

TRADESHOW

NEW CURRENTS IN RECENT ASIAN AMERICAN ART
20030411-20030430

ATHENA ROBLES
JEAN SHIN
SKOWMON HASTANAN

Many of the works chosen were those that supported a universal, non-abrasive view of the Korea/America connection such as Ik Joong Kang's humorous installation of martial arts icon Bruce Lee made of uncooked grains of rice, while the acerbic bite of works like Michael Joo's "Headless" installation which juxtaposed stereotypes of the East (defined by contemplative casts of Buddha figures) and the West (famous cartoon character heads) were underplayed. "KOREAMERICAKOREA" merely turned the other cheek to the stark critiques some works presented during the multicultural era.

So What is the Difference Between Asian Art and Asian American Art, Anyways?

The Thai artist Skowmon Hastanan posits an intriguing point of departure for this examination. Hastanan is a Thai citizen living in New York since 1973. According to a formalistic definition of Asian American art which would presumably include only U.S. citizens, Hastanan is not an Asian American artist. Then are her works Asian works? It might seem so, given her own words as to why she began making art: "In college, I was feeling homesick so I began to look to things that were related to that experience. I was really affected by the history of the Middle Passage where Africans were forcibly transported to America as slaves. And then my work became about the connection between this history and what I felt was a similar history of Asian women being transported here." This connection is manifested in the "Fever" series, a group of paintings done between 1999 and 2002 depicting Thai airline hostesses packed together like sardines. The artist transcribes her own version of the slave ship by depicting the hostesses in vessels of transport - a Boeing jet.

It is clear that Hastanan initially began "Fever" from a diasporic perspective where she saw herself as homeless, cut off from Thailand. In this way, "Fever" could be reasonably described as Thai art. Concurrently, however, Hastanan observes that the experiences she depicts is hardly limited to women from Asia. The work confirms theorist Laura Hyun Yi Kang's statement that "the Asian female working body is simultaneously erased of historical and material specificities."

The "Asian female" includes the Asian American body, for in the capitalist market of labor, there is no distinction made between the two by the buyer, the seller or the middleman. The females in "Pageant Fever" are smiling duplicates, based on images printed on postage stamps issued by the Thai government. It is a wry gesture on the artist's part, insinuating that like the stamp that gets cancelled once it reaches its destination, the Asian and Asian American female body gets similarly erased of her individuality as she is circulated in the world of global exchange. Whether she is Thai, Japanese American, Filipino or Chinese American, specific identities are effaced in favor of an Asianness constituted out of Orientalist suppositions.

As Kang points out, this Asianness in the vernacular of international labor, is often characterized by terms like "surplus," "abundant" and "cheap," words that are exactly illustrated in "Pageant Fever" where the women are many and cheap because they are indeed, "all alike." Hastanan further drives this point of the commodified female body by rendering them in jewel-like nail polish enamel and mounting the paintings on backgrounds of lush silk.

The "Fever" series, despite its relevance to Asian American women, does not refute the fact that it is a work produced from a diasporic perspective, of a Thai woman wanting to go home. But is it exclusively a diasporic work?

Without delving too much into biography, it is impossible to assert that she is an Asian artist without being aware of the relevance of her work to Asian American art. Her years in the U.S. and her depiction of this experience indicate that she is, actually, an Asian American artist while her citizenship and the conceptual provenance of the work also designates her as an Asian artist. "Fever" cannot be said to be an exclusive member of one or the other.

I must stress that this, by no means, should be misread as a call to conflate the two together lest, as cultural theorist Lisa Lowe warns, the imagined otherness of Asia is indiscriminately collapsed onto the metonymic figure of the Asian American, or as I perceive, lest Asian American art is seen as an auxiliary to contemporary Asian art, a potentially attractive, but potentially opportunistic strategy.

Yet it is equally misleading to separate the two, as if one had no connection to the other so the question that is intensifying by leaps and bounds now is how to discuss the two in parallel without erasing or exaggerating their specificity, or falling into an exercise of labeling.

A possible answer might be to examine Asian American art as a loose framework perforated by multiple aspects, such as the realities of global movement of all kinds, from the struggles of the emigrant and commodified worker to the privileged upper tier of the art world where logistics pose little hardship. Race, as it is visible in Asian American art, is not a stand-alone issue and neither is it a platform that can be interpreted only through a chosen spokesperson. It is my fervent hope that future explorations of Asian American art through practice, theory and reception will be fully rooted in reflexivity that will inoculate practitioners and theorists alike from the debilitating apathy of a postmodernist free-for-all as well as a equally deleterious neo-colonial regime. Asian American art oozes and coalesces tensions together and in the process, demands the formation of an open zone where artists and their work can be read with an understanding that no conclusion must ever be derived.

Notes

Thanks to David Ho Yeung Chan for his comments.

1. Alice Yang, "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered," *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 97.
2. Peter C. Marzio, the director of the Museum of Fine Art in Houston asks, "Can the large, established art museums afford minority art exhibitions? Can the cost be offset by income? If a director does not ask that question, he or she should look for another job." Marzio's statement implies that exhibitions of so-called "minority artists" are contingent on whether it can bring in money. Its market logic operates as a credible excuse for eschewing further discussion. Peter C. Marzio, "Minorities and Fine-Arts Museums in the United States," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine, (Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 124.
3. Quoted by Jeff Baysa in "Longing/Belonging: Filipino Artists Abroad," *At Home and Abroad: 20 Contemporary Filipino Artists*, (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 1998), 55.
4. Diana Yeh, "Ethnicities on the Move: 'British-Chinese' Art – Identity, Subjectivity, Politics and Beyond," *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2, July 2001, 65-91.
5. Ibid.,
6. "1.5" generation artists refer to those who were born outside of the U.S. and emigrated to the U.S. during childhood or adolescence. "Second generation" artists generally refer to those artists born in the U.S.

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7. Interview with the author, 13 February 2003
8. Interview with the author, 19 February 2003
9. Interview with the author, 13 February 2003 and electronic mail communication with the author, 12 March 2003
10. Kobena Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationality New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness," *Third Text*, no. 49, Winter 1999-2000, 51-62
11. Interview with the author, 19 February 2003.
12. Interview with the author, 13 February 2003.
13. Interview with the author, 19 February 2003.
14. Ueno discusses this tendency with respect to Western desires to see "Japaneseness," but I assert that this tendency is generally active in any positioning of "Asia" by the Western gaze.
15. Nerissa Balce-Cortes, "Imaging the Neocolony," *Hitting Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 2, Spring 1995, <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~critmass/v2n2/balce1.html>.
16. Ibid.
17. Miwon Kwon, "Thoughts on 'KOREAMERIKAKOREA'", *KOREAMERIKAKOREA*, (Seoul: Artsonje Center, 2000), 88.
18. David Ross, "KOREAMERIKAKOREA," *KOREAMERIKAKOREA*, (Seoul: Artsonje Center, 2000), 16.
19. Hers states that whether an adoptee is accepted as Korean American purely depends on other people's convenience. "Based on Art Sonje's 'difference' that makes OAKs [Overseas Adopted Koreans] 'foreign' to other Korean Americans, overseas adoptees hold no place in Korean American immigrant culture. So where do we belong?" Kate Hers, "Overseas Adopted Koreans, Where Do We Belong?," *Art Monthly*, July 2000, 167.
20. Interview with the author, 21 January 2003.
21. Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "Sighting Asian/American Women As Transnational Labor," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 5, no. 2, Fall 1997, 404.
22. Interview with the author, 21 January 2003.
23. Kang, 405.
24. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.

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