

A Spectrum of Voices, A Common Vision

By Betty Kano

"Bridges: Works by Korean American and Japanese American Women Artists" is an invitation to explore the connections between two disparate communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Because art has the ability to cross ethnic, racial and class barriers, it is the ingredient that makes bridge-building possible, opening many aspects of individual lives to the viewer. Putting art before the public is the beginning of communication. Without such action, a community remains voiceless, formless, without articulation.

By looking specifically at Korean American and Japanese American women artists of several generations, "Bridges" presents a spectrum of contrasts, diverse and divergent experiences, influences and aesthetic visions. Taken together, these elements suggest a wide range of connections and a journey through human experience.

NJAHS conceived the exhibition based on the notion of two ethnic communities divided by history and culture. As executive director Rosalyn Tonai noted in her proposal, "NJAHS's mission is to tell as fully as possible the story of Japanese Americans . . . The history of the Korean community, while not a direct part of NJAHS's mission, is integrally tied with Japanese and Japanese American experiences. The two countries have had a long, tension-filled relationship, culminating in the annexation of Korea by Japan from 1910 to 1945.

"Korean and Japanese immigrants to the US have brought with them long-held prejudices, and there is often little interaction between the two communities, as evidenced in San Francisco's Japantown. . . NJAHS recognizes the demographic shift taking place in the area and that the ability

of diverse groups to successfully interact and work together may in part determine the future vitality and viability of the Japantown neighborhood."

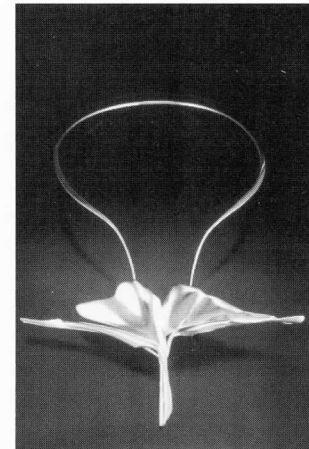
The original title, as funded by San Francisco Arts Commission Cultural Equity Fund, was "Bridging Divides: Korean American and Japanese American Women Artists." The intention was to promote dialogue and greater cultural understanding between the two communities by comparing and contrasting their experiences. The exhibition would also be a venue for young emerging artists to gain a larger audience, and a starting point public discourse on issues of immigration, race, identity and assimilation.

Soon after our first curators meeting we decided to rethink the title. Many of the works under consideration seemed to speak from a common frame of reference that addressed issues of identity, the influence of media and personal memory. We both thought the word "Bridges" addressed the idea that different aesthetic perceptions are a way of navigating a changing terrain.

The imagery and approach in work by Korean American artists tended toward figures and portraiture, perhaps because they are more recent immigrants. Questions of identity are, for them, more pressing; memories of the home country more present. Is this due to a need to literally put a face on Korea's history of oppression both in relationship to Japan and the US, as well?

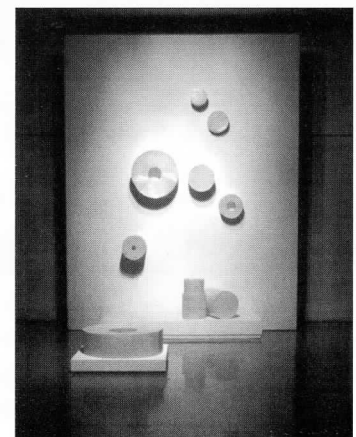
The work by Japanese Americans covered a wider range of genres and leaned towards abstraction. For Nikkei, especially Sansei and Yonsei, identity issues emerge in a more subtle, diffused form. Some of the

imagery is more symbolic than narrative. Jeweler Dawn Nakanishi (b. 1957, US) for example, uses natural forms, such as the shape of a ginko leaf or the lyrical curve of water, as symbols of Japanese culture and an acknowledgement of Asian identity.



Dawn Nakanishi

Other artists choose materials that are cultural indicators. For her paper sculptures, Rachel Osajima (b. 1969, US) layers sheets of heated wax paper over thin armatures in simple shapes reminiscent of Japanese lanterns. Stitches hold the layers together, providing a handworked quality. She is interested in creating harmonious pieces, much like the feeling of a Japanese garden. The paper structures also suggest shoji screens and, though non-representational, project a clear identity.



Rachel Osajima

In Asian cultures in particular, women are keepers of a community's stories and guardians of that which historically was unspoken. They recognized that hope lies in memory, reverence in solitude and that there is a need to continually balance the forces that thrust us outward with those that urge us toward contemplation. The artists in this show illustrate that women are at the center of social connections.

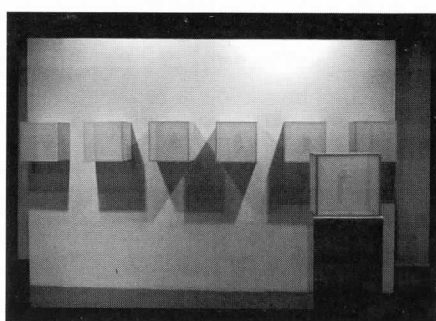


Wendy Yoshimura

Watercolors of fruits and vegetables by Wendy Yoshimura (b. 1943, US) capture a precise moment of light and time. While they appear simple on the surface, the pictures become more poignant when viewed with knowledge of Yoshimura's own history. She was born in Manzanar internment camp and later returned to Japan with her parents. She became politically active while an art student at California College of Arts and Crafts and was connected with a radical movement during the 1970s.

The internment was a radicalizing experience that motivated her political choices later in life; she made the Japanese American community more visible through her notoriety, and in turn, the community pulled together to support her during a subsequent trial. That she was acquitted was a victory for the community as well. Her life struggles seem to have resulted in an appreciation of the moment, and attitude that is revealed in her painting which, in its precision, is a kind of struggle too.

In similar fashion, small floating figures by Soonran Youn (b. 1967, Korea) record a precise point in time.



Soonran Youn

"Sometimes, an unforgettable place or moment in the long solitary journey of life unexpectedly shakes our soul and changes everything. When I was six, I was eager to know how it would be to be a bird, so I jumped off the roof of my second-story house. At the moment, I was ecstatically joyous fulfilling my dream without knowing how tough life would be [after my experiment].

"My right arm was seriously broken and deformed for several years. I was also emotionally injured by the stares other people gave me, and soon withdrew into myself. However, I was lucky enough to discover an amazingly infinite world inside, and started drawing the inner world. Occasionally, I feel myself as a bird flying freely under the transparent sky when I make art." Youn's work is highly personal. At the same time her art captures a universal human urge to feel free, like a bird.



Saku ee

Both Saku ee (b. 1975) and Sasha Yungju Lee (b. 1960, Korea) explore concepts of appearance and perception. "I am particularly interested in the way media images shape us, and I use art and popular culture to critically reflect upon celebrity, power, adver-

tising, race, gender and media hype," says Lee. Her "Eye-con" (see cover) re-envisioning Marilyn Monroe in order to make us think about how Asians might fit into a hegemonic media representation of women.

Performance artist Saku ee enjoys challenging mainstream ideas of proper behavior. "I like feeling awkward and uncomfortable," she says. "It means there's something I'm resisting, something that needs to be confronted, something that needs to be learned." Recently, while fasting "for health and beauty reasons," she made a revealing discovery: "Hunger pangs not as bad as the Yankees losing the World Series."

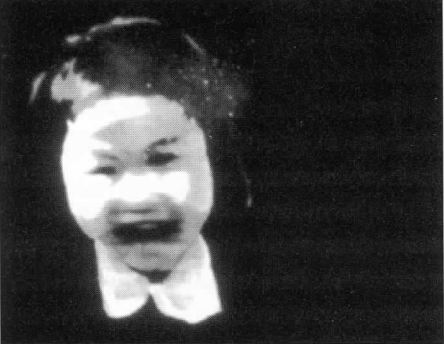


Young Kim

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Young Kim turns the camera on herself for another purpose. As she explains in her statement: "In October of 1989, I began a project of daily photographic documentation using myself as a subject. The camera became a diligent observer, allowing me to continue the ritual of recording myself every twenty-four hours. This process is invisible; only a small photograph remains as its faithful or unfaithful witness without idealization or projection, embellishment or disguise."

Kim reproduced the sequence of photographs on videotape for a chronology of her life that evolves in increments, marking the slow process of aging. "As the singular individuality of each self-portrait diminishes, the series of visage as a whole creates a vast landscape of repetition that appears to be still, yet slowly changing as time passes," she explains.

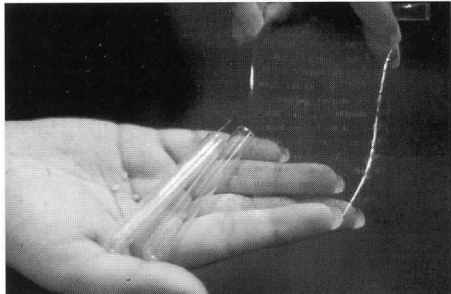


Junsung Kim

For Junsung Kim, the most important faces are those that document memories. Her dense, black paintings are made from images she collects and duplicates to keep alive the thought of her Korean relatives and her previous self. "Old photographs enable me to see the past that is part of my history," she writes, "although I neither remember it nor even did I exist at the moment that many of these images were taken. When I recall or reawaken the past through my brush strokes, the past becomes part of my present. At the moment the present starts to move the future forward, the present once again becomes the past."

Asako Ushio's film, "Parachute Kids," made in collaboration with Kelly Vaughn, follows six Asian immigrant

youths living on their own in the US. Interviews and footage document "weekly cell phone calls to home in Korea. Family meals consisting of corn dogs and ice cream. Teachers speaking in unintelligible words. Fitting in the English-speaking crowd." The artist who was born in Japan, uses her own situation as a starting point to frame the experiences of others.



Reiko Matsuo

Finally, Reiko Matsuo (b. 1978, US) is inspired by the reality of living in two cultures. Matsuo was born in Los Angeles, raised in Japan and schooled at University of Maryland Baltimore County. One of her pieces is a 12-inch sphere of nori—it resembles a bowling ball. In another piece, she built a shoji-type screen of heavy two-by-fours. She invited viewers to poke holes in the paper to peek at a Western-style dress hanging behind the screen; then she patched each

hole until the structure was covered with patches. Like the screen, Matsuo exists not purely in Japan or America, but in a patchwork of the two.

By examining the thoughts behind these images, a viewer can more fully understand the experiences of Koreans and Japanese in America. Learning through the expressions of our art helps develop self-consciousness within our communities and validates the inherent humanity that links each of us. As we define ourselves to the world, we become visible. This is the other, larger bridge. ✨

Events in conjunction with "Bridges: Works by Korean American and Japanese American Women Artists" are held in collaboration with Locus Arts, a nonprofit performance space in Japantown operated by Julia Kim and many volunteers. Please see Calendar for a list of performances, film screenings and discussions.

Betty Kano and Clara Kim are co-curators of "Bridges." Kano is Executive Director of Pro Arts in Oakland and teaches at San Francisco State University. Clara Kim works at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Her most recent exhibition, "Lee Bul: Live Forever", is currently traveling in the United States.

Exhibition runs Jan. 25-May 4, 2002, at NJAHS Gallery. Open: M-F, 12-5, and first Saturday of the month.

SPOTLIGHT



"Peace!" by Coleen

These images are among hundreds produced by Japantown Art and Media (JAM) Workshop during more than 20 years of operation in San Francisco's Nihonmachi. The non-profit community arts center, directed by Dennis Taneguchi, produced posters and other materials to promote and support J-town happenings, from festivals to redress activities (JAM also organized the first Nihonmachi Street Fairs, Oshogatsu celebrations and other events). Richard Tokeshi was the wizard behind JAM's art classes, which trained and mentored many young artists. JAM alumni include Hideo Yoshida, Richard Wada, Wes Senzaki, Boku Kodama, Paul Kagawa, Leland Wong, Gail Aratani and Stephanie Lowe of the Asian Women Artists Project. JAM closed its doors in 1999. NJAHS recently acquired its collection of lithographs, calendars and silkscreen posters.



"Hunter and Seller of Wild Animals in Toisan, China 1984". Crystal K.D. Hue, photographer