HYPERALLERGIC

Must Asian Americans Always Be Seen in Relation to One Another?

Scratching at the Moon hones in on a loose network of artists that have known each other for decades in Los Angeles.

Alex Paik | April 3, 2024

Installation view of *Scratching at the Moon*, featuring works by Amanda Ross-Ho

LOS ANGELES — Michelle Lopez's "Correctional Lighting" (2024) is one of two massive sculptures that greet the viewer as they enter *Scratching at the Moon* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), an intergenerational exhibition of 13 Asian American artists with strong ties to Los Angeles. It consists of a suspended upside-down highway light secured with yellow rigging straps to a semitransparent cinder block, which acts as a counterweight. The connections between the elements feel strained, tenuous, and awkward. Although the sculpture itself is quite elegant, the harsh, surveillant glare and soft electrical buzz of the slowly spinning light casts its constant, somewhat unwelcome presence across the exhibition, a metaphor for what scholar Susette Min terms an "extra-aesthetic demand" that haunts race-specific exhibitions such as this one.

This demand that Min wrote about in *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art* (2018) requires that race-specific exhibitions do the extra labor of being a site of conversations around the role race still plays in the larger selection and valuation of art at the institutional level. *Scratching at the Moon* attempts to side-step this demand by honing in on a loose network of artists that have known each other for decades, representing but one small segment of the Asian American arts community. At the same time, many of these artists directly engage with their personal relationships with others, as if to admit that their individuality will always be seen in relation to other people, histories, and identities.

Some of the artists make direct references to family members. For example, Amanda Ross-Ho's work is an homage to her father, the artist Ruyell Ho. For "Untitled Prop Archive (THE PORTFOLIO)," she gathered dozens of objects from her father's commercial photography portfolio and spread them across a comically oversized wooden table. Nearby is "Untitled Waste Image (HEAVY DUTY)" (both works 2023), a lightbox that contains an enlarged, water-damaged photograph of her father that Ross-Ho found among his archives. The colors and distortions from the

water damage create beautiful painterly passages that call attention to the way time and memory warp our perceptions of relationships.

Dividing one room is “Multitude Wall” (2023) by Anna Sew Hoy, who co-curated the exhibition. The piece is made from hundreds of men’s dress shirts that have been sewn together, a metaphorical map of a community whose individual shirts have been altered so that they are reduced to one identifiable marker: the collars and button seams which signify the upper-middle class uniform of respectability initially inspired by her father’s work as an orthopedic surgeon.

In the same room, Amy Yao’s work playfully engages with ideas of who can claim nativity, authenticity, or cultural legitimacy. Her *AZN Clam* series (2023) focuses on a species of clam originally from East Asia that has, through changes in water currents and human industry, spread throughout the world, becoming labeled “invasive” in North America. This work raises questions about what it means to be labeled foreign or invasive, who gets to decide such things, and the parallels between categorizing goods and categorizing people. “Doppelgängers” (2016) combines fake and real rice with fake and real pearls, referencing the often racist mistrust of Chinese goods, which, buttressed by stories of counterfeits and sweatshop labor, make the label “made in China” code for cheap or inauthentic. By combining relatively inexpensive goods like rice with more expensive goods like pearls, “Doppelgängers,” raises questions about valuation.

Tucked in the corner of the exhibition is a touching pairing of the work of Young Chung and Yong Soon Min. Min is known both for her art and her role in several community-based Asian American arts organizations. She was a member of Godzilla, served on the board of the Asian American Arts Alliance in New York, and co-founded GYOPO here in Los Angeles. Min was Chung’s professor at UC Irvine and played a lasting role in Chung’s trajectory as an artist and community builder. Included in the exhibition is a series of photographs from Chung’s time as a student, entitled *Not By Birth* (1996/2023). These portraits of Chung’s chosen and biological family, including one of Min, pay respects to the myriad influences that shaped the artist’s identity. In the same room is Min’s seminal work “Defining Moments” (1992), a series of portraits of the artist that reference significant dates and events in the artist’s life. This pairing examines the agency one has in creating their chosen communities (Chung would go on to found Commonwealth and Council, a gallery known for championing artists of color, including some of the artists in this exhibition) and the way that external events beyond our control such as the chance relationship between teacher and student or the circumstances of our birth shape our sense of self.

So what does *Scratching at the Moon* tell us about Asian American identity? Only that it remains unresolvable, both within and without the community, as Lisa Lowe argued in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996). Indeed, both the persistence and necessity of race-specific exhibitions reveal the continued underrepresentation of Asian American artists in institutions. Given the codependent relationship between what is taught in academia and what is shown in institutions, underrepresentation unfortunately also means undereducation, meaning that much of the art world is plagued with the “generational forgetting” that Sharon Mizota recently wrote about. By referencing and linking to some of the scholars who have helped shape my own thinking, I am, like the artists in this exhibition, responding to yet another extra-aesthetic demand — the responsibility to acknowledge our histories.

However, more and more Asian Americans are grappling with the limits of representational politics, reassessing whether institutional visibility should be the end goal. Groups like Godzilla that fought for (and won) visibility in the art world teach us through the recent protests and subsequent cancellation of a planned survey exhibition that Asian Americans need to contend with the question of whether or not representation is/was worth the cost when institutions remain largely unchanged. When untethered from the goal of representation, Asian American identity becomes but one way in which we have been brought in proximity to each other, a method of community building. As Danielle Wu wrote in her essay for *Just Between Us: From the Archives of Arlan Huang* (2023), “an entrusted space for Asian American ideas, culture, and art might not [be] a museum or an art gallery, but rather shepherded between people.” The artists in *Scratching at the Moon* acknowledge and grapple with the relationships and identities that have shaped them, revealing the legacies, tensions, and contradictions within these connections — a messy mixture of family, loved ones, teachers, students, Angelenos, and yes, Asian Americans.