

Transcript of *In Conversation* with Olivia Eng

Winter 2022

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Andréa Spearman: Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

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Olivia Eng is a San Francisco Bay Area multi-disciplinary artist, performer, teacher, and choreographer. She graduated from UC Irvine studying Afro-Modern dance with Donald McKayle, focusing on dance performance and sociology. She has combined her passion for dance, music, photography, herbal medicine, and holistic practices into works of art that have taken her around the globe. During a hiatus after a series of surgeries for a congenital spine defect, she began developing the S.C.A.R.S. project (Strength, Courage, and Resilience of the Soul) with the mission to foster healing through dance, storytelling, poetry, cross-cultural exchange, and holistic practices.

Hello everyone. Welcome back to *In Conversation*. We're here with Olivia Eng. Hi!

Olivia Eng: Hi Andréa, thanks so much for inviting me to this.

[00:01:27.00]

Andréa: Yes! We're so excited to have you here with us. Let's jump right in. Please tell our listeners about your background and how you came to study with Donald McKayle.

Olivia: As a young girl I was always interested in the arts. I loved writing poetry and drawing, and I don't exactly know when I decided I really wanted to train seriously in dancing. It was probably when I got a little bit older and into my teenage years. When I was getting ready to decide where I wanted to go after high school, I was looking into a lot of different arts programs and different universities. I think at that time I was trying to get out of the house, so at first I was like somewhere on the East Coast! Far away, you know, to find my own independence because I was always like the baby of the family and felt babied in a lot of ways. I was really wanting to branch out and physically go far, but I ended up choosing UC Irvine.

I didn't really know a lot about a lot of dance history to be honest growing up because I grew up in a really small town and so there weren't a lot of those resources available. And then as I started kind of researching on my own and deciding I wanted to take it more seriously, I did read and research a bit about [Donald McKayle](#) because he seemed

like the main faculty at UC Irvine. And then just kind of reading on his history I was like, “Oh, I definitely want to study with him.” But I missed the auditions to actually get in the year that I was supposed to go in, so I actually spent a year first at UC Santa Barbara with the intention of transferring to UC Irvine after that year. And so I basically caught the audition for the second year and then went in as a sophomore to UC Irvine.

But in terms of my dance history before that, there was this teacher that moved to the States from Argentina. I think when I started to train with him, he was the one that got me thinking more seriously about pursuing it as something that I wanted to do in my life. He had this perfect balance of being a really strict and disciplined teacher where he really was like, “No, you can't cut corners. You gotta do your warm up and your cooldown, and you gotta do what you need to do.” And he just had this way about him that kind of reminded me of my own grandpa from my mom's side where he also had this compassionate kind of energy that made you want to work with him and listen, really listen to everything that he had to share.

I remember one thing that stuck with me that he said one time in class was— he was kind of going through like, “Okay, this is the routine that you need to do to condition yourself” and you were really trained because I came in with more of a sports background as a kid, so he's like “You know, you gotta learn how to use these muscles for dance and it's a little bit different, right?” So he's trying to teach me these things and he was like “Now you do it and you do it every day, but you don't tell anyone. You don't tell anyone. You don't need to tell anyone. You just do it because you know it's what you need to do.” So in other words, the hard work he emphasized that you do behind “closed doors” is just something that you do because it's the discipline that you need to instill in yourself and it's not something that you need to brag about or show people. Especially now, the day and age right now, where everything is so accessible on Facebook and Instagram and you do a live story or whatever, and you can literally capture every part of everything you're doing in every moment. I think that advice really instilled in me this sense of discipline, just doing the things that need to be done to sustain yourself as an artist, as a dancer. Whatever that is for each person.

Andréa: Yeah, so he was basically saying that discipline is your routine and it's not for public show. It's for your personal growth and elevation.

Olivia: Exactly. He's like, “Just do it! Because you need to do it, but you don't need to tell everyone about it.” [laughs]

[00:06:13.29]

Andréa: I've seen some of your previous dance work and it's been outdoors in the elements, so what's that process like for you and what are some of your favorite places to move outdoors?

Olivia: Yeah, I've done a handful of work with other choreographers and groups doing things in site-specific places. The dance film that I facilitated last year also was outdoors. It's so interesting because when I did start my dance training, it was always in a studio, like a more traditional studio with the mirror and the floors and all of that. It wasn't really until I say... maybe in university that I experimented and learned about doing more site-specific type work, and even that was pretty minimal. It was still a more traditional setting of usually being in a theater space or in a studio with that that was made for dance. Actually when I moved to the Bay is where I got really more introduced into that. That idea of it's kind of a thing, a site-specific work. I think for me in the different ways I've experienced it, it kind of just depends on the work. I remember once many years ago when I worked with [Paco Gomes](#), an Afro-Brazilian choreographer from Bahia, I did a piece with him that was in Civic Center on top of that fountain right in the middle of the plaza. They turned the fountain off basically and we danced on top of the fountain and that was part of [Trolley Dances](#). It was interesting because it was a piece that was an Afro-Brazilian/contemporary/modern fusion and then the piece was already set. It was already something that we had done before and then using the space of the fountain really changed different elements of it, where he could kind of emphasize and highlight different sections of it more, or it had a different meaning to it.

Then I think for me personally when I've done my own work, literally being by any kind of natural body of water but then dancing by it gives me that same effect. It just feels very serene and it just gives a kind of comfort that I don't get when I'm not by it. And then I've done other types of work and pieces also in the redwoods or the forest. I don't know if it's maybe the air or the energy—I think it's a little bit of both to be honest—because you're not enclosed in a space so it almost translates that into the movement of feeling the freedom of being able to extend your energy out beyond any physical limits. That's the kind of feeling I would say I get when I'm dancing outdoors. That expansiveness and then also not being able to see yourself but you have to just feel it. Especially if you're in let's say a forest kind of floor or ground, it's not super flat and even like a dance studio so you have to be really in tune and aware of your movement so you don't step over a branch or fall into a little pothole. And so I think there's something about being outdoors that also just really tunes you in with your senses and your inner awareness that expands outwards. There's just something really beautiful about that.

Andréa: We're going to take a quick break. Thank you for tuning in for this audio experience. To listen to previous *In Conversations* with our dynamic dance community, visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.

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Andréa: So Olivia, in our previous conversations, you mentioned volunteering at a farm. What? [Olivia laughs] Tell us more about that experience and what led you there.

Olivia: Yeah, so it's an interesting journey. My family is from Hong Kong and Kowloon, but I was born here in the States and growing up I had a hard time fitting in with the other kids because we were maybe one of three Asian families in the small town that we grew up in. I experienced a lot of rejection of my culture in different ways. And so I think as a kind of protective mode, I felt this rejection, like self-rejection, and then rejection of the different cultural practices. My mom always had so much wisdom to share with me as a kid growing up of different herbal medicines and things that she would give us. And I would take it, you know, because she was like, "Okay, take this. It's gonna heal your sore throat or help with this sickness" or whatever. And even though I would take it, I always kind of had this attitude of like, "I don't want to hear about this" because it was not wanting to be part of the culture and that sense of "Okay, maybe the kids will accept me more if I'm more like them." And so as I started to heal those intergenerational wounds as I got older, I started to voluntarily, really want to learn more about basically all the things that my mother wanted to share with me when I was younger but kind of rejected or kind of pushed away.

I finally moved to a spot where there's a small space in the backyard to plant things and have a little garden space. And it's something that I was interested in for a long time, of learning how to grow herbs and things as I was getting more into wanting to learn about my ancestral medicine, and so I started to research more. I was looking up different places to learn more about herbalism but specifically I wanted to learn about one type or from one region, but wanted to find an all-encompassing program. [I found] the [UC Gill Tract Farm](#) and was kind of researching in there and saw that they had slots for volunteers to basically kind of dig their hands in and learn in person in that way. And so when I would go in and volunteer at first, I would volunteer on the days that just had to do with learning about herbs and that's in every sense of how to harvest them, how to cultivate them, how to take care of them. And so anything that had to do with herbs I just really, really dove into. I try to keep going when I can and continue learning because I signed up for an herbal program but it's not in person so a lot of my in-person learning comes from actually being at the farm and like digging my hands in and actually getting to practice a lot of the things that I'm studying.

Andréa: That's such a wonderful opportunity and such a multi-disciplinary way to learn more about yourself, to learn more about your culture, to learn more as an artist because I've seen you bring that holistic sensibility to your work as well.

What's a quote or guiding point that has stayed with you over the years?

Olivia: "A great revolution in just one single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a society and further will enable a change in the destiny of humankind."

And that's a quote from [Daisaku Ikeda](#) who is the current president of the [Soka Gakkai International](#), which is a Buddhist practice, basically. It definitely resonates during some

of the deepest struggles that I've had. This is one guidance that helped me to really, as hard as it was, to really try to shift from this mindset of blaming others or external factors or "Woe is me," which we can all get into when we're going through it. Just this and other guidance that was similar to this helped me to try to transform the attitude of "If I want something to change, there's something that I have to change also within myself."

Andréa: Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Right now, we're going to take another break. Thank you for tuning in to this audio experience. To listen to previous In Conversations, please visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.

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Andréa: So Olivia, talk to us about the S.C.A.R.S. project—what is it and how did it manifest?

Olivia: [S.C.A.R.S.](#) is a multi-faceted platform that brings people and community together through the intersection of artistic expression, dance, poetry, music, storytelling, and cross-cultural exchange. And then there's this element of holistic wellness—wellness and herbalism. The goal of it is to encompass the intersection of all those different things, or the mix of all those different things. S.C.A.R.S. is an acronym that I created that stands for Strength, Courage, and Resilience of the Soul.

S.C.A.R.S. is basically inspired and born from my own healing experience and journey that I started in 2012 when I had a really traumatic surgery for a congenital defect in my spine or issue in my spine that I needed to fix because it was starting to affect my ability to walk, let alone dance. I had this surgery and it didn't really go very smoothly and my right leg ended up being paralyzed for almost a year because some of the nerves were so injured during the first surgery that I had back in 2012. As I was going through that first recovery, I ran into a lot of different challenges for the first year so I was just kind of trying to train that right leg to stand on its own and walk again. I was going through a lot of challenges just with not being able to dance anymore and a lot of physical pain and then it brought up a lot of also mental and emotional pain that was just part of that whole process.

I remember I went to this one physical therapist one time during my recovery for that first surgery, and she asked me, "Do you want to have children one day?" and I was like "Yeah, of course." [laughs] And I just— you know, I didn't question it. It's like, "Okay, she's a physical therapist, I'm sure she's gonna link this to something that makes sense, you know. Let me just try to trust this process" and so I kind of assumed that's why she was asking was [due to] some kind of health concern. She was like, "Yeah, I'm asking because I feel like I haven't really worked with too many people your age that have had a surgery in that kind of place, part of your spine." It was in that low back area so it's connected to the pelvis, and then I think when you get pregnant and all that, it might put

a lot of pressure or it's kind of focused in that area. And so I was like, "Okay, maybe that's why she's asking..." She was explaining, "Yeah, you know, so I think that it's probably better [that] if you want to have kids that you do it now since you're still young..."

Andréa: Oh, wow.

Olivia: "...and I'm not sure how this whole thing is going to affect you if you wait too long." And so it's interesting because I never really... it wasn't something that I really worried about, you know. I was like, "Yeah, when I'm ready I'll have them." [I] was 29 at that time. That whole interaction, she was like, "If it's something that you want to do, then you need to focus on finding a nice young man." And she was giving me all this unsolicited advice and here I was literally just trying like, "Let me just take care of this thing first. Let me just heal this first and then let me focus on paying my bills off for that."

It threw me into this kind of depression for a little bit but then—I think this has always been something that even as a kid, I would do—I turn something into art. Whether it was something painful or something joyful, it was always my way of processing basically hard emotions. And so I had this idea of "Yeah, I'm totally gonna have them. I'm not gonna have them right now." It was almost like motivation for myself to reassure myself that I will have them one day because it got me really worried. She got me really worried like "Oh, maybe you're not going to be able to have them one day if you don't do it right now."

And so I had this idea of coming up with this book which would be a collection of people's "scar" stories because I started kind of dabbling a little bit in photography. I feel like I got into that specifically with scars because I was just checking maybe the stitches or something one day on the scars that I had. It took me a while to get used to looking at my body, the way that it had changed, because I also, even directly after the surgery, I was really swollen. I actually looked pregnant because my abdomen was so swollen and some of the fluids hadn't drained out the way that they should have. And so I just looked like a different person when I woke up and it took me a while to get used to seeing that when I would undress and get ready to go into the shower and see the little glimpses of the mirror and stuff. And so I think the photography part came into mind because I would make myself just stand there to look at it until I got past the discomfort of seeing my body that way. And it wasn't— maybe I didn't the first day, I wasn't like, "Oh, I love it. It's awesome, it's great. Let's show everyone this." But I kind of did it as a practice to make myself begin that process of accepting. Like this is where you're at, this is what has happened... it didn't feel good to always go into that space where I would look at it and then I would just feel disgusted.

So I was like, "What are you gonna do about that? You have to be able to look at it long enough." And it kind of was a practice that I had to do every day until I was like, "Okay, now I'm used to seeing it. It's not so bad." And so this process that I went through of having to kind of train my mind in a way to accept it, but in a genuine way, it wasn't like it

happened the first day. It was a process through many months and years. The idea I got from that was then getting to a place where I was starting to actually feel a bit proud of what I went through. But as I was getting better, because when I would kind of look back (“Okay, last year or like a few months ago, and look how much you progressed”), I started to feel like, “Yeah, you know, you’re getting better. You put in a lot of work to get here.” I started to actually feel kind of proud of it. And as I started dialoguing with other people, I felt like making those connections were healing for both people as we shared and exchanged our stories. And then I was kind of interested in getting into some photography since I couldn’t dance. I was like, “I just need some kind of artistic outlet.”

Then the idea came of doing what I call the “[kintsugi photography](#).” It began as painting around the physical scar with gold makeup. I didn’t have any fancy gold paint or anything, but it was just gold makeup and then photographing the person with this kind of honor of their scar. And the inspiration for that came from the practice of [kintsugi](#), which is this ancient Japanese pottery repair technique where if something breaks, it’s put back together and then it’s lacquered. The crack is actually lacquered with gold, which symbolizes a lot of different things, but the main philosophy is that it’s a celebration of the beauty of what the broken object has now become. It has this history so it’s honoring that instead of seeing it as less than, or something that is done for. So that inspired me to do the gold paint instead of just photographing the scar, but kind of embodying that philosophy and that way of seeing it as something celebrated. Honoring the beauty in it actually instead of something that should be hidden.

When I started getting this idea, I was asking some friends that actually had professional cameras, “How would I bring out the scar?” because everything that I looked up was how to hide scars and so I think one of the goals in initiating the project when I first thought of it was going back to the whole experience that I had with the physical therapist: I’m gonna make this book and I’m gonna show my kids that I have one day this book that I created. Kind of in honor of them, to show them the different scope of beauty and strength and resilience. Basically that’s where the acronym came from. Like these are all different representations of what strength, courage, and resilience mean. That’s my motivation—to be able to create more of the world that I would want, that I wish maybe existed.

Andréa: We’re going to take a quick break. Thank you for tuning in for this audio experience. To listen to previous In Conversations with our dynamic dance community, visit our In Dance article archive at dancersgroup.org.

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Olivia: I feel like that might have been something that helped me to stay motivated—to read about other people’s journeys and how they found their own ways and healing ways and

maybe we can all exchange. And [it] kind of developed into what it is now of wanting it to be a platform for these exchanges and storytelling and basically holding each other up and encouraging each other and supporting each other through our journeys.

Andréa: What's the next project for S.C.A.R.S. or what's the next step that's coming up?

Olivia: As the platform has developed and I started to actually dance and move again, [I] had this idea of creating a series, just short dance films where different groups of artists come together with a different theme that's somehow related to scars. And we've done one that's completed, which is the [first one](#) from last year. I reached out to some good friends of mine, but they all lived in different countries. There was one friend from Kenya, there was one from New York who was on her way to move to Senegal, there was a friend from Senegal, there was one from Mexico, there was one couple that actually lived in the Bay, so we were literally from all over and we put together this global group of us where we did some Zoom meetings and we did it in a way that worked for each person in their own location. And that was focused more on actual physical scars and then including some folks in the group that actually had some scars that weren't visible, but they wanted to share their story. For their kintsugi they would paint an iteration or their representation of what their scar, their kintsugi, would be on their body.

So that was the first one [towards] the goal of having a series, and so we're currently working on the second one right now and it's all artists that currently live in the Bay. The theme for that one is basically the acknowledgement, acceptance, and celebration of the different characteristics or traits or practices that are associated with our ethnicity or culture or identity or background in some way that we used to feel like we had to hide or feel ashamed of or felt conditioned to have to reject in some way. Each of us have our own stories from our own backgrounds with that, so we have this highlight of each person's individual journey. And then as we've been rehearsing together and connecting and bonding together, we found some of these threads and throughlines that, even though our stories and experiences may be different, there's also similarities in a lot of them that tie us together well.

Andréa: Well thank you so much, Olivia, for sharing your insight, your artistry, and your journey with us.

Olivia: Thank you so much, Andréa, for giving me a chance to share all of it with you.

[calming mid-tempo music plays in background]

Andréa: Thank you so much for this journey, for this time. We hope you all will tune back in for the next *In Conversation*.

Thanks so much for joining us for this audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.