

On Finding Community And Comfort In Collaboration: 2019 Resident Artists Big Chicken and Baby Bird

Nat Bradford and Tsz Kam (a.k.a [Big Chicken and Baby Bird](#)) are a two-person collective and artists in #BBATX's 2019 Residency. In this interview with #BBATX committee member Jen Rachid, they discuss how and why they became collaborators, as well as the inspiration behind their art.

This interview has been condensed from a conversation with #BBATX committee member Jen Rachid.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Nat Bradford and Tsz Kam are a two-person collective, pair of birds, and dynamic duo currently living, working, and dying in Austin, TX. Their work centers around the experience of shifting between girlhood and womanhood within the ambiguity of gender. Their work stages fantastical scenes of domestic comfort in which objects and figures become characters with inevitable roles to play in seduction and repulsion. They have been collaborating since 2015. Both studied at and received their BFA from The University of Texas at Austin (the Lamborghini of public schools).

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUNDS:

Tsz Kam: I was born in Hong Kong. My grandfather who came from a wealthy family had all his family money taken away by the communists. He escaped to Hong Kong, which was a British colony at the time. He was always strongly anti-communist China and wanted me to have an American education. I moved to Houston for high school when I was 13, stayed with my relatives and got into UT Austin. I've been more or less on my own ever since. I never went back. I am almost 26 now, so I have spent half my life in Hong Kong and half my life in Texas. I got into UT as an engineering major, but I switched out on the first day. My grandfather passed away right before my high school graduation and I knew he would have wanted me to go to college to pursue a field I am passionate about. I had no knowledge about the art world or galleries at the time. I had a very typical public school art education. As I progressed through the undergraduate art program, I learned more and more and I knew it was something I want to do for the rest of my life.

Nat Bradford: I've always lived in Texas, I grew up running around in the junkyard my dad ran when I was a kid. I saw my family working with their hands often; dad working on cars, mom made a shit ton of crafts with me, my grandmother has been running a business doing plants for office buildings, and my mother helps with that. I spent the past five years working with plants and realized I'm the third generation in my family doing that sort of work. I had the weird queer-teen-growing-up-in-Texas-suburbs experience. I'm not really visibly queer now but my experiences attached to that aspect of myself still influence how I live. I think Tsz and I share that and are able to express it in our work together.

HOW DID Y'ALL MEET? WAS IT A MATCH-MADE-IN-HEAVEN RIGHT AWAY?

Kam: We both attended the undergraduate art program at UT Austin. I was a junior when I met Nat. We had painting together and I quickly found out how talented Nat is as an artist. I also really admire her work ethic. We weren't making collaborative work at the time; we wouldn't start that til two years later. I would say it's more of a gradual process of coming together. My hobby in college was to bother other people when they worked on their art late at night at the studio. The UT art building was still open 24/7 back then and people would stay really late, or even sleep in the building. We were both doing that a lot.

Bradford: We are both smokers so we also hung out at the picnic table while smoking outside in between and during class. That's how we became familiar with each other at the beginning.

Kam: I remembered purposefully seeking her out, because there's something about Nat that was very attractive to me.



HOW DID Y'ALL START WORKING TOGETHER? DO Y'ALL FILL IN EACH OTHER'S GAPS?

Kam: We applied for the Co-Lab Summerskool the year right after I graduated. We made some collaborative sculptures and installations.

Bradford: I was still at UT when we worked on that project, I had only participated in a few shows at the time and the prospect of a collaborative show was exciting. A lot of the work we made for that show was sculpture, so that was the beginning of Tsz and I getting into that realm. I didn't super enjoy making sculptural pieces on my own but collaborating with Tsz brought actual enjoyment to the process. Tsz is good at making sure I don't get in over my head logistically, but gets me out of my head when it comes to building concepts and making art. We took a break for a bit after that show, I was still finishing school but the others working on that show graduated.

Kam: The year that followed was tough for me. I didn't like anything I was making. I felt embarrassed and I was having a hard time finding a full time job at the time due to my circumstance. I didn't stop making but it took me a while to say, "forget the rules, just draw what I've always wanted to draw." That's when I came up with the macaroni themed paintings. I started having critique circles at my house and I invited Nat. We started hanging out and making work while hanging out, we still weren't really collaborating at the time, but we talked about it. When Andrea Hyland invited me to be part of ArtBash in 2017, I asked to have Nat be in the show with me. That's when we first started to experiment with more serious collaboration. I think being here without my parents since I was 13 has always given me a little bit of a co-dependent tendency. Being an artist seems like a one man show sometimes, and I figured why not do it with another person, so I can have someone to share my joy with.

Bradford: Yeah, and a lot of our new works deal with the idea of co-dependency so I feel that too. Growing up queer led to a lot of isolating myself when I was younger but holding on really hard to friendships that felt safe, I still live that way on some level and collaboration with Tsz is one of those comfortable spaces. Actually making the work doesn't necessarily feel safe, I'm scared as hell when we start on something new, but it's an exciting sort of shared fear I guess. It's nice to have another person there to stare at a blank canvas with.

WHAT ARE SOME BOOKS, MUSIC, PODCASTS, PEOPLE ETC. THAT INSPIRE YOUR WORK?

Bradford: We listen to horror podcasts constantly while we work. I don't know if we derive any inspiration from that regarding the work we make, but it's become part of our collaborative ritual. I've been looking into alchemy and imagery in that for a bit, interested in the characters that have been given to the components of reactions. I think our work has some of those ideas in it too, we create a lot of characters that develop in the paintings narratively.

Kam: I think it's ironic that we listen to so many horror themed podcasts while we work because our work space and relationship have so much love and care in them. I think in some ways, it's because we feel safe with each other that we can face the fear of confronting these really difficult themes in our work concerning our gender and queer identities.

WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND YOUR COLLABORATIVE ARTIST NAME?

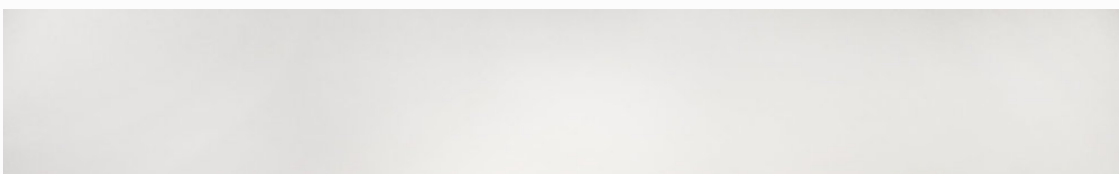
Bradford: Tsz started calling me a baby bird in college because they'd startle me often. Tsz always wore a purple velvet cape and was bold as fuck. When we did our first collaborative works together they made a huge embroidery piece that had the face of a chicken on it and that was settled. We have our respective titles but trade off being Baby or Big when we work. You're the Big Chicken of whichever element in a piece you're working on; I'll be working on part of a painting and ask Tsz for verbal input as I go, "Is this yellow, yellow enough?" And Tsz will be doing the same from the other end of the painting.

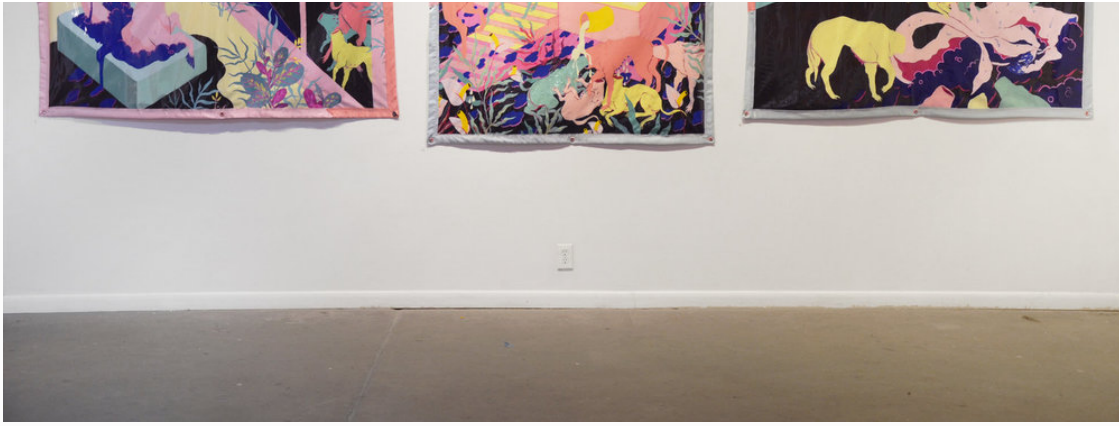
Kam: The embroidery piece that gave us the idea for BIG CHICKEN was of a pawn shop sign. It's a very common neon sign in the streets of Hong Kong. I made the whole sign look like a stylized chicken because the word "chicken" is slang for a prostitute in Cantonese. Big Chicken and Baby Bird is sort of a play on the big daddy / little girl trope.

WHAT IS THE GENERAL MOOD OF YOUR ART?

Bradford: When I'm working on something with Tsz I think we build more humor into it off of each other, the paintings are horny but don't take their horniness too seriously. I think our collaborative work has more emotion built into it than my personal work, there's a dialogue between us and that human interaction is important to the work.

Kam: I think our work is a bit moody. It's a sort of gloomy humor.





THE DOOR BY THE GARDEN, 2018

FOR PEOPLE THAT ARE LOOKING FOR A CREATIVE COLLABORATOR WHAT WOULD YOUR ADVICE BE FOR FINDING AND MAINTAINING THAT RELATIONSHIP?

Kam: I remembered making the effort to actually pursue Nat. I don't think it's because she's particularly standoffish. I think most people are a bit shy when it comes to making new commitments. I communicated very clearly to her it is something I really want to commit to with her and I showed up and spoke with my actions.

Bradford: Yeah I'm shy, I had to convince myself someone liked what I do enough to want to work with me, especially when I really admired the work Tsz was making. But I think we both saw potential in what we could offer each other. And we both keep weird hours that other people aren't happy to work in. We've always both been down to put in a full day-job-work-day and then meet up after, late, and then work on art even later. Weekends and free time are for art making; we both get our satisfaction from working too much. You really have to find someone with similar expectations and work ethic, that's just as important as our work's visual synchronicity.

Kam: Mutual respect and open communication are definitely very important for maintaining the relationship. I really admire Nat's skills and talent, she's better at certain things than I am, and I think we both take advantage of the other's stronger suits. Every time we brainstorm for a project, I don't really worry about getting my way or anything. I believe in her judgements when it comes to certain things that I am not as good at and I know she does the same for me. I just know that whatever we make will end up being great because we worked on it together. I am not a collaborative relationship guru, so I can only speak about my own experience.

WHAT DO YOU THINK PEOPLE NEED TO HEAR RIGHT NOW?

Kam: Don't be afraid to talk to other people.

Bradford: You might just make a friend!

TSZ AND NAT'S CURRENT HOBBIES INCLUDE:

Kam: Transformers, fabulous, gay, gender-defying robots in disguise. I read a lot of Transformers fanfictions. They inspire me.

Bradford: Watching wrestling and watering my plants. I'm a tattoo apprentice right now, which isn't a hobby but has me doing a lot of research in that realm in my free time.

ANY PROJECTS OR VENTURES YOU WANT TO SHARE ?

Kam: I have a solo show coming up in June in El Paso at the Galeria Cinco Puntos. The theme is fantasy and escape. Aside from my personal works, Nat and I are also collaborating on a series of chimera themed paintings right now, which will be shown for the first time at the Elizabeth Ney Museum here in Austin on July 11th.

Bradford: I'm currently running my Etsy shop (GNATandRAT.etsy.com) to keep food in me and a roof over me. I mostly sell pins and little paintings, I try to offer the kind of affordable art objects I seek out myself.

WANT TO SEE WORK BY #BBATX RESIDENT ARTISTS BIG CHICKEN AND BABY BIRD IN-PERSON?

The opening reception and artist talk for Big Chicken and Baby Bird's exhibition will be held on July 11 at the Elisabet Ney Museum. The exhibition opens at 6:30 PM with complimentary refreshments by [Austin Cocktails](#), followed by a tour of the museum at 7:00 PM and an artist talk at 7:30 PM. The exhibition itself will be open through July 22. [Click here to learn more.](#)



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