

Reviews

yong soon min

CULTURE AND CONFRONTATION

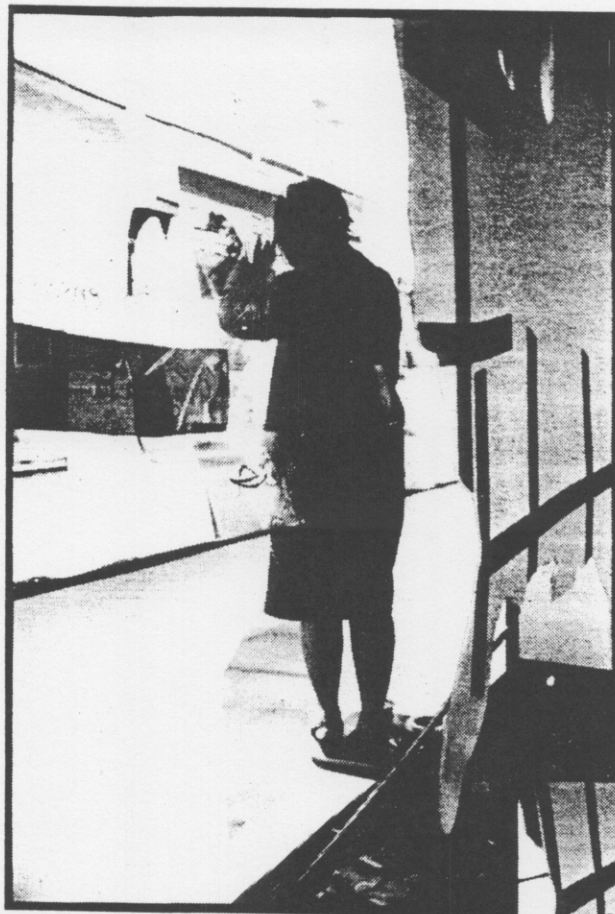
911 AND WINDHORSE GALLERY
JULY, SEATTLE

Yong Soon Min's multi-media installations deal with the clash of cultures, with the search for identity. She challenges the concept of culture as an isolated phenomenon, and instead explores the intangibility of identity and the need to constantly redefine ourselves in the face of changing social realities. Her work consists of images and language about cultural confrontation, a reflection of the struggle that ensues when a dominant culture is forced to extend itself to include the Other.

Over there/Here/Out there, a window installation created with the assistance of Irene Kuniyuki, examines the sense of home and belonging. The window is covered with paper, out of which the words GO BACK and the shape of a house are cut, blaring a familiar slur, but at the same time allowing us to peer inside and see "through" the words and view the rest of the display. To get the full view, one has to repeatedly negotiate a vantage point. The piece progresses in various layers, each obscuring a little bit of what is behind. Hung behind the paper facade are transparencies with writing in various languages—French, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and one that I could translate, written in Tagalog: *Tayong lahat ay iisa*, "We are all one." Further back, we see a map of the world, or at least part of one. We shift, and we notice that the outer edges of the map take on the shape of the continental United States.

WRITTEN ON THE DOUBLE MAP, BY THE South Atlantic Ocean/the midwestern states is a quote from Trinh T. Minh-ha: "There is a Third World in every First World and vice versa." Min implies an interpenetration of boundaries, countering the illusion of national purity. Within this melting pot we call the **United States is a constituency of people of color who are marginalized and who constantly negotiate their relationship to the mainstream.**

On the floor, the words "Love it or Leave it" lie like an abandoned sign, sharing space with other residues from the machines of contemporary capitalism: a McDonald's cup, a Rainier beer can, a Wendy's paper bag, all scattered about in thoughtless profusion. Indeed, home is the world, and the world is home. The United States extends its sphere of influence throughout the planet in the entity of consumerism and the multi-national corporation, and the world—represented in the various heritages and cultures that make up the people of this country—mix and resist, progress and struggle for equity.



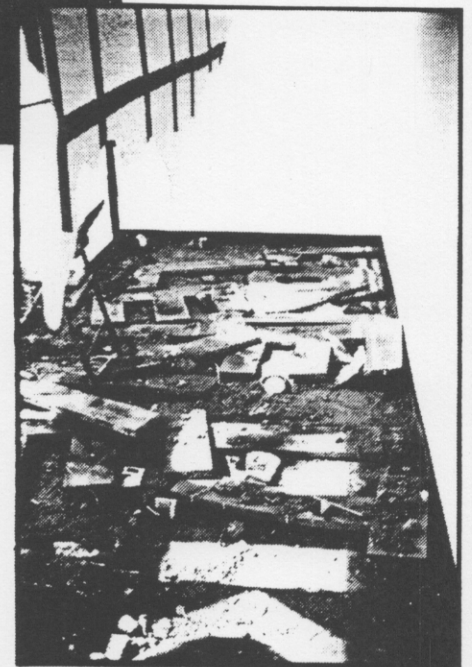
Yong Soon Min
with Irene Kuniyuki
*OVER THERE/HERE/
OUT THERE*, 1990
Window installation

YONG SOON MIN IS CONSIDERED A "1.5" in the nomenclature of Korean immigrants. This designation means she came over to the States at an early age, and has more in common with second-generation immigrants in that she is more assimilated into this society. But the 1.5's, like second-generation

Min explores the intangibility of identity and the need to constantly redefine ourselves in the face of changing social realities.

immigrants, are more likely to experience a crisis in cultural identity. First-generation immigrants, having "lived" the journey, having experienced the transition from familiarity in their homeland to the shock of alienation in a new country, are less likely to question their roots. The dilemma that plagues their offspring is the feeling of not belonging in either place. In an article she wrote, "Comparing the Contemporary Experiences of Asian-American, South Korean, and Cuban Artists" (*Artspiral*, Winter 1989), Min states that "Asian-Americans are put in a particularly ambiguous relationship with mainstream American culture. Regardless of the generations of Asians who have made this country their home. Asians are still considered the eternal aliens at the same time that we're designated the honorary whites or the more recent appellation, 'model minority'. No matter what they call us, it's all derogatory and serves to keep us in our marginalized place."

In earlier installations, Min has explored just this categorization of Asians. One piece shown in her slide talk at Windhorse Gallery consists of four photographs of herself, each photo showing a different gesture and facial expression, and each posted with a different description: Model Minority, Exotic Emigrant, Assimilated Alien, Objectified Other. Another piece, *Echoes from Gold Mountain: Different Name. Same Game*, presents this objectifica-



tion in a dichotomized shift. In this wall installation, the central motif is a mountain, half of which is in darkness, half in light. Within this mountain shape are depictions in Asian-American history. In the darkness is earlier history, including the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the Japanese internment camps. In the light are included more contemporary events—protests against the film *Year of the Dragon*, and a remembrance for Vincent Chen. Above the mountain, to sum it up, is the statement "Yellow Peril = Model Minority."

If there were a formula for integrating cultures, or for calculating identity, then perhaps we would be able to tuck everything away neatly and assign everyone their place. Yong Soon Min maintains, however, that culture is ever-evolving, and identity is elusive at best. The construction of a formula is precisely the method used by the powers-that-be to separate those who don't fit, those who challenge the "vanilla" definition of *this* culture. There is a whole world contained within these (our) borders. To "go back home" means never to leave.

—Lucia Enriquez

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