

# Protest Song

We can't all get along, but we can make some art

BY ERIN AUBRY

**P**HOTOJOURNALIST ROLAND CHARLES thought it sounded like an idea too burdened with good intentions to really fly: get together a group of African-American and Korean artists to work on collaborative projects, and prove to the world that these two groups, whose street-level relations are still regarded as glacial at best, could get along just fine. But Charles, director of a fine-art photography gallery in the Crenshaw district, couldn't say no to Julie Sim-Edwards, an energetic curator he met at a conference last summer. Although she conceived of the project in the wake of the 1992 civil unrest, Sim-Edwards lacked a co-curator who would provide entrée to a community of black artists, a liaison who would share her vigor in bringing together frankly disparate cultures and aesthetic sensibilities, and cross-fertilize at will. Someone willing to throw artistic, and maybe political, caution to the wind. Upon meeting Charles, she seized the opportunity to bring her dream show to life.

The resulting group and individual show, aptly entitled "Collaborations," bursts forth with images, textures, poignancy and imaged humor that both delight and assault the senses; it's like a gust of spring air laden with fragrant but formidable pollen. Utilizing everything from fabric to photo montage to glass, "Collaborations" simultaneously embraces a we-are-the-world altruism and ignores it altogether. Its points of view are as fitful — and as interesting — as a human being of any skin shade. Which is exactly the aim of the project, says exhibiting artist Nathaniel Bellamy. "Artists can be just as petty as anyone else, sometimes even more so," says Bellamy, who teamed up with Iktae Rhee on a mixed-media piece entitled *It Doesn't Matter What Ship You Came In on, We're All in the Same Boat Now*. "There's a lot of dishonesty, a lot of bullshit in art. What I attempted to do is correct the stereotypes I have, and other people have, of Koreans. And I hope that from today on, Iktae won't put a blanket attitude on a black person he meets on the street."

**F**OR THE EXHIBIT, 25 BLACK, KOREAN AND Korean-American artists divided up 70 collaborative and individual works between the Black Gallery in the Crenshaw district and the Sabina Lee Gallery in Koreatown. At both sites, the variety and clarity of voices, particularly within the single pieces wrought by the two-artist teams, is impressive. Kenneth Coleman and Sahan Jason Chang's three-dimensional photograph, *In Harmony*, melds together Korean and black families but also separates them, depending on which side of the piece you stand on. Kyongho Shin Ko and Mark Greenfield's wryly observed *Only Five Bucks!* puts viewers in the most familiar L.A. position — the

seems to say, things might be more culturally vague than they already are. There are also plenty of delicate counterpoints to the in-your-face offerings: *Lightness of Being* by Carole Kim and Matthew Thomas, a complex, altarlike circle of branches with gauze wafting over the top; Charles and Sim-Edwards' own contribution, *Three Hundred Years of Broken Dreams*, which drapes a supine African-American figurine with a regal scarlet sash in a moving attempt to give

ration time and even less funding, Charles and Sim-Edwards relied on the artists' mutual dedication to their projects. Happily, most of the meetings of the minds were fruitful. "I saw right away that we had similar concepts and ideas, that I wouldn't have to compromise," says Greenfield. "We didn't have enough armor around us to get in the way of our progress. Actually, we spent four months becoming friends before developing the piece in two months. That had to happen before we could have total trust."

Not all the matches were made in heaven. Though *Cherish*, a quilt by LaKeeta Howard and Sunglee Lee, eloquently marries an essentially Af-

## A R T

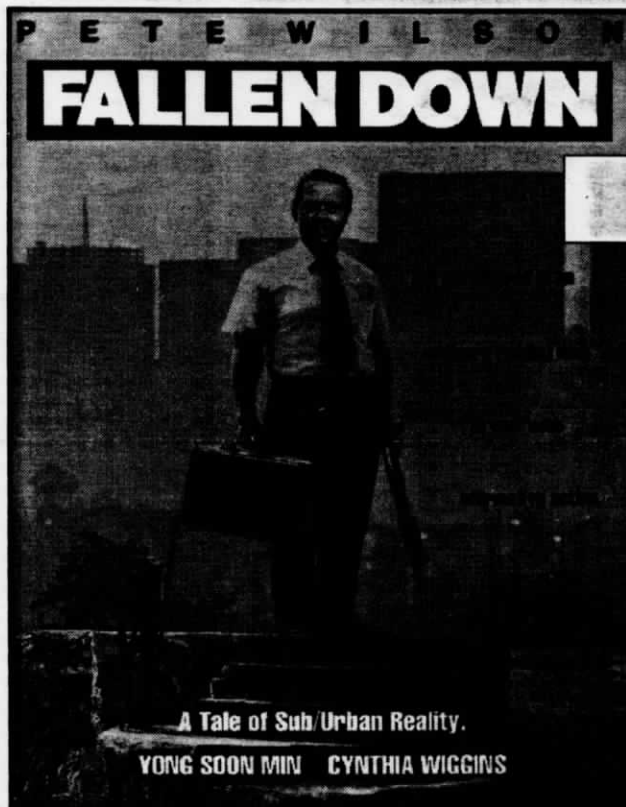
frican-American tradition with a Korean version, Lee admits she and Howard didn't jibe personally. "I felt like I was the teacher in this, like I had to kick LaKeeta's butt to get this done," said Lee, whose hands swelled during frantic sessions of last-minute sewing. "The important thing is, the quilt happened. My other pieces happened. It would be nice to say, 'Oh, we met and ate Korean food and really hit it off and everything's great and we're a rainbow coalition now.' But that's not it."

While no one involved in "Collaborations" is calling the show a watershed event in L.A.'s stormy history of black-Korean relations, most say they have forged friendships that will far outlast the exhibit itself. Many partners pleasantly discovered that their strengths — sketching or painting or assemblage — played perfectly to their partner's weaknesses, and vice versa. The curators plan to take "Collaborations" to

other L.A. sites this year, and possibly to Korea. More artists are talking about future collaborations, even those who struggled with language differences. "Our saving grace was pen, paper and rough sketches," says Bellamy of his experience with Rhee. "We may not have had words, but we communicated. After he said, 'boat,' things kicked in."

Greenfield, currently director of the Watts Towers Art Center, says he and Shin Ko converged on more than artistic points. "We both agreed that people don't really even know what the boundaries of South-Central are, or where Koreatown actually is," he said. "Yet the division between the two is hyped so much. We were able to discard our own points of view about it and come up with something totally different."

Sim-Edwards says that the "1.5" Koreans like herself — those rooted in Korean culture but educated and acculturated in the States — will play a prominent part in building future bridges and dispelling the myths whipped into a frenzy during the civil unrest. "The media manipulated a lot of people into believing that blacks and Koreans were to blame for the whole



the effigy, in Sim-Edwards' words, "a proper burial." For Sim-Edwards', a 36-year-old artist who graduated from UC Santa Barbara, the real revelation came three months after the riots. That's when she picked up Edward Chang's book *Black: Who Are They?*, a Korean-language account of black American history from slavery onward. She devoured the volume in a single evening. "I've been here since I was 13," she says. "I've been to universities, but I had never taken a course that covered that history. It really hit me. I was galvanized the entire time I read. I thought, 'What can I do as an artist to help?' I wanted to do this show but didn't know how."

**C**HARLES, WHO CO-FOUNDED THE BLACK Gallery in the Santa Barbara Plaza 11 years ago, admits he initially felt Sim-Edwards was "making casual conversation" about mounting a collaborative exhibit. "You hear these ideas all the time, but then another person wants you to take on the responsibility," he says. "But after our second meeting in a week, I took her seriously. I said, 'This is great, let's do it.'"

Booking for unity:

Yong Soon Min

and Cynthia

Wiggins'

collaboration.

*Fallen Down*

COLLABORATIONS

At the  
BLACK GALLERY  
107 Santa Barbara  
Plaza,  
Los Angeles  
At the