

Yong Soon Min: Over There / Here / Out there

A collaborative window installation by Yong Soon Min and Irene H. Kuniyuki is currently on display at the Windhorse Gallery, 1335 Third Avenue (corner of Third and Union). The piece, "Over There/Here/Out There," is one of six projects sponsored by the 911 Arts/Media Center for the Goodwill Arts Festival. The program, "Origins: The Experience of Multi-Culturalism," is intended to create a public dialogue about border culturalization and border experience.

The following is an interview of Yong Soon Min conducted by Irene H. Kuniyuki. Kuniyuki, a Seattle artist, received her education at the University of Washington and participates in public exhibitions regularly. Her work is currently featured as part of the Goodwill Arts Festival's art-on-buses project, "In-Transition."

Yong Soon Min is a multi-media installation artist from Brooklyn, New York. She received her education at the University of California at Berkeley, and exhibits regularly in New York City.

Regarding the intended concept or theme of the work, "Over There/Here/Out There," Min states, "This piece is meant to be an affirmative statement about the vital diversity of people in the United States and it's meant to re-examine that xenophobic slur, 'Go back home where you belong!' and to really make people wonder, Well, where do they belong? Where is their home?"

"The window is intended to communicate that the United States is the home for everybody who is here, no matter where they came from."

Northwest Nikkel: You acknowledged that you recently found your identity as an Asian American artist and the issues dealing with your identity are based in the late '60s and early '70s. Do you view your art as a contemporary Asian American statement?

Yong Soon Min: Yes, I do view my art

as a contemporary Asian American statement. Some of my works address specifically Asian American art — issues like the Gold Mountain piece. I don't also just restrict myself to those issues specific to Asian Americans, I also deal with other issues relating to other movements. Generally, I am an advocate for empowerment of Third World people. I do identify myself . . . as an Asian-American, so I would say that whatever I do is a reflection of that identity, but that is not the only identity - there are many identities also as a Third World person and as a Korean American.

NWN: Within the Asian American community, is there much tension or competition between artists?

YSM: There is, on a certain level . . . there's also an incredible spirit or solidarity among them. There's a really good level of cooperation and sharing and a realization that they are working with a different spirit in mind that goes counter to the prevalent Western notion of art — that it's this very elitist, individualistic practice. The lone artist alienated from society, that portrayal of the artist has

basically been shoved aside.

Many artists work alone in their studios, but there's a greater openness to different attitudes and different ways of approaching the artwork. And, understanding that they aren't isolated individuals, but that they are a part of the community. The community is as much inspiration and resource for them and not just an audience.

NWN: Is New York's alternative scene more receptive to Asian American artists than Los Angeles'?

YSM: I'm not too familiar with the scene in LA, but in New York, there are so many established alternative venues that there's already mainstream established alternative spaces and organization, as opposed to emerging ones.

The Asian American Arts Alliance is an umbrella arts organization for other Asian American arts organizations in the New York area. In our count, there are over 100 Asian American arts and culture organizations in the larger New York area including the five boroughs. Some are very fledgling, emerging groups and others like Asian Cinevision

and Pan Asian Theater are more established.

I'm very clear about what my relationship is to the mainstream - I still haven't broken into the gallery system. With the kind of work that I do, with the kind of politics that it has, and also because of my artist of color status, it is very hard to break into the mainstream.

I feel I have a very ambivalent attitude about breaking into the mainstream too, because I'm not so sure that I want to be in a gallery situation. Often times when you deal with a commercial situation, there's certain sacrifices I feel that you make - unless that gallery is extraordinarily independent and open minded. I've known people who have had to white-wash their work in order to fit in.

New York is manageable because in the sense that at least there's enough alternative venues and support systems outside of the commercial mainstream to expose your work.

YSM: It's hard for a lot of artists of color to survive in any situation in relation to the mainstream — the funding is not there. Often times the only accessible funding available is through mostly the mainstream sources. As much as I would like to do more work oriented towards the community, they don't have the funds to support my work. I have to rely mostly on money from other sources.

Hopefully, it will change as there's greater development of more community based arts organizations that can serve as nurturing ground for artists. And, that those organizations can then develop and grow into larger institutions that can then have the political and economic clout to really support Asian American artists.

NWN: How do you feel when a white artist who does art that looks ethnic is called "exotic" by critics and when an artist of color does the same, is labeled as "too ethnic to understand it"?

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Multi-media installation artist Yong Soon Min. Irene H. Kuniyuki photo

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YSM: To label your work or for anyone else to prescribe what your work should be, is very dangerous.

If you're true to who you are and if the work reflects something about yourself and is rooted in your life and you're Asian — it's going to be in there. It's not in the sense of a certain look. I don't think there's any stereotypical image of what Asian American art should look like.

All of this lies with the viewer, if a mainstream critic were to look at work that doesn't look very ethnic, and if it follows more the formalistic mode, then often times you're just considered derivative. The work is considered less than a white person's version in the same style or mode.

If your work is categorized as ethnic, you also can get pigeonholed from both sides, from Asians as well as non-Asians.

To me the kind of work that's interesting is when the work is challenging, defies stereotypes and really changes you in some way. Changes your notions of what things are and deals more with the complexity of the situation and doesn't try to simplify things.

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NWN: *What are the influences on your art?*

YSM: The civil rights movement, the Asian American movement and Third World artists whom I've met who are living in the U.S., Canada, and Britain.

NWN: *Do you consider yourself as an "activist artist"?*

YSM: I consider myself an artist and an activist.

NWN: *How much time do you devote to your art?*

YSM: Pretty much five days a week. I work two days on the weekend, the rest of my time is split between my art and my work as an activist.

YSM: What's really important is what you're trying to say and how much conviction you have in what you're trying to say. In art school you're like a sponge, receiving and absorbing all the external stimuli. But at a certain point you start to develop a balance between what you receive and what you put out.

It took a while for me to develop a kind of language and conviction in my life. What is it that I'm really interested

in? What is it I'm really passionate about?

It's tied in with really becoming aware of my Asian identity. Because in the early stages of my career as an artist, I thought my identity as an artist was enough for me to give meaning in my life. But it wasn't until I moved to New York that it wasn't enough — I had to dig deeper.

I began to become aware of the Asian American community and I spent a lot of the time reflecting and looking back. Just becoming more involved, I realized that the search for identity really rests with all of this other self — my roots, my identity, everything, that it had nothing to do with art.

So from that point on, actually, I felt my work is talking about myself, not about art. It's really dealing with issues, the relationship with myself and the world — and whatever I learned in art school is just perhaps reflected in trying to explore new ways of saying something. What you're trying to say is the crux of the matter, that's really what's important.

It's very important for me to keep one foot in the studio and the other out in the communities, to be involved — a meaningful balance in my life and an inspiration to the work that I do.