



Oedo Reggae Festival, 5th Anniversary.

*Racial
Representations
in Asia*

Edited by

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patriotism through asserted political loyalty remains a basic assumption of the now-dominant integration discourse. But its impact and social relevance as a novel have been vitiated by the fact that its embrace of state-propagated anti-communist ideology has been undercut by changes in Philippine foreign and domestic policy as well as region-wide economic and political developments in East Asia. Far more important, Filipinoness itself has undergone important redefinition in light of the Filipino diaspora, and the ritual expressions of patriotism have been transformed as well. Contributions to the 'economic, social and cultural development of our country' can now be done without being physically 'rooted' in the Philippines. Demonstrating one's love of country no longer precludes demonstrating one's political loyalty to another country and taking up citizenship and residency elsewhere. The datedness of *The Sultanate* underscores how quickly some of the ideas of the novel achieved orthodoxy even as subsequent events rendered the other ideas of the novel irrelevant within just a few years of the book's publication.

It is a fitting irony, perhaps, in light of what has happened since *The Sultanate* was published, that plans to develop Chinatown were put into effect around the same time that the government initiated the process of mass naturalization of the Philippine Chinese. The Filipinization of Chinese schools in the early years of Martial Law, by reducing the number of hours of Chinese instruction, ensured that future generations of Philippine-born Chinese would be barely literate in Chinese. This form of integration would effectively turn younger generations of Chinese into cultural *tsut-si-a* whose mestizioness would be both a source of anxiety about the loss of Chinese culture and, by the 1990s, a cultural and economic asset in its ability to claim Filipinoness while accessing and mediating regional East Asian capital and cultural flows (Hau 2005).

Safely Filipinized, Chineseness could now be further commodified not just by the underground extortion/bribery/kidnapping economy that flourished in the wake of the breakdown of law and order during the early seventies (*Manila Bulletin* 1971: 1, 7), but also as an official tourist attraction aimed at increasing state revenues (*United Daily News*, September 17, 1973). Tellingly, the mayor of Manila expressed disappointment that 'Chinatown' had 'lost the quality that sets it apart from the rest of the sections in the city' (Genovea 1972: 3), and found it expedient to set up pagoda gates and order the business establishments to put up 'Chinese signs' to mark the area's 'Chineseness,' just as newspapers began searching for the 'vanishing breed' of 'Chinatown Chinese' (*Times Journal*, June 13, 1973: 20).

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New Arts, New Resistance: Asian American Artists in the 'Post-race' Era

Yasuko Takezawa

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been growing discussions on 'post-race' in the US. Terms such as 'post-race' and 'post-identity' have come to appeal to the younger generations, specifically those of color who grew up witnessing the intense debates surrounding questions of multiculturalism and identity politics in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Racism, in the meantime, still permeates everyday life in American society, whether it manifests itself as racial slurs on the street, the perpetuation of stereotypes, or the workplace 'glass-ceiling.' The complexity of today's racism, however, is carefully disguised, not only repackaging itself like 'old wine in a new bottle,' but sometimes daring the colorful camouflage of 'multiculturalism' or 'cultural celebration,' often used to conceal the structural inequality and institutionalized racism on which 'race' operates as a major axis. Then, admitting the difficulty of the kind of minority resistance movements witnessed a few decades ago (see the Introduction in this volume), what forms of resistance can we conceive of in the face of the changing state of racism?

In this chapter, I explore this question by taking a group of young Asian American artists as a case study.¹ We must acknowledge the specific limitations and characteristics inherent to the art world. Nonetheless, I chose to venture into the realm of artists of color for the following reasons. Contemporary art has often been a cutting-edge arena sensitive to social and political issues, and is one of the realms in which the 'post-race' trend has sharply manifested itself. Furthermore, the mainstream art world in general, and visual art in particular, is known to be conservative and largely dominated by white male curators and critics.² Thus the worldviews of young Asian American artists involved in contemporary art will provide us, I believe, with valuable materials to examine issues such as identity, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, diaspora, and globalization.

While I do not analyze each artist's works from the viewpoint of art history or critique here, I explore from an anthropological viewpoint these artists' identities and their expressions, drawing on my personal interviews with artists and

curators.³ Among them, I focus on a group of young artists who were included in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, an exhibition that opened at the Asia Society in New York in the fall of 2006, traveling through five other cities until the summer of 2008. In this chapter I aim to demonstrate how these young artists react to preceding self-representations by the older generation of Asian American artists as well as to the representations of 'Asian Americans' prevalent in the dominant American society, and examine the alternative style each of them has generated to resist such representations.

Before we proceed to the main discussion, let us take a brief overview of the history and the current status of the term, 'Asian American.' The term was coined in 1968 at the beginning of the Asian American movement, as part of the effort to recollect memories of past discrimination shared among different groups of Asian ancestry and to enhance solidarity among them, while rejecting the term 'Oriental,' commonly associated with stereotypical images of people with East and Southeast Asian backgrounds. In the US census and other demographic data surveys, 'Asian American' has become one of the racial categories employed in its efforts to identify the current conditions of racial discrimination in the country.⁴ Thus, 'Asian American' has come to have *social reality* in terms of becoming an officially recognized racial category in American society, let alone its role as an important dimension of identities among Asian Americans.

In the last several decades, the demography of people of Asian ancestry in the US has dramatically changed. With the reform of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and the acceleration of globalization from the late 1980s, immigrants from all regions of Asia suddenly began to increase. Now two thirds of them are foreign-born, and they encompass a wider range of people rooted in East, Southeast, South, Central, and Western Asia. These demographic changes have problematized who is 'Asian American' and whether or not the category remains meaningful. We will address this issue later in this chapter.

From 'identity-based art' to 'post-identity art'

Multiculturalism in art, or identity-based art took the limelight from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. In contrast to the expressionism of the post World War II period with its focus on individual identity, this style of art rather leveled its gaze on the groups and cultures to which individuals belonged (Robertson and McDaniel 2005; Joselit 2003). One of the representative exhibitions of the time was *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, held in 1990 in New York.⁵

The ultimate exhibition in praising the virtues of multiculturalism, however, took place in 1993 as the Biennial held by the Whitney Museum, an event

always on the leading edge of American art. Multiculturalism was made the theme of the 1993 Biennial, partly because in 1992, many artist groups of African American, Asian American, and other minority backgrounds expressed criticism of the white-male-centeredness of the Biennial, which in its 1991 edition had an emblematic all-white line-up of artists. Margo Machida, one of the key photos of 'Godzilla,'⁶ recollects in a personal interview her and her colleague's disappointment at there being no representation of Asian American artists, except in the film section, in that Biennial. After their investigation of the records her group found almost no representation of Asian American artists in the preceding ten years of the Biennial.⁷

In the 1993 Biennial, for the first time, artists of color, women artists, and queer artists were called upon in large numbers. These two exhibitions challenged and shocked the art world through their questioning of the hitherto presupposed dominance of the heterosexual white male in the field. Among young artists today, however, it is often said that multiculturalism in the arts 'crashed' after the 1993 Biennial. Soon after these exhibitions, the 1993 Biennial became a target of leading art critics, who referred to the works as 'victim art,' implying third-rate art that loudly proclaimed the sufferings of those racially or sexually discriminated against. Holland Cotter, in his review in *the New York Times*, states how identity-based art came to be stigmatized as 'victim art.'

And to make art about race in America—where, it might be argued, slavery didn't really end until the 1960s—is often to tell a sad story. At first such telling had impact, in part because they were unfamiliar in a mainstream context. But soon enough they were stigmatized as 'victim art' and consequently dismissed. (Cotter 2001)

It is noteworthy that the US social climate in 1993 entailed extremely intense racial tensions, as symbolized in the LA civil disturbances and the heated debate on 'culture wars.' Such social trend without doubt has problematized multiculturalism. Although predicted to be a landmark in the history of American art, the Biennial ironically came to be remembered as the turning point leading to the fall of multiculturalism in art.

In the late 1990s, 28 young African American artists based in Harlem began producing and exhibiting a new style of artwork. By 2001 when an exhibition entitled *Freestyle* was held at the Studio Museum in Harlem, it was being referred to in the mainstream art world as 'post-black' or 'post-identity.' According to the catalogue, the exhibition was the creation of young black artists who actually regarded the label of 'Black artist' itself with suspicion and felt they were free to reject it. Thelma Golden defined 'post-black art' in the *Freestyle* show as

that which includes artists who are 'adamant about not being labeled 'Black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness' (Golden 2001:14). From 2005 to 2006 another exhibition called *Frequency*, one close to a sequel to *Freestyle*, was again held at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Both exhibitions came to have a strong influence on young artists from other minority backgrounds, who furthered the 'post-identity' art.

Asia/America

This 'post-race' or 'post-identity' trend also reached young Asian American artists, bringing greater diversity to the themes and media dealt with in their works. The event that cemented this was the 2006 exhibition, *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*. But first, as a way to understand the historical background which later brought forth *One Way or Another*, it is worth making some brief observations about a previous exhibition held in 1994, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*. It was also promoted by the Asia Society, but organized by one guest curator, Margo Machida.⁸

Although the exhibition, *Asia/America*, was limited to first generation immigrant artists, it was quite an advance for the Asia Society, an institution that had dealt only with Asia and traditional fine arts. It was the first exhibition of this scale for this genre of art. In part of the background of this project lay the rapid economic growth achieved by Asian countries in the 1980s, and a fever for contemporary Chinese art and Japanese pop culture in American society.

The exhibition aimed to engage with the ways in which Asian-born immigrant artists expressed their negotiation of life 'between two worlds.' The slash connecting Asia and America in the title symbolically articulated what was happening in the vanguard of the Asian community: the transnationalism that crosses the boundaries of Asia and America, the Asian diaspora, the position of Asian immigrants in American society, and the cultural interaction between the 'East' and the 'West' (Machida et al. 1994: 68).

For instance, Photo 6.1 shows the piece *Hey, Chinktown! You killed my father*, by Ken Chu, a long-time active member of the Asian art community in New York. The piece depicts the everyday experiences of discrimination that lower and middle class Asian American men face: racial discrimination based on references to the Vietnam or Pacific war—past political conditions to which the young Asian American men living in the US bear little or no relation.

Photo 6.2 is a piece by a Hawaii-based artist Masami Teraoka, who came to the US in his mid-twenties. Teraoka employs the *ukiyo-e* style to touch on the

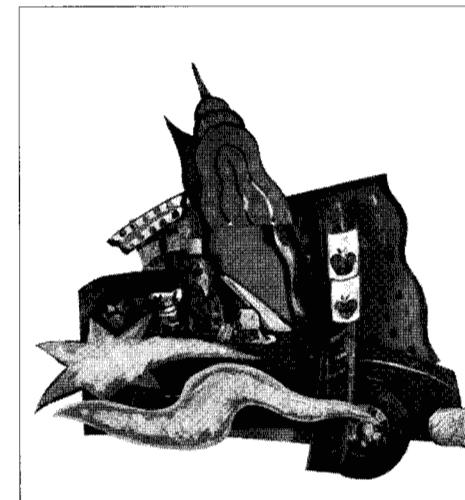


Photo 6.1: Ken Chu, *Hey, Chinktown! You killed my father*, 1990.



Photo 6.2: Masami Teraoka, *Kyoto Woman and Gaijin*, from *New Waves* Series, 1991.

contemporary social problems arising from encounters between 'Westerners' and Japanese. In this work, based on interviews with the artist, the curator of the exhibition notes the emotional oscillation of a Japanese female tourist, torn between curiosity and desire toward an American man she encounters on a Hawaiian beach, and the boyfriend waiting for her in Japan.

One of the major concerns expressed to me by Margo Machida involved what she had in mind at the time of the exhibition: 'we were trying to express our

history and actuality through culture and art to fight stereotyping and racism.⁹ For her generation, heavily influenced by the Asian American movement, art is in part a political tool inseparable from resistance to racism and the demands for more comprehensive rights for the Asian American community.¹⁰

The exhibition, however, met with bitter criticism from both mainstream art circles and some in the Asian American art community. The former attacked the exhibition's political excess and lack of aesthetic sense and direction. The latter deplored the exclusion of American born artists of Asian ancestry, along with what they considered to be the reproduction and reinforcement of stereotypes through the use of exotic images. Such criticisms may be in part attributed to the contemporary context: the project's initial stage coincided with the peak of multiculturalism, when the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora were yet a novelty in the arts; however, it was in 1994 that the show was actually held, only a year after the 1993 'Identity Biennial,' a critical turning point for multiculturalism in art. Further, the inclusion of some pieces that appeared to the audience to be identity-based art with explicit expressions of their experiences as immigrants—either with language, facial expressions, or body posture—resulted in giving the impression that the entire exhibition was the identity-based art show. The difficulty of self-representation thus provided a great deal of frustration for both the artists and the exhibition's curator.

One Way or Another: Curators' narratives and reviews

In order to regain its reputation and to appeal to the general audience with the diversity of Asian American art, the Asia Society organized *One Way or Another*. One of the unique features of the show lies in the fact that it was organized by three curators: Melissa Chiu (from the Asia Society), Karin Higa (from the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles) and Susette S. Min (from the University of California at Davis). This was different from *Asia/America*, which was solely organized by Margo Machida. The curators selected 17 young artists who were mostly born in the 1970s, reaching their late 20s or 30s at the time of the selection. Their focus on this young generation was one of the ways to demonstrate its difference and the time shift from *Asia/America*. The three explained the purpose of the exhibition as follows:

It appears as if the momentum behind what appeared to be a unified and, at times, collective art movement in the 1990s has dissipated and been replaced by a greater emphasis on individual modes of working. The conception and organization of this exhibition illustrates such a shift. (Chiu, Higa, and Min 2006: 8)

The title of the show, *One Way or Another*, was taken from the 1978 hit song of the same name by the rock band, 'Blondie,' which employed a hybrid of pop, disco, punk and reggae, and would, the curators thought, be a perfect representation of Asian American artists, conveying the message that there was no single method or interpretation of Asian American art.

Many of these artists had already received public attention through gallery shows and other exhibitions, reflecting the curators' efforts to find, in Higa's words, 'artists who were emblematic of certain strains within contemporary artistic practice that we thought held promise.'¹¹ Chiu describes another feature of this exhibition, that is, their freedom and options when it came to creating their art:¹²

Although many from an older generation who are involved in the political movement might see this at a point at which the movement has lost momentum, I would prefer to see it as a point in time in which there are many more options for people and the fact that there is no one voice or no one way of doing things is actually much better. You leave people to make choices.¹³

The exhibition demonstrated the diversity in Asian American art today in a number of different respects. For instance, the media utilized by the artists was diverse, ranging from painting, photography, video, and sculpture, to installations. The show was also a way to put forward a resistant representation countering mainstream society's failure to understand Asian American diversity, thus, this time the artists with ties to East, Southeast, South, and West Asia, as well as artists with queer identities were included.¹⁴

To what extent, then, was *One Way or Another* evaluated to achieve curators' intentions? Let us cite here a couple of reviews:

The show covers the waterfront in terms of mediums, while issues of identity shape-shift wildly and sometimes drop entirely from sight. (*New York Times*, Sept. 8, 2006)

That cosmopolitanism is what unites most of the disparate works in *One Way or Another*, abandoning older, more conservative models of identity. (*Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 2008)

Some other reviews, such as those published in *The Week* (October 6, 2006) and *New York Sun* (September 14, 2006) also gave favorable perspectives. It is interesting to note, however, that these reviews essentially mention the show's ascendancy over identity-based art. The diversity in various senses, which the

curators strove to represent, was acknowledged by a number of critiques. Thus, one may be able to say that the show overall has achieved the initial goals the curators set and tried to appeal to the mainstream art world.

One Way or Another: Artists' narratives

The identity-based art pervasive in previous years was essentially absent from *One Way or Another*. In fact, with the exception of one or two artists, any theme relating directly to race or gender was not perceptible at first glance. Nevertheless, my interviews with the artists revealed that their identities were still the source of their creative powers and ideas. In what follows, I will examine the artists' worldviews and the features of their works in light of certain themes, but my intention is not to categorize these artists or their art. What I intend to do is to approach their current forms of expression from a variety of angles.¹⁵

The absence of 'Asianess' and the challenges with silence

Kaz Oshiro, a Japanese from Japan, had his own doubts, at first, about joining an exhibition of 'Asian American artists,' since he does not even possess voting rights in the US. However, he was convinced to join the exhibition when told that Asians living in the US without citizenship are also an important part of Asian America today.¹⁶ His elaborate 'paintings' of home appliances and furniture, constructed of canvases made to be three-dimensional, look absolutely real. Even the 'dirt' on the surface looks so real that in the house of one collector, a housekeeper tried to spray the dirt off by mistake. The seemingly very old stickers on the objects feel just like real stickers, with a little plumpness. This effect is achieved by repeatedly using paint and sandpaper.

The ideas behind Oshiro's art derive from his art school days at the university. Most of his instructors were white males, and the students around him were praised whenever they spoke out, whether or not they had knowledge of the matters being discussed. Oshiro, on the other hand, was always silent and could not express everything he wanted to say in English, and he therefore, according to the artist, was thought of as a weird man.

However, Oshiro believed in the possibility of an 'expression that does not express itself,' leading him to the style he now practices, a result of his loneliness and struggles. 'I think I am doing things in a very Japanese way,' he says, keeping in mind the approach of the traditional Japanese craftsman, who is obsessed with excellence and producing his pieces in silence. His work is a very personal form of resistance to Eurocentric values and the hegemony of white culture, which for him is based on linguistic sameness and the direct expression of feelings.



Photo 6.3: Kaz Oshiro, *Microwave Oven #1 (Marilyn Mason)*, 2003–04.
Acrylic and bondo on stretched canvas. $15\frac{3}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{8} \times 16$ inches.
The Paul Rusconi Collection, Los Angeles.

If you just look at my artwork, you would think that an ordinary white artist made it. If I produce a piece with visible Japanese, the justification would be something like 'teriyaki chicken,'—one that does not exist in Japan, but is considered tasty here. In the end, there is absolutely no understanding, not even the most basic one, except a real tragedy waiting. I can't stand it! I want to create something that would be appreciated in Japan as well as here in the US.¹⁷

Mika Tajima, a child of Japanese parents teaching in the US, grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Austin, Texas. When I spoke to the assistant curator responsible for Tajima's works, she remarked, 'Identity is not an issue here, and I have never heard anything like that from Mika.' However, in my interview, Tajima claims that identity is a strong undercurrent in her creativity. She shared with me several stories about the racial and gender discrimination from which she suffered in her upbringing as well as adulthood. The walls of her house in Texas were scrawled with the word 'chink,' and at school she would suffer racial discrimination, even from her teachers. In high school, she began to think about her own position, as someone who is not fully part of a mainstream white American world and also not being completely Japanese because of her upbringing outside of Japan. From this time on she would always try to disrupt categories and contemplate plurality.

The piece Mika Tajima displayed in *One Way or Another* was a three-dimensional installation with multiple layers of large colorful plexiglass and mirrors. The central part of the installation consisted of a gridded cube-like structure of strips of plexiglass and mirror; large sheets of mirrors with cut-out

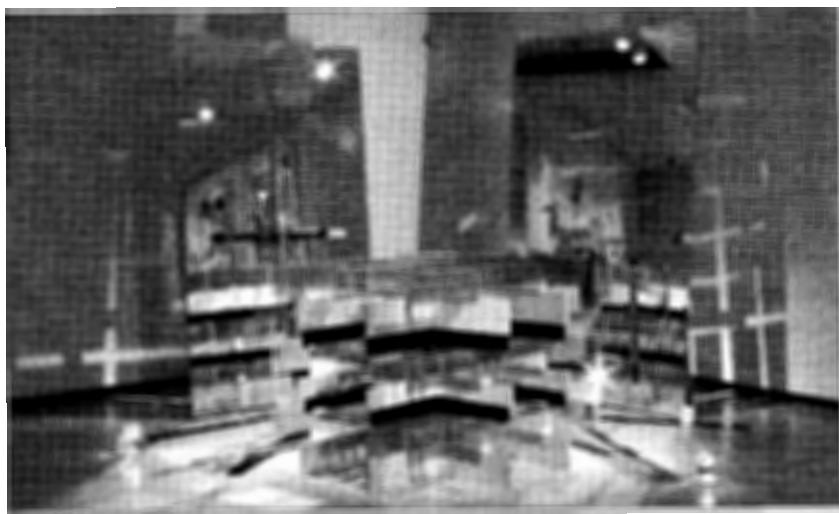


Photo 6.4: Mika Tajima, *Extruded Plaid (Suicidal Desires)*, 2006. Plexiglass, MDF, wood, silkscreen, lights, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

patterns were placed surrounding the central sculptural element. The piece itself was static, but as visitors walked around it, they could perceive changes in the moving shadows and their own multiple shattered reflections created by the lights reflected in the mirror. A speaker was also placed beside it, emitting the sounds of electric guitars in minimal high, medium, and low tones. The three layers of sound would intertwine and overlap, magnifying viewers' perceptions of time and space. Here, the piece attempts to break down the grid structure, the hierarchy of object, and place.

This idea of everything having multiple positions is something that has a lot to do with my identity.... with my work it's always shifting positionality or function, darting away from categorization, which is in some ways a reflection of my own experience.¹⁸

Tajima's work centers on the multidimensional aspect of a positionality that defies all categorization. She often works with these large-scale materials and installations with the understanding that there are very few female or minority artists working in this way. These types of materials, subject matter, and scale are, according to Tajima, mostly associated with white masculinity.

What seems to be parallel between Oshiro and Tajima is at first glance an absence of ethnicity or 'Asianness' in their work. Yet, on a deeper level, they are both trying to challenge racism, sexism, and the hegemony of white

(male) cultural standards, either with silence or by destabilizing viewers' pre-assumptions associated with gender, race, and the ethnicity of the artists.

Crossing ethnicities and objectifying 'gazes'

Mari Eastman established her style, often combining the ink brushwork and painting with soft colors and glossy materials, enabling her to produce a bright effect that she herself calls 'feminine.' Eastman describes her painting style for the show in Los Angeles: 'My work is representational. I like portraits of animals, decorative art, and landscapes. I like to mix it up, from a combination of restlessness and a desire for equilibrium (Japanese American National Museum 2008: 2). Eastman's father is of Irish-American descent, and her mother is Japanese. She spent one year at an American high school in Japan, where she met other 'half' children of Japanese and non-Japanese parents, and this experience implanted her with a high sense of pride in being 'half.'

In terms of my appearance and how I looked, I could see it was quite normal, you know, especially in that group. So I think that was extremely helpful, that was a good thing for me.

Eastman says that she loves *sumi-e* and zen paintings, which she attributes to an upbringing in which she was surrounded by numerous Asian artifacts:

In my house my mother always had lots of Asian carpets and Balinese art works and woodblock prints. And it was really chockablock full of things, so it was always just around. And of course animation—every time I went to Japan as a child, I would watch lots of cartoons. So I think that aesthetic kind of... it's just very much a part of my history.¹⁹

Photo 6.5 is one example that shows such influence on her art. It is of interest to note that historically speaking, the final year of the Chieng-lung Period written on the caption of the piece is inaccurate, but Eastman considers this a part of her work of re-representing those images that circulate in the West as Chinese art.²⁰ Eastman's intent is to superimpose her own contemporary vision onto a piece of classical art, 're'-representing Western representations of 'Chinese art,' explains Miwako Tezuka, one of the exhibition's assistant curators. Under the rubric of otherness, Eastman thus objectifies Western representations of 'Chinese art.'

Anna Sew Hoy is a Chinese New Zealander and still holds New Zealand citizenship. In her work, she often uses rocks, branches of trees, rope and beads, which she believes, 'evoke an Asian atmosphere.' She feels free to claim many different aspects of her identity, from which she creates a piece of art, saying 'so



Photo 6.5: Mari Eastman, *Bird on Flowering Spray: Porcelain Cup, Chieng-lung Period (1736–1750)*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas. $40\frac{1}{2} \times 43\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Collection of Rosette Delug.

I can claim a feminist identity, a queer identity.' She has also produced a work incorporating the 'Dream-catcher,' a Native American handmade folk object, as well as humorous sculptures inspired by Japanese pop culture, such as one of a giant green wasabi (horseradish).

I just never claimed any certain nationality, because I don't want my work to be defined that way. I just let people assume that I was Japanese because I was making Wasabi. [I was] just playing with people's assumptions.... If I make Wasabi, people will assume that it's a work about my heritage.

She continues:

So I'll use a Chinese idea, and then a Native American idea, and I'll use a Japanese idea, too. So I feel free to use these cultural objects, cultural ideas to make my own sculpture that has something to do with that cultural object, but not too much (laughs).²¹

Sew Hoy, thus, objectifies the stereotypes of a mainstream society incapable of distinguishing between the Japanese and Chinese.

It is because of Eastman and Sew Hoy's great love for Chinese, Japanese, or Native American traditional art that they try to represent its 'beautiful' and playful aspects. Unlike many of the previous generations of minority artist,



Photo 6.6: Anna Sew Hoy, *Violet Noir*, 2004. Fired ceramic, rope, beads, charms. Dimensions variable, approx. $14 \times 20 \times 13$ inches (ceramic piece). Collection of the artist.

these two artists do not hesitate to cross the boundaries of their own ethnicities in their works. Their passion for their work has overcome the essentialist notion that the traditional arts of a minority group are only 'authentic' when produced by members of that minority.

Deconstructing authenticity and redefining the Asian American community

Among the work of the seventeen artists, Indigo Som was one of few artists who dealt, even indirectly, with issues related to the communities for American-born Asians. Som's photographs show Chinese restaurants in the Southern US, where they have become a part of the landscape. Som, a second generation Chinese American, spent her adolescence in a predominantly white county, feeling constantly isolated. But when she advanced to college on the East coast, she became aware of her identity as an Asian American, a woman, and later queer. She then began to understand why she had been so troubled by the people around her during her school years.

I really was like very white-identified for my whole childhood. I mean I don't see how else I could have been ... because everyone around me was white.



Photo 6.7: Indigo Som, *China Garden, Yazoo City, Mississippi* (from the series *Mostly Mississippi: Chinese Restaurants of the South*), 2004–2005. Digital pigment print. 34 × 34 inches.

She ‘discovered’ the restaurant in the photograph when she was driving through the South. These Chinese restaurants, melded into the landscape of their faraway region, seemed to represent the experiences of the Chinese Americans who have taken root all over the US, after integrating into American society.

Som says that her emotional reaction to seeing a Chinese restaurant after driving for hours in an area with no signs of Asianness, reminds her of her feelings of racial isolation during her adolescence spent surrounded by white classmates.

I leave the Bay Area and I’m like, oh my God, I’m in America! There’s no Asians and there’s nothing to eat and what a horrible fate, you know.... then there’s this Chinese restaurant... So I’d always have this emotional response to it and it’s immediately so visceral; it’s like, wow, what’s that doing here, who is running the place, what’s their life like.... And it has such a strong resonance for me with how I grew up, that whole racial isolation thing and.... you know, having to represent in some way, like being forced to represent Chineseness.²²

Jean Shin, after immigrating with her family to the US as a small child, grew up in the suburbs of a predominantly African American community in Washington, D.C. where her parents owned a supermarket. There, she witnessed the intense racial hatred and violence between black residents and Korean merchants in the poor neighborhoods. She constantly suffered from nightmares.

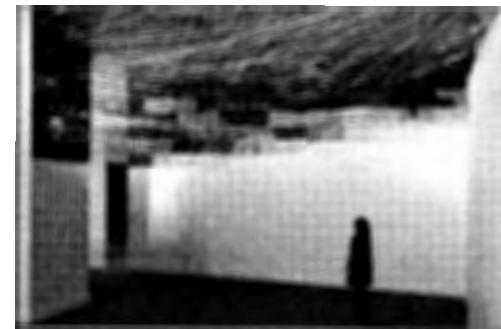


Photo 6.8: Jean Shin, *Unraveling*, 2009. Yarn of sweaters collected from the Asian American art community. Dimensions variable. Installation at Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

I was afraid of coming home to the news that my parents had been robbed at gun-point, threatened, or just shot dead in our store.... I witnessed a lot of people in both communities responding and acting out of anger. I wanted the shouting and fighting to stop. I was thinking...could everyone stop fighting and stop being angry and just be quiet so we can make peace. But that seemed impossible in that situation. So I’m motivated maybe by that kind of life experience. In my work, I’m interested in bringing disparate worlds together.

Shin’s artwork is distinctive in her use of materials. She transforms abandoned materials such as discarded lottery tickets, used pants, eyeglasses, and pill bottles through intense manual labor. Although these objects bear no obvious relationship with her Korean immigrant background, they are partially derived from it.

My work is very labor intensive. I choose to work with modest, everyday objects, rejecting fine arts materials. As a first immigrant generation, you get whatever job no one else wants and hopefully you make it better than what it’s supposed to be and take pride in it and so on. I wanted to find a link towards the notion of someone else throwing something away or not being interested in it. And then for me to say oh, well then that’s fine, give it to me because I can make something out of it.²³

For *One Way or Another*, Jean Shin collected sweaters from participants in the Asian American community to produce an installation at the Asia Society Museum in New York. Shin mounted the sweaters on the two walls of a corner, unraveling sections of them and using the yarn to connect the sweaters to each

other. This colorful web of yarn mapped the social networks of the contributors. The project questions identity as self defined by the community. Consequently, the donators of the sweaters included non-Asian staff members from the Asia Society (including my family and I who were living in Boston at the time). For Shin, who married and has a young son with a European American, the Asian American community is not defined by blood or nationality. In turn, her work seeks to express a community and network of Asian Americans unrestrained by essentialist frameworks.

Memories of the homeland and the US

One of the distinctive features of the works displayed at *One Way or Another* is that many deal with memories of what diaspora studies calls the 'homeland,'²⁴ a significant theme produced by a number of artists with South, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. Until recently, these ethnic groups had been seriously underrepresented in shows of 'Asian American art.' The majority are first generation immigrants, 1.5 generation who came to the US still very young, or second generation, born in the US. In any case, they form a much more recent portion of the Asian American community.

Binh Danh and his family left Vietnam as 'boat people' and reached the US when he was two years old. Later inspired by college courses in Asian American Studies, Danh became interested in the history of his family and community.

Photo 6.9 shows how Danh utilized photographs, published in a 1969 issue of *Life* magazine, of American soldiers who died during the Vietnam War, and through a special technique, printed them onto the surface of leaves from tropical trees. He has been interested in the relationship between death and photography, saying that 'You know how photography reminds us of somebody, but it's somebody in the past.' The choice of photography as a medium is closely related to the subject of the Vietnam War and also to Danh's own sense of positionality.

I think family's histories always tell through photography. And I felt like I was missing that part. You know because when my family left to come here, we didn't really have any photographs. And we started taking pictures of where we started living, but there weren't any photographs of great, great, great, you know, ancestors, you know? So when I did that body of work, it became kind of like an eye opener for me to start to question my identity and my history, too.²⁵

Danh thinks that the issue of race is important because it is part of American history. However, rather than making race the main point of work, the artist prefers to, 'keep it subtle in a way.' For example, he hopes that visitors notice

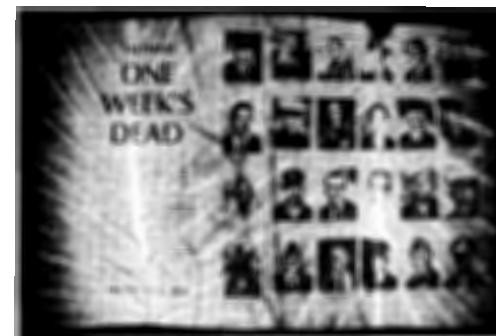


Photo 6.9: Binh Danh, *One Week's Dead #1*, from the *Life: One Week's Dead Series*, 2006. Chlorophyll print and resin. 17 1/2 × 24 inches. Collection of the artist.

the significant difference in 'race' between those who died in the Vietnam War, in contrast to the Iraq War.

However, what Danh is more concerned with are the ways in which Vietnam is represented in the US. He believes that all values in American society are white-centered and unrelated to Asia. By dealing with the war fought between the US and his country of origin, he tries to destabilize this white-centered perspective in order to create new forms of representation that combine the memories of Vietnam in his interpretations.

Mike Arcega moved from the Philippines to the US with his family when he was ten years old, and has been living in the San Francisco Bay Area since his college years. Because art circles are white centered, he built a network with other artists of Filipino origin and organized an exhibition of their own. This triggered his strong interest in political issues, such as colonialism, and the relationship between Catholicism and the state.

Growing up Catholic, I was kind of, indoctrinated from birth. I think that early missionary efforts are an arm of colonizing governments. It's a way to control and subjugate a population, you know. Many Oceanic populations were converted to Catholicism by force or political coercions. So the native idols and religious iconography were all destroyed and replaced with Christian ones. You know, religion became a tool for control.

He says that he deals with themes related to the Philippines because he feels he has great freedom to give an artistic treatment to the Philippines, and also because the colonialism enforced by the US and Spain is very much related to the

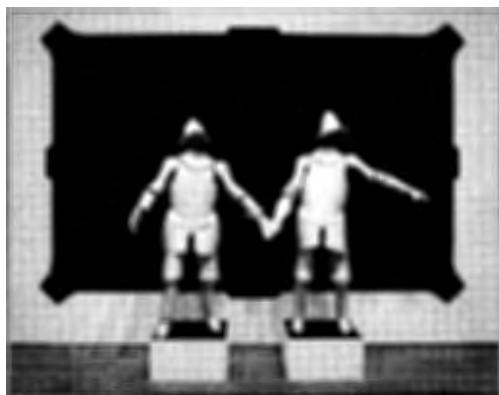


Photo 6.10: Mike Arcega, *El Conquistadorkes*, 2004. Manila folders, glue, acrylic hardware. 72 x 18 x 24 inches. Installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2005.

current American military presence in Iraq. However, his works do not ‘unveil the wrongdoings’ by exploring tragic feelings. His goal is rather to do so through parody and humor. The accent of Filipinos also becomes an element of Arcega’s humor. He explains the effects of making parodies with an accent as follows:

If you dissect Tag-lish jokes (Tagalog/English), you are using English but also challenging it by the under-dog, Tagalog. You are bastardizing English with an accent. It’s a way to weaken its power. So in a way, it’s empowering the Tagalog-speaking population. The accent becomes a tool to level the playing field, though in the US, the accent is still looked down upon.²⁶

The title of the piece in Photo 6.10 plays with this accent to combine the Spanish word ‘conquistadores’ with the English word ‘dork.’

In her works for the New York exhibition, Geraldine Lau scans pre-modern maps, and after redesigning them with computer graphics, she represents them on the wall with colored adhesive tape. Lau sees herself as ‘Chinese’ as well as a ‘New Yorker,’ because the infrastructure of Singapore, her country of origin, has, according to the artist, progressed, ‘so fast that so much is lost in the physical landscape.’ Although she still feels attached to the country, she does not think of ever going back there.

Because everything—that is part of like memory, like my grandfather’s house [and] all the areas that I grew up, they are completely changed. You know, I grew up in a beautiful colonial bungalow house, it was the countryside, we had lots of

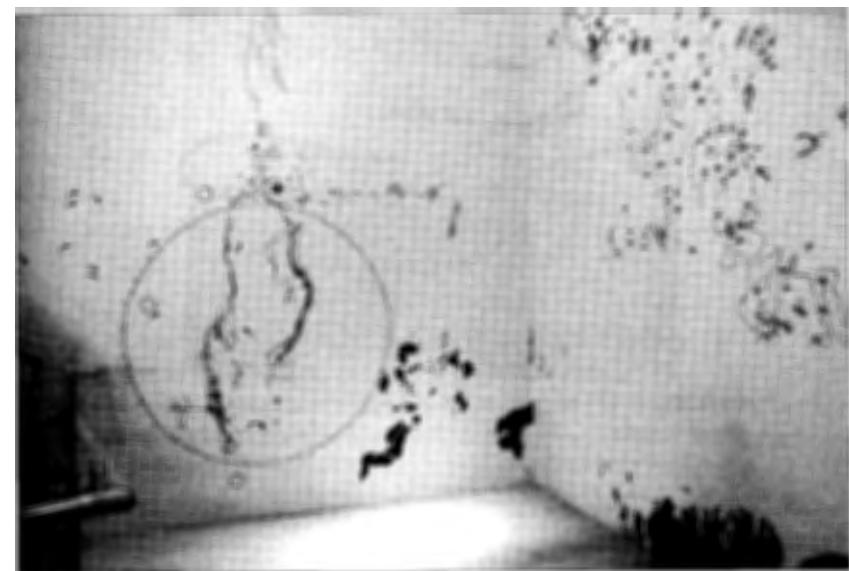


Photo 6.11: Geraldine Lau, *Information Retrieval, #125*, 2006. Vinyl. Adjacent walls along stairwell, each wall about 11 ft x 14 ft. Asia Society, New York City.

land, orchards, farms, you know. And now everything is exactly like that, like you see. So when you go back, there’s this huge sense of dislocation. And that’s very much what drives my work.²⁷

Lau’s piece for the exhibition is based on a nautical map that she acquired in Singapore, which gives expression to the mobility of transmigrants crossing borders on the Asian continent, like her ancestors who migrated from Southern China to Singapore.

Ala Ebtekar, the son of Iranian immigrants to the US, made an installation based on the Iranian coffee house, but from the point of view of someone of Iranian origin born in the US. He chose the subject of the coffee house as ‘a reaction to the miniature painting,’ a rejoinder to traditional Iranian art on which only noble people are privileged to work, in contrast to the coffee house that is for working class, often illiterate people. He painted everything white and placed several pairs of Nike sneakers on the floor.

I painted everything white because, even though it is the foundation and it is the architecture that foundation of what I’m trying to say and me, I still don’t know all the details and color as an American. So I slowly am trying to photo it all out, but



Photo 6.12: Ala Ebtekar, *Elemental*, 2004. Mixed media. Dimensions variable (total of 156 x 180 inches footprint area; two benches; 60 x 60 inches linoleum floor; a counter/table with sculptural elements). Collection of the artist.

it's still not clear, because I grew up here. However I still feel as though this is my root, or the framework where everything else exists....And I'm getting to know it better. So I get to know it. So it's kind of a comment on that as well, you know?

It is interesting to note that he claims to 'consider himself 100 percent Iranian and 100 percent American.'

I can't ever shake that off; I can't ever shake the American stuff off... but the thing is I'm more interested in creating this visual glimpse of a crossroad where present day events meet history and mythology. So this moment where the past and the present, the fiction and the not fiction, they all come together.²⁸

All the works mentioned above make us aware of the diasporic positionalities of these artists while living and based in the US. The exhibition also included other artists who explored the subject of the homeland, and who satirized American foreign policy in elaborate pieces that indirectly deliver their criticisms, with humor and wit. While these do make use of culturally-specific resources, they also embed signs of their lived experiences in America in their works. Thus, they seem, alongside other interests, to enjoy having the freedom to express their cultural identities and memories attached to their ancestral homelands.

New relationality: power, body, and tactility

Laurel Nakadate identifies herself as a 'half' born to a third generation Japanese American father and an Irish, Cherokee, and Welsh American mother. Nakadate



Photo 6.13: Laurel Nakadate, *Untitled* (Video still from *Lessons 1-10*), 2002. Video. 11 minutes, 20 seconds. Collection of the artist.

claims that being a Midwesterner, from Iowa, constitutes a more crucial aspect of her identity than race or gender. In fact, large natural landscapes from the Midwest play important roles in her videos. In *OOPS!* she and a male stranger having a chance encounter begin to undress, but when she strips to her underwear, she silently tells the man to turn around by pointing her fingers, which he then enacts. Although the artist is the object of the male gaze, she nevertheless implies that she is able to control the male gaze as both the video's director and as an attractive woman.

Her works often center upon lonely, middle-aged, white men. Nakadate explains:

I am obsessed with men who live alone with no one to care for them... because they are invisible people in our culture.... I think about the desire to be saved from loneliness, the way one life can change another. (Japanese American National Museum 2008: 3)

Such loneliness is a vital inspiration for Nakadate's art-making process, for it is related to her childhood experience of having seen a tent in which an older single man lived alone, like a hermit. In the loneliness of the men she portrays, she looks to fulfill her wish for them to build a world 'with her.' As she states:

I guess the main thing I'm looking for is someone who seems like they have a space in their life for me. (Indrisek 2006)

In an interview with me, Nakadate described the theme of her work as gender politics, having no concern with race.²⁹ While her art deals with the construction

of human relations, through role-playing, and power politics, by using her own body as the medium, it would, however, 'be difficult for viewers to overlook the artist's gender, sexuality, and the otherness of her appearance: the very basis from which her critique of power politics itself emerges. *OOPS!*, for instance, draws our attention to the contrast between the men she videotapes and herself. The contrast not only resides in distinctions between male/female, middle-aged/young, and white/ 'half,' but also in these men being controlled by their own desiring gaze toward Nakadate, even as the artist who simultaneously directs her provocative gaze toward them while not allowing them to transgress the line.

In 'A Chinoiserie out of the Old West' (2006), Patty Chang asked three academics to translate Walter Benjamin's 1928 text 'Chinoiserie Out of the Old West' in which Benjamin interviewed Anna May Wong. They agreed on translating his question to her as: 'what medium of expression would you take hold of if you couldn't make films any more?' Yet, each of their translations of Wong's answer varied, for in Benjamin's German text, a phrase 'Touch would' was inserted in English. Was it Benjamin's unintentional mistake of 'touch would' with 'touch wood' (as in 'knock on wood' in American English)? Or can we interpret it as 'Touch would [be the medium of ...]', that is, a medium used in the work of a masseuse or a prostitute as a response to Benjamin's question about the 'medium' of expression? The slippage among the three different translations inspires Chang to imagine the translatability of ambiguous and awkward relationships between dominant and minority culture, theory and medium, subconscious and conscious, or even the relationship of what is inside and outside of language through a physical filter.

In her conversation with Melissa Chiu, Chang says:

In the beginning, race and gender were a big part of my work. The focus on identity politics ... allowed me to use personal issues or ideas that came from my growing up in suburban white California. I guess the sense of difference was important to my work. You could describe it as two communities that had an impact on my work: my own Chinese family within the white middle-class suburbs of California. (Chiu 2006: 28)

For Chang, body is a medium, and one's body is, as Chang states, 'very much part of experience.' In this body-as-experience, gender, race, and sexuality all come into play because 'it's not just cultural but also very physical, physical nature, a physical experience.'³⁰ What interests her is, however, not the expression of gendered, racial, and sexual identities themselves, but the contrast of relationality in the world as seen through the body and its resonance.



Photo 6.14: Patty Chang, *Contortion* (Video still), 2001. C-print. 40 × 60 inches.

Chitra Ganesh, whose parents immigrated from India to the US in the early 1970s, grew up listening to Hindi music and attending Hindu temples in New York City. Being South Asian American is how she describes herself as well as her main point of 'cultural reference.' She has worked with a group called SLAAAP or 'Sexually Liberated Asian Artist Activist People' in order to draw the public's attention to the information and visual material related to sexuality and gender in Asian American communities.

I think the idea of the queer aspect is to get to move beyond like traditional representations of sex or sexuality. ... [T]hat's just about a different way of looking at the body that is not just about sex and love, but about changing the terms we use to think about sexuality and representations of bodies—questioning the foundation by not saying 'here's another body,' but saying, 'what is a body? Why do we think this is a body instead of this one? How can we like expand the terms of the discussion to introduce different perspectives.³¹

Ganesh's work relies significantly on reimagining Indian mythologies and Indian comic books that are mostly written in English. The comic books that inspire her work circulate extensively both in India and the Indian diaspora where they have 'become a primary vehicle through which people learn about their culture and history.' For Ganesh, mythologies or fairy tales transmit abundant messages about social hierarchy, power, culture, and gender, as well as offer a potent ground for critiquing these same norms.

The works of Nakadate, Chang, and Ganesh evoke tactility by using the body as a medium and explicitly depicting body parts (including sex organs) and violence done to them. The evocation of tactility rather than visuality



Photo 6.15: Chitra Ganesh, *Sisters*, 2005. Mixed media. Approx. 120 × 240 × 144 inches. Collection of the artist.

makes it possible for the spectator to perceive their art in its multi-dimensional meanings.

By mobilizing tactile sensation, these artists share their efforts to express new human relations and networking alternatives to existing modes of power relations and positions. As Chang argues, the body-as-medium consists of diverse experiences. Ganesh also attempts to convey a South Asianess and queerness through the female body, as a means of moving beyond spatial boundaries common to conceptions of community and nation. Though not always explicitly expressed as identity-based art, their work does interweave aspects of gender, sexuality, and race in ways that embody and reach out to new human relationships and networks.

New forms of art with the 'Asian American' label

An exhibition without a 'face'

If we compare the acclaimed *One Way or Another* with *Asia/America* or other exhibitions by Asian American artists, what key characteristics can we find? I suggest that there are three features that have not been previously noted by art critics.

Most important is that the faces and bodies of Asian Americans were hardly visible in the works on display, except for a few pieces, which rather, at least on their surfaces, make references to more universal issues. Intentionally or not, this made it easier for the audience to be emotionally involved in the pieces without being reminded of the artists' backgrounds.

Second, unlike the artists with East Asian origins, most artists connected to regions still relatively unfamiliar to US society, such as South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East, focused on the subject of memories of the homeland. Except for Danh, who dealt with the Vietnam War dead, the homeland was always expressed through artifacts of the material culture or the landscape rather than people.

Third, many artists have embedded their positionality and perspectives as Americans as well as their diaspora connections in their art. Danh's use of *Life Magazine's* photographs, for instance, suggests the presence of America. Ebtekar's all white installation, with its Nike shoes shows the viewpoint of a US-born, second-generation Iranian for whom the idea of 'authenticity' can have only very limited appeal. Arcega's work conveys political criticism through American humor such as parody, and the caption with the Filipino accent. Both for Som and Nakadate, the American landscapes stand out as well as embrace 'otherness,' i.e. the Chinese restaurants or Nakadate's body. Chang, on the other hand, takes the theme of the spectators' gaze towards her as 'other' both in the US and China. It also demonstrates the taste of young artists who vigorously incorporate popular culture into their work.

The 'Asian American' label in One Way or Another

There has been much discussion on the validity of the label, 'Asian American artist' (Min 2009; A. Chang 2008; G. Chang and Johnson 2008; Chatterjee and Tam 2000). Then, this section focuses on how the artists and curators involved in the show articulate their visions underpinning this label. Although I have to omit further details here, it is worth noting that in my interviews in a broader project with artists from the 'older generation,' or even younger artists who more explicitly engage with identity politics, it has become clear that it is impossible for them to resist racism and express it without mobilizing the label 'Asian American.' However, many artists included in *One Way or Another* found the subtitle *Asian American Art Now* problematic, inappropriate, or unfavorable. Let us hear again the narratives of the artists themselves.

Tajima was one of the artists concerned about the subtitle.

...many of us are afraid of the stereotyping after the crash of multiculturalism in art—some of us were afraid that the show would be seen like 'this is what Asian American art looks like,' like there is a way to actually racially pinpoint what an aesthetic is. My work looks nothing like anybody else's in the show, but there is a fear of suddenly becoming that 1993 Biennial, like the work would become flattened into one category.³²

Ganesh calls attention to the problem of categorization and marking marginalized groups.

I hate the way all art made by women or people of color is considered identity-based art... it reinstates the dynamic between certain marked and unmarked categories within contemporary art discourse, where the unmarked body is often implicitly white. Many artists' work, in the fields of the visual, literary, film and music, comes from some aspect of exploring a relationship between subjectivity in the world, or some critique of the world but... I think that when it is marginalized groups, it's considered to be identity art.³³

However, other perspectives reveal that the issue is not that simple. Sew Hoy, who wants to move on from that label, admits her ambivalence:

Well, I think that even if we would like to be past those kinds of labels, on the other hand you want to have solidarity with people. So I've been included in feminist shows... and then this show is an Asian American show, and it's a chance to explore 'Asian Americanness.' It's not the most ideal situation, but there's no situation at the moment, where one can have solidarity with a group and avoid certain assumptions or generalizations.³⁴

These artists would prefer to be recognized simply as 'artists,' without the 'Asian American' qualifier. But in the current situation where Asian American artists are still underrepresented in major art communities, to work under the banner of 'Asian American art' also provides them with the opportunity to affirm their presence.

Oshiro acutely points to the contradictions in the 'Asian American' conceptual framework. He began, at one time, to question the following contradiction that he could see in being categorized as 'Asian American.' When one speaks of Okinawa, it is impossible not to think of the opposition between Japan and Okinawa. But the spokespersons of Okinawa also discriminate against minorities inside Okinawa. In the end, it is a dualism of 'us against them,' and we cannot evade this contradiction. A confrontational consciousness can only lead to violence, so the methods remain the same.³⁵

Higa articulates the relevance of Asian American identity in the entire matrix of their various categories:

[W]e were interested in artists who identified themselves as Asian American as people, whether or not that came through in their work was really of little consequence for us. ... So if someone said, oh you know it was a great show, I

didn't even notice that they were Asian American... to me that would be an insult... but I also don't want to say like, it's only good because they're Asian American. It's maybe to think about these artists within a matrix of their various categories, whether it be painter, woman, Asian American, works with color.³⁶

Machida, on the other hand, points out the kindred features of the two exhibitions while acknowledging certain distinctions in the artists' generations, orientation, and curatorial methods.

Both have been organized by Asia Society, which remains strongly associated with Asia rather than being regarded as a museum of American art. While 'One Way or Another' also includes artists of mixed heritages, both shows group artists together by Asian ethnicities, and enfold them in the rubric of 'Asian American art.' Indeed in order to take part in these exhibitions, artists must consent to being identified within an Asian-specific context. (Chiu et al. 2006: 19)

Yong Soon Min, one of the leading art critics of politically-oriented art dealing with Asian American identity, says in a personal interview that the younger generation does not feel the same political urgency as the older generation because racism seems to have diminished on the surface despite its continued prevalence. Min believes that we are now living in a complex yet interesting period, precisely because it has become increasingly difficult to define what it is to be Asian American after such dramatic social change. Min says:

I think that there's always going to be that dialectic, you know, tension. I think even from the beginning, possibly there was always the element that Asian American is a construction. It was always a contested territory. And I think that's healthy—to always keep questioning, what can this construction really mean, and for who and for what?³⁷

Creating new forms of art

In the arts, as most artists argue, white male dominance shows no sign of faltering, even after having faced the flourishing of multiculturalism. Whiteness remains the institutional and evaluative 'norm,' and exerts a coercive power despite its visibility. So in the arts, without a very skillful strategy, it is extremely difficult for minorities to produce self-representations by approaching discrimination directly.

Thus, the problematic position of Asian American artists today, except for those who have already established themselves, demands a constant negotiation between two major arenas: their own desire to be recognized as artists, and the

expectations and anxieties of mainstream society. It should be stressed, however, that this very process of negotiation becomes the site for creating new forms of contemporary art. I believe each major arena is closely related, respectively, to the work of artists with roots in the Third World who have a relatively recent history in the US and who tend to focus on subjects related to their homelands, and to the work of East Asian artists who simply cannot avoid facing the stereotypes surrounding the traditional fields of 'Oriental art' in America.

Art circles have gone through significant changes since the fall of multiculturalism in the arts during the mid-1990s. The substantial growth of the art market in the recovered American economy in the 2000s, lasting until Lehman's fall in 2008, resulted in an intense commodification of Third World culture under the influence of increasing globalization. This process was further accelerated by the blurring of the borders between popular culture and art, between daily objects and art works.³⁸ As Julian Stallabrass (2004: 35) argues, the victory of capitalism after the end of the cold war, the heated 'culture wars,' the commodification of Third World 'culture' promoted by neoliberalism and 'free trade,' all of these have generated a growing demand for and consumption of 'cultural differences.'

When looking at this issue with reference to *One Way or Another*, it is the artists dealing with the theme of homeland in Southeast, South, and West Asia who would be exposed to the gaze of contemporary forms of Orientalism by the commodification of Third World culture. These regions are less familiar and thus considered 'exotic' by the general American audience.

The debate around Asian American art shares some common ground with Latino art, a considerable proportion of which has been produced by immigrants. Susana Leval astutely points out the dilemma faced by Latino/a artists who manage to break into the mainstream (Leval 1990: 150). Entering the mainstream means leaving the closed community of Latino art circles, and being able to work in a more open environment. Yet, what mainstream art circles expect is an ethnic, religious and primitive art, whether they are conscious of it or not.

However, are assimilation and segregation the only two alternatives that we have left at the onset of the twenty-first century? Should artists be forced to choose between accommodating themselves to the demands of mainstream art circles, and distancing themselves from it in order to confine their activities within the borders of their own communities? It is a third way, I suggest, that the young artists in *One Way or Another* tried to open up.

Though young, most of the artists in *One Way or Another* do have experiences of racial discrimination, and therefore, they are clearly aware of the dominating gaze of mainstream society as well as new forms of Orientalism that collude

with the global economy. It is also true that these artists coming from the Third World have benefited, even if indirectly, from neoliberalism. Market research has become an important aspect of art circles, and this also applies to the young black artists experimenting with the new 'post-identity' style mentioned earlier. Since the art market for works dealing with Third World countries within Asia has yet to be explored, they have considerable investment value for capital owners.

On the other hand, these artists living in the US feel the need to resist the absorption of their works by the Orientalist consumption of Third World culture in an art market entirely dominated by white males. One of their means of resistance is the insertion of elements of popular culture, which function as signs of their position as Americans. The use of these 'American' signs allows them to separate themselves from consumer culture imported from the Third World, and express their own subjectivity.

What about the artists with their roots in Japan, China, or Korea, countries more familiar to American society, yet whose same familiarity ensures the stronger prevalence of stereotypical images? Some artists, rejecting the production of representations sought out by mainstream society, present a new artistic style that articulates itself through 'expressionless expression.'³⁹ The works of some other artists destabilize racial, sexual, and gender categories, and those of yet others cross ethnic boundaries in their search for beauty and joy without falling prey to ideas of 'authenticity.' And there are also some artists who attempt to tackle some more universal subjects, such as the dangers of representation, by 're'-representing images widely circulated in American society, and the multi-layered gaze towards the other. All these efforts to avoid essentialism and stereotypes expressed by mainstream society in the arts have led these artists to create new forms of expression.

Conclusion: beyond assimilation and segregation

The *One Way or Another* artists examined in this chapter are young and dynamic creators, many of whom have just begun to shine in white-male-centered art circles.⁴⁰ Some consider them to be 'assimilated' or 'passing' for they do not explicitly deal with racial, sexual, and gender identities. On the one hand, there is an optimistic view that today, as long as one has talent, there is enough of a chance to display one's work even in mainstream art exhibitions. On the other hand, there is an opposite view that these artists' growing visibility and public presence at major exhibitions does not necessarily mean the doors have been opened for minorities. Such representations of Asian American artists, they

argue, are only a form of 'token' cultural diversity, in which the same few people keep meeting each other every time. The opinions are not uniform, and the situation surrounding Asian American artists does not allow for easy interpretation.

If we look through the surface of the works on display at *One Way or Another*, we will see that for these young artists, the issue of identities based on race, gender, and sexual preference has not lost its importance. They are proud artists who refuse to conform to the expectations of mainstream society. Nonetheless, if artworks oriented toward multiculturalism and identity politics have only limited support by small community circles and a few grant opportunities, they have no choice but to operate on a small scale for internal consumption and a few white supporters. Then, the artists cannot reach the wider audience with whom they intended to communicate in the first place. Rather than falling into this trap, it is more productive to enter the mainstream art world with their new styles, even if they do so at its margins. This would open up a space for a better understanding of Asian American art and the Asian American experience itself. For this reason, Asian American artists have developed new forms of expression as a way to resist.

The newness of these artists' works derives from such a predicament: in their everyday lives, they exist as multifaceted individuals who do not feel constrained by the category of 'Asian American.' However, the label 'Asian American' seems to be indispensable to either promoting the presence of Asian American artists or doing away with the 'monolithic' images presupposed by numerous stereotypes. In other words, this category can be effectively mobilized in a strategic way to network with those who share similar experiences and values, as well as to convey their expressions to a wider audience. 'Asian Americans' certainly do exist as a social reality, and yet their diverse positionalities cannot be easily and directly represented, thus making it harder to achieve political solidarity. In this scenario, more and more young artists are now trying to move beyond an assimilation or segregation paradigm, while strategically using 'Asian American' identity as a new form of resistance.

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