

This year's annual exhibition at the Asian American Arts Centre presents 11 artists, selected from a total of 146 submissions by a panel of five. Although each of the artists' work reveals distinct artistic visions and approaches, together they reflect upon many of the issues found in contemporary art today, and for some, the particular concerns of artists of Asian descent working and living in the United States. Most of the artists have chosen paper as their preferred medium, whether pencil or ink drawings, photographic prints, or installations incorporating paper in some form or other. For a number of these artists, their work is installation-based, functioning within a prescribed space or format, with a few that employ machinery and technology. Other recurring categories are modes of abstraction, the primacy of artistic process, the use of found materials, and the artist as subject.

Since the panel based its selections on quality and originality, it did not actively seek out works that refer to Asian American issues or aesthetics. A majority of the artists, however, do utilize vocabularies inflected by their Asian backgrounds, which, in this case, are Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. But the specific markers of cultural identity inscribed by the artists range from subtle to manifest. Katarina Wong and Phuong Do explore issues of the homeland, whether ancestral or actual, in works that address migration as well as the formation and fluctuation of new communities. Asuka Osawa and Mary Ting also access the homeland by mining native culture and folklore as well as family histories. Susan Choi self-consciously interrogates the creation of Asian myths and stereotypes, while Sara Ching-Yu Sun remarks upon the changeability of identity in a less literal way. Shaped by Buddhist practices, the art of

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Seongmin Ahn probes the attainment of peaceful spirituality. In contrast, concepts of existence and everyday conflict are uncovered in the work of Kaori Ukaji. C.J. Lee creates physical environments with machinery that transform her found materials, while Noelle Tan and Eva Lee translate experience and knowledge of the world through aesthetic decisions specific to their chosen medium.

Born in the United States to a father from China and a mother from Cuba, Katarina Wong has described herself as floating "Between Contrary Equilibriums," a phrase from a Federico García Lorca poem. Both her family's migrations and her own experience of inhabiting and traveling between three different cultures inform her work. Wong constructs

migratory patterns by using wax castings of fingertips individually attached onto the wall. The fingertip castings, clustered together in great number, can be perceived as the passages of flocking birds or swarming bees as well as the universal journey of immigrants to other lands. Through the use of her family and friends' fingertip impressions, Wong also creates a personal work that leaves behind the indexical traces of her own community. This investigation into the linkages between oneself and community draws on Wong's interest in the Buddhist concept of "interdependent arising," which asserts that the reality we experience is a co-creative act dependent on the constant participation of everyone and everything.

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Like Wong, Phuong Do examines her own passages between three separate cultures and her search for a sense of place brought on by her childhood experience of forced migration. A photographer, Do inserts herself directly into the varied home spaces of her family. Her images often capture Do with her family and friends while eating a meal – perhaps the foremost facilitator of community. While the group is engrossed in their own interactions, Do is spatially removed from them, looking out at the viewer with her hand visibly holding the remote control for her camera. By appropriating the layout of a National Geographic essay, Do transforms her images into journalistic documentation with texts that reveal the distinct locales of her family as well as the borders she must cross to make her connections.

In contrast to Do's actual travels, Asuka Ohsawa makes art historical migrations. The visual culture of her family's native Japan is her source, from ancient to popular forms. Inspired by the ways in which older visual traditions are reinvented by successive generations, Ohsawa re-enacts her own versions of such practices. She appropriates and alters her selected original material, often the art of the 17th to 19th century Edo period, consciously aware of making the new form with the visual language of her own generation. Ohsawa's current project is creating limited palette gouache drawings based on the work of the 18th century Japanese painter Jakuchu Ito.

For Mary Ting, family histories are often her springboard. But her work, usually paper-based installations, does not attempt to retell specific narratives. Instead, her metaphorical pieces examine how loss and memories of the

past function in the present. A common theme found in Ting's art is the horror and beauty of death, a dichotomy inspired in particular by one of her mother's stories about life in China during the political unrest of the 1930s, which forced her family to flee in 1937. Through repetitive processes, such as burning or cutting, that change the physicality of her paper medium, Ting transforms her family memories into something material into the residue of past experiences.

Seongmin Ahn's abstract works are also paper-based installations stemming from intensely personal experiences. The processes of folding paper into geometric patterns and dyeing it through dipping or spraying techniques are rituals

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she likens to Buddhist meditative practices that are part of her daily regimen. After moving to the United States from Korea in the late 1990s, Ahn came down with a chronic illness that baffled doctors. To alleviate her symptoms, she turned to meditation, learning how to empty the mind of her daily struggles. Thus for Ahn, her meditative working process is just as important as the work itself. *Beyond 2* (2002), consisting of three folded and sprayed sheets of mulberry paper installed in a corner, creates an exclusive space where Ahn intends the viewer to achieve spiritual purity, similar to her own.

While Ahn's ritualistic methods unload suffering, Kaori Ukaji's obsessive mark-making is an exercise of everyday struggle and existence. Her dense works on paper are aggressive, non-meditative acts, built up of repetitive gestures or scribbles drawn in graphite. Hanging from the wall to the floor, *Flowing Solid* (1999) is a long sheet of paper covered with layers upon layers of graphite marks. The result is an abstract, textured surface that shifts between its utter blackness and its ability to reflect light. Although the finished surface might imply completion and calm, Ukaji's work calls attention to the journey of life and how the process is always rife with conflict and struggle.

Eva Lee creates alternate worlds through mark-making. Her marks are dots, circles, lines, scribbles and other imprints that reveal her interest in the structures of nature, from dust particles to galaxies of the universe. As she draws, adding new marks to previous ones in both ink and watercolor, more complex forms emerge from the empty space of the page. With science as her motivating force, Lee is concerned with the formation of knowledge as well as what is beyond scientific inquiry. Her work *Queries* (2000) investigates circles or subsets of knowledge, achieved through a methodical accumulation of circles of varying sizes and marks. Whimsical touches such as a hand and silhouettes of fish add

an earthbound element to a work that seems to access something outside of ourselves.

At first glance, Noelle Tan's large matte photographs appear to be black charcoal abstractions with hints of gray and white. A closer look reveals views of the actual world caught during the darkness of the night. Tan undoes the traditions of landscape photography by almost erasing away the landscape. She allows a single light source to highlight subtly the outline of a house or the branches of a tree. The shift in the viewer's perception from seeing something abstract to recognizing the visible world mirrors her fascination with the boundaries between internal and external experience. She searches for spaces in between the populated and unpopulated, border towns that rarely register on roadmaps similar to the way in which her vistas barely register an identifiable image.

Although their aesthetic projects differ considerably, Sara Ching-Yu Sun, like Tan, engages modes of indeterminacy by accessing the indefinable spaces in between the oppositions we use to order our world. Through multimedia installations, Sun relies upon the active participation of the viewer, a decision that already redefines the traditional artist/viewer binary. With *Happy Face* (2002, 1997), a work seen on a monitor or projected onto the wall, the viewer assists in selecting images and voice responses that alter the look and sound of the "happy face." The images are found materials taken from everyday sources such as newspapers or the Internet, and the sounds are common phrases recorded by the artist. The "face" is thus always in a state of flux, randomly determined by the viewer's choices. For Sun, such moments of uncertainty and dislocation recreate the experience of those who live in-between different cultures.

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While Sun hints at such shifts in Asian American identity, Susan Choi unabashedly addresses Asian stereotypes, using her own body as a site of cultural investigation. In photographic work, she explores the varied stereotypes of the Asian female negotiated and constructed by the power and fantasies of white, patriarchal culture. Inspired by Hollywood movies from the 1920s to the 1940s that relied upon orientalizing themes, Choi created *Orientalism Series* (2001), a set of digitized and composited inkjet prints in which she role-plays as the Asian Other against backdrops collaged from 18th-century European Orientalist paintings. But she distorts her position, performing a hyper-racialized, -sexualized role in order to question the validity of such constructions.

The installations of C.J. Lee often begin with a blank slate. In the case of *24/7* (2001), two sewing machines are functioning automatically. One machine sews a constant stream of white toilet paper while the other sews black fabric. As the toilet paper and fabric run through the machines, their mundane quality is transformed and elevated into something that has beauty and the potential to fulfill human needs. Lee excavates the convergence between repetitive technological

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processes and individual human interaction in an installation that inevitably calls to mind the histories of women's work and how, as its title suggests, it's never done.

When eleven artists are selected for a group exhibition without a curatorial theme, it is always satisfying when valid connections and contradictions can be made between their works. As noted earlier, one major aesthetic parallel is the reliance, for most of the artists, on the paper support and the great flexibility it offers to be processed, shaped, and transformed. The installation format also continues to liberate the artist,

allowing new realignments of the viewer's engagement with the artwork. Other overlapping concerns evident in this exhibition are memory, community, crossing borders, in-between spaces, knowledge formation, and shifting identities. But ideological issues aside, one basic commonality among the eleven artists must be observed. They are all women. This has never happened before in the twelve-year history of the Asian American Arts Centre's Annual Exhibitions. It should be noted that the ratio of male to female submissions was equal, so empirical evidence cannot easily explain this particular occurrence. Instead, the opportunity must be taken to celebrate this serendipitous milestone, to honor this exhibition of women's work.

Review Panelists

Mihee Ahn

An Independent Curator, has curated *Apt # 3F* at the Asian American Arts Centre, NY; *Lost & Found: Reclaimed Moments* at Rotunda Gallery, NY; and *Now & Then: Asian Presence of Difference* at Oella Mill Gallery, Baltimore. She also co-curated with Hyunjin Shin *WATERwalks* at the Ise Foundation Art Gallery, NY. She is a contributing writer for *Art World*.

Timothy Liu

An author of four books of poems, most recently *Hard Evidence* - Talisman House, 2001. He is also the editor of *Word of Mouth: An Anthology of Gay American Poetry* - Talisman House, 2000. A frequent contributor to *Art Papers* and *Publishers Weekly*, Liu lives in Hoboken, NJ.

Margo Machida

A New York-based educator, independent curator, researcher, and writer specializing in Asian American visual art. She is a faculty member in the Department of Art and Art History and the Asian American Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, CT.

Tricia Paik

An art historian and educator at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Morgan Library. She writes reviews for *Art on Paper* and was previously the Arts Calendar Editor for *A. Magazine*.

Lydia Yee

A curator at The Bronx Museum of the Arts, where she has organized numerous exhibitions including *One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art* - 2001, with Franklin Sirmans and *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s* - 1999, with Betti-Sue Hertz, among others. She also organized *Sites of Chinatown* - 1996 for the Museum of Chinese in the Americas.