long I've been photographing. My most well known project up until then was Lake Street USA, in which I photographed the neighborhoods connected by Lake Street, from Uptown to the Mississippi River. After doing that project and installing 675 photographs taken over four years of every day life along University Avenue – in store windows, on sides of buildings, on bus stops, on sides of buses – I didn't think I would do another project that big. But in 2007 I was working with Public Art St. Paul on another project along University Avenue with Christine Larson, the president of Public Art St. Paul. She asked me if I would consider doing a project on University Avenue like I had done on Lake Street. And I said no. I didn't think I had the energy to do a project like that because it took so long and takes a lot of money. But the more I thought about it and more I thought about how my work had shifted since I had done Lake Street and thinking about conceptual ideas and just trying different things – thinking about the intentions of what I do, the impacts of what I do – I started thinking I could do it in a fresh way that wouldn't seem like a repeat of Lake Street. And so I applied for a grant from the Joyce Foundation, received a grant, and Public Arts St. Paul produced the exhibit. We opened the exhibit May 1st along University Avenue – it's a six month exhibit and it's got less than three weeks to go – where we installed 250 photographs ranging in size from 8 x 10 inches to 30 x 45 feet, in about 90 locations – businesses, windows, sides of buildings. But the centerpiece of the exhibit is an outdoor projection on an outdoor movie sized screen – 40 feet wide – on which we project 450 images that I'd taken over three years of the everyday realities along University Avenue in St. Paul from the State Capitol to just west of 280. The large-scale project...Public Arts St. Paul is a small nonprofit, and to put on something like this – this massive – is incredible. Working with hundreds of volunteers, many businesses, nonprofits, community organizations, other artists, other arts organizations, Northern Lights, Steve Dietz the creative director came up with the concept for the projection site, MS & R Architects designed it, and that's just a part of the large team and the thousands of photographs, thousands of people that I photographed that are part of it.

Q I saw the show this summer and would like to come back. Is there something special planned for Oct. 31?

A Yes, October 31st, Halloween night, is the last day of the exhibition. We've had four cabarets, we've had a stage in front of the projection, the 40 foot screen, and had all different kinds of performers, all different kinds of performances, cultural influences, genres and so on. Our last cabaret will be October 30th, which is a Saturday. We'll have a closing ceremony at the projection site – 1433 University Avenue – across from Walmart. We're not sure what we're going to plan for the closing ceremony but it will be very simple.

Q Going back to the Lake Street project, what were the commonalities and differences with the University project?

A In a way it's all part of a continuum. All my projects really look at everyday life, really...I collect in a way. I collect points of view, I collect little bits of reality and put them up in a way that show my subjective point of view but also they act as mirrors. So Lake Street and University Avenue really are microcosms of what we are becoming, who we are as Minnesotans and as Americans. There are differences. Part of the difference is just that it was a different time in my life when I was doing them. So building on the experience of what I did with Lake Street USA and reacting to it just photographically. In some ways it's hard to really articulate all the differences, but I think that University Avenue is just structurally or geographically bigger than Lake Street. The streets are wider, it's vast, there are big box retailers, there are light industrial. So the challenges of putting a public exhibition on University Avenue is different than Lake Street, which is why we decided to scale up the photographs as much as possible. And we were able to do that with a generous donation from 3M. They donated \$50,000 worth of materials and installation costs to put mural size photographs on buildings. But I think in terms of the cultural landscape University Avenue, because it's the inner city, suffers much of the stigma that any inner city neighborhood has. The projection site really is a communal space, it's a town square. It's interesting to see how people react to it. For instance, one man who lives down the block said that he's lived there all his life. He has two nieces who live in south Minneapolis, but they will not come to visit him because they think it's too dangerous. So he brought them to the projection site because here is a way to show people what the Avenue is really like.

Q In one of your interviews, you noted that there is a gap between the reality of University Avenue and the perception. Can you talk more about that?

A Well I'm a native Minnesotan. There are a lot of perceptions about who Minnesotan's are. And you ask people outside the State or even people inside the State – what is Minnesota? And who are Americans? They say the current phrases of main street or real Americans. So I think that growing up in Minnesota I was formed by the same myths and cultural icons that everybody in the state is formed by – the Vikings, Paul Bunyan, Mary Tyler Moore, Lake Wobegon. Well, that addresses the past. So the realities of who I am and who my family, what they're about, is not reflected in popular culture in America or in the State. So yeah, growing up people ask me where I'm from – innocent question. But I would say I'm from Duluth. They say, no, where are you really from. And I'd say I really am from Duluth. It may seem like an innocent question and I think any time anybody asks you a personal question to kind of start a conversation, you

appreciate that. But not everybody gets that question in that way. What is implied is that I'm a foreigner, or adopted, or that I'm not quite...there's "us" and there's "you." When they ask that question, I'm not part of the "us." Now Lake Wobegon is an ethnocentric creation. It's brilliant. But it's fictional. Part of the problem is that people think Minnesota IS Lake Wobegon. It's so imbedded in our culture, in our media, in our everyday conversations that there are hundreds of thousands of people like me who bump into those realities on a daily basis. Love the show; don't live there. I live in a place called Minnesota.

Q Can you talk about the different neighborhoods along University?

A It's difficult to characterize neighborhoods or to make general characterizations. But along University Avenue there are big box retailers, there's mom and pop stores, there's condominium communities, there are families who have lived there for many generations and there are people from all over the world. In one high school, all of the students are immigrants; there are 40, 50 countries represented. So no matter how you think about urban life – socio-economically, ethnically, culturally, gender, sexual preference, spiritually – it's all there.

Q University Avenue, with its wide mix of businesses and types of people who live and work there, may be the most diverse street in the Twin Cities. What did you notice about all these people who share a common street?

A I think we live in a polarized culture, disparate neighborhoods, people walk in their own bubbles. Their connection is that they live there, or they work there, or they shop there, or they worship there, or they play there. What really connects any of us? You know, in a way we live in ghettoized islands – we go from one place to the other, but we don't, to avoid, or we don't see all the stuff that's in between. This project is about all the stuff that's in between. What binds us all culturally, it's really hard to say. Certainly there are churches or organizations where people from all different walks of life are gathered, but that's the exception. At our projection site we did see people that represented all people in the photographs, but it's hard to say...I photographed a very small percentage of the people along the neighborhoods. You're talking about hundreds of thousands of people, at least tens of thousands of people. So...but hundreds of thousands of people who go through. In this exhibition, tens of thousands of people see the exhibit every day whether they want to or not. But all the imagery that's out in public, all the photographs...I've read that the average person in a metropolitan area sees ten to twenty thousand images a day. But how many of those images reflect the people looking at them? How much are marketing and media realities? How much of that is representative of a mostly white culture? Or mostly white male culture? So what I'm trying to do is create a new iconography of Minnesotans – this is what we look like.

Q Can you share a few stories about people you've met along the street?

A I photographed thousands of people and it's interesting using the chalkboards. With my previous projects I interviewed a lot of people in the photographs and included their words alongside the photograph. With this project I decided to incorporate the words directly into the photograph and I decided to use a chalkboard – something very simple and something kind of old fashioned. I just made my own chalkboards. And I decided to come up with a list of questions that would not be easily answered but that would address a lot of different issues – thoughts, dreams, fears, hopes. And it's

amazing what people decided to reveal. I asked a lot of different questions but there ended up being a sort of a core six questions: what are you – not who are you, what are you? How do you think others see you? What don't they see? What advice would you give to a stranger? What's your favorite word? Describe an incident that changed you. And then the last question was how have you been affected by race? And so I walk up to you on the street and ask if you wanted to be photographed as part of this community photography exhibit and then asked if you wanted to write on a chalkboard. I would ask you these questions, you would give me the answers – whether you write them down or you give them to me verbally – and then I would pick what I thought was the most interesting answer and ask you to write that down on the chalkboard. So it's really amazing what people decided to reveal. It'd be hard to pick out one or two because it addresses so many things. But I think it's unusual for...I mean some people revealed things that I think they don't reveal to the people around them and here they're revealing them to a stranger, someone who's going to put them up in public. And it's a vast array of inner thoughts. Maybe rather than give you an example of people I photographed, I gave a presentation to sixth graders and the teacher asked the students to pick a photograph that made them feel uncomfortable. And one sixth grade boy, he said, well you know what that person wrote on the chalkboard? I don't like what they said because they're showing you their weakness and people take advantage of that. Another boy said, yeah. You show people your vulnerabilities and they can hurt you. Then a girl got up and she said, well I think if you show people what you're really like, it could make you stronger. And I said, well – I asked the entire class – well, what if everyone did this? What if everyone showed their true selves and their vulnerabilities? What do you think would happen? And the first boy who spoke said, well I think the world would be a different place. In that same class a boy said, you know I really like your pictures. I said, that's great; what do you like about them? He said, well they're real. I said, don't you ever see real photographs? And he said, no. I think we all know what that means.

Q Did you meet people who have been here for many decades?

A As an artist I really don't want to...because just the amount of...say people who have been here for a long time? That's as vast and complex, you know what I mean? And for people who have come recently...I'm not sure if one thing binds all of them. So it'd be difficult for me to characterize one whole group. I'm not a social scientist. As an artist I put things up in a way so that they're ambiguous. So my point of view is not obvious and it's up to the people to interpret for themselves. Now my parents are immigrants; they weren't refugees, but they were immigrants and they had a hard life. So the word "immigrant" now is loaded. My family emigrated illegally. So we live in a time where we are very polarized. And how we think of each other has a lot to do with photographs because we're formed by photographs. But that kind of complexity, that kind of all that humanity that's out there...that's why I'm very careful in how I talk about the people themselves because it's the photographs that you see that represent them.

Q Do you have any thoughts as to why University Avenue has always attracted people who want to start something new?

A I would think that every major city has a street like University Avenue – inner core, white flight ,70s, real estate goes down, people who have less move in, becomes gentrified, condominiums come in, artists come in...I don't know... So I think... that's not really my field. The "why" of things is not really my field; I just photograph it.

Q Before your did this project, what are your earliest memories of University?

A My first project was on University Avenue – the Frogtown neighborhood. That was in 1993 to 1995 that I photographed and had an exhibition/installation on the corner of University Avenue and Dale in 1995. That was my first solo show. I was interested in Frogtown because the neighborhood I grew up in, in Duluth, we were the only Asian family and I was always the only Asian kid in school. So every room that I was in growing up, if there was another Asian person in it I was probably related to them. So moving down to the Twin Cities and moving not too far from Frogtown, where on University Avenue there are dozens and dozens of Asian restaurants and markets...so when I was living in Lowertown I spent a lot of time on University Avenue – ate there – I went to every single place. And when I was deciding on a project, I decided to photograph the neighborhood because I was interested in what goes on in a neighborhood? And the Frogtown neighborhood was the kind of neighborhood that you'd only hear about when something bad happened. I only knew of its reputation. Like many inner city neighborhoods, how much of the reputation of it is driven by the media? So I wanted to understand all of the stories behind the 10:00 news. And at the time...one of the oldest neighborhoods in St. Paul, borders the State Capitol. But when I was photographing there all of the European immigrants and their descendants, a lot of them moved out. Half the population was African American, half was white, a quarter was Southeast Asian and a mix starting of Latinos and people from other parts of the world. So I would see a Hmong family on the street, I'd see the older immigrants and I'd think, that's probably how my parents looked when they first arrived to Duluth. They looked a little lost. They look like a part of them never left wherever it is that they came from. My mother never learned to speak English. Then I'd see the younger kids and they're like me – Americanized or becoming Americanized. And I see the gulf between that younger generation and the older generation and I thought, well that's my family. So seeing that kind of mix was fascinating. So I think photographing areas like that and showing the photographs to the people there and the surrounding neighborhoods and to the world beyond...even though I photographed a very small part people will say...they're surprised, like: wow – really? All those kind of folks live along here? Because walking down the street you only see one thing, or you see a certain thing. But you have to go into the schools, into the businesses, into the homes. Not everything is apparent from the street.

Q What changes are you seeing? Are they good?

A I don't think about negative or positive. I don't think that's how things should be. I try to photograph how things are. I'm not a moralist.

I think there's a lot of changes. In a way University Avenue is the way Lake Street was before it was developed, before they widened the streets, before there was a lot of focus on Lake Street. Now you're starting to see a lot of focus on University Avenue. But I don't know. I mean really, I'm not an historian, I'm not...I don't think about things that way...how things have changed, big shifts – I can't really say. I photographed Frogtown 15 years ago and in some ways it's the same and in some ways it's different. But again I only see a part of it. That's not my intent, to compare one area to the other. So I don't look at things that way. And as an artist I'm careful not to characterize because it's just, I'm not sure. But it is a microcosm of who we are. It's who we are becoming and it's complex, it's vast. There are many layers. It's a colliding kaleidoscope of humanity.

Q If people who live in a bubble would come out and really experience a place like University Avenue, how do you think it might change their perception of the world?

A A lot of people who have come to the projection site are not from the area and I think it's eye opening. But it's hard to know what really goes through people's minds. It's hard for people to know themselves. I don't know...one area or the other – which is more eye-opening, which is more revealing, which is more...certainly University Avenue is really like I said a microcosm. But to characterize one neighborhood over another, I mean, I don't know...those are questions that...

Q What kind of reactions to your projections have you received?

A There are really so many comments. Someone will say, you got us. They don't know. They don't know what it's really like. What does that really mean? I don't know. But you do get a feeling that there is the idea of University Avenue, there's the idea of who we are as Minnesotans, there is the idea of the inner city. And so people are confronted with that, they bond with that, they're challenged by that. And they're not just looking at other people; photographs act as mirrors. They're looking at themselves and they're looking at their perceptions. They're challenged by what they think, what they know.

Q How could you briefly describe University Avenue to someone who had never been there?

A I spent four years doing that so I don't think I could do that in several seconds.

Q Is there anything else?

A Well, there are University Avenues everywhere. So I think that really what I'm doing is I'm photographing the cultural landscape. It's not particular to University Avenue, it's particular to America.