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# Locating Asian American Art: Redefinitions

By Alexandra Chang

AFTER ALL IS SAID AND DONE WHEN ATTEMPTING TO DISCUSS the topic of Asian American Art, the questions remain: where are we located now and how does one talk about a space that is constantly evolving independent of time, place and imagination? Does theory bring us into a space of initerability and therefore stagnant waters in our seeking of the conscientious read? My mind filled with thoughts on theory as I emerged from the Symposium on Contemporary Asian American Art hosted by New York University and sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, March 21-22.

For two concentrated days, 30 scholars, curators, artists and critics including invited guests gathered for a series of closed panel discussions by organizers Margo Machida of the University of Connecticut at Storrs and international artist, scholar and curator Yong Soon Min from the University of California at Irvine. Machida had previously curated "ASIA/AMERICA: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art," for the Asia Society in 1994 and recently co-authored a book with Elaine H. Kim and Sharon Mizota entitled *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (please see review p.96 of this issue).

Other panel participants included, from the American West coast, Karin Higa, curator at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, Eungie Joo, curator and Director at REDCAT gallery in L.A., artist scholar Gaye Chan of the University of Hawaii, and artist and critic Allan deSouza from L.A. Also present were artist Dinh Q. Lê from Ho Chi Minh City, Okwui Enwezor of the University of Pittsburgh, writer/scholar and curator Monika Gagnon from Montreal, Richard Powell from Duke University, and the founder and Director of the Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia Gayle Isa. Completing the list of panelists were the New York City-based scholar Joan Kee, artist Tomie Arai, Alanna Heiss of P.S. 1, Asia Society's President Vishakha Desai and Curator Melissa Chiu, Director of the NYU A/P/A Studies Program and Institute John Kuo Wei Tchen and the Rockefeller Foundation's Associate Director for Creativity & Culture Tomas Ybarra-Frausto.

Interestingly, early in the panel discussions, Tchen introduced the notion of the dialogic as a model of potentiality for conceptualizing the highly layered and constantly shifting ether of public space and memorialization within the works of Maya Lin. His suggestions brought a new and inspired look to the possibilities for actual real life consequence and iterability stemming from formalistic aspects of her works. Similarly, as a sort of bookend to the conference, the concluding speaker, scholar and writer Joan Kee tuned into the importance of accountability within the highly fashionable and what Kee deems often cavalier theoretical discourse of hybridity within Asian American Art historical frameworks.

Meanwhile, Chiu's presentation of diaspora brought one to question the notion of past, present and future within the concept of homeland, place and "Chineseness" within the art works of several Chinese expatriate artists in Australia, the United States and France including Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Chen Zhen and Zhang Hongtu, among others. She went on to compare



■ (Center standing), Artist, scholar and symposium organizer Yong Soon Min speaks as artist Dinh Q. Lê (left), scholar Richard Powell (right) from Duke University, and curator writer Ingrid Chu (back row) look on.





Chen Zhen's model of *transexperience* as when one's concept of "Chineseness" is constantly fashioned through life experience and in constant evolution, thus denying a notion of this "Chineseness" as fixed in the past and using it as a possible model for thinking about diaspora. Kee's notion of accountability goes one step beyond, when she questions the specificities required in investigating the notion of evolving life experience and biography itself.

Indeed with the multiple disciplines represented at the conference, the boundaries of the conservative nature of the field of academia and more popular forms of discourse were constantly brought into question. In Chan's presentation of her projects as well as Kee and Higa's observations, the multiple layers of biography, economics and socio-political concerns came to the fore as well as art historical formalist concepts involved with any conscientious reading of issues and subjects within the already quite nebulous and nascent framework of Asian American Art. Higa's discussion on Japanese artists in the early part of the 20th century in Little Tokyo brings to bear another issue of concern—the notion of definitions and the stigma of ethnic enclaves within the Asian American artistic discourse. In fact these artists both crossed into international artistic spheres and back into their local communities.

Joo, who spoke of her work on *Six Months*:

Crenshaw, where she teamed up with L.A. and New York-based artists to form a space for open exchange and creation outside of the institutionalized art scene, was able to bring into question the idea of complacency, looking for a way to challenge the mainstream effect of institutionalization of "the minority artist." In a similar mode of thought, deSouza and Gagnon were able to critique Sarat Maharaj's notion of official "multicultural managerialism" in the comparative contexts of the Canadian Multiculturalism policy of 1988 and the Black Arts movement in the U.K. during the 80s.

Of interest in its abundance was the topic of diaspora and issues of post-colonial discourse and representation that infused many of the presentations within the conference. While investigations of post-coloniality were reminiscent of past discourses in which "whiteness" or First World appropriation of the Other may seem relatively simplistic and not finely tuned to the dialectic of the many tiered mix in which one now finds the conversation, Chan's *DownWind Productions* project (See Reena Jana's interview, p. 64) touches on the overlapping notions of property, distinctions and appropriations of otherness, and economies that are now recognized to problematize simpler models.

With those that wish to understand the mainstream and its margins as a blurred and

shifting zone that is at its best, an artificial yet real phenomenon, as indistinct zones of hegemony, there lies a difficulty to then specify the empirical case. And with this, there becomes an inability to bring about any real-life dialogue at all. So, is in fact this hypersensitive form of hybridity and diasporic-speak in fact a further distortion of the language of the minoritized, or more precisely, those on the supposed reified social-political lower rung? In the Habermasian context, this inability to speak causes further separation and a build up of discontent among the silenced. However, in this model, perhaps there is an equal impossibility for interpretation—equal from one end to the other in the power function.

Can definition be ever truly accountable as Kee asks? While she seems to hint at its impossibility, she also underlines an element of responsibility that needs to be constantly examined at its core, though one that seems to fall prey to the deconstructionalist turn.

Drawing from this conference, Machida and Min hope to amass a collection of essays for a future book that is currently, like the field, in flux and in development. Machida explains, "We certainly do not regard the symposium as an endpoint, but rather as one of many long-term efforts intended to further develop discourse on Asian American Visual Art."