

Cassandra Moe

A response to the rise in anti-Asian sentiment around the globe, *We Are Watching* is a collection of Banksy-style street art meant to invoke discomfort, defiance, and most importantly deliberation. The outbreak of COVID-19 has inflicted suffering and death on an enormous scale, but further still it has exacerbated racism and xenophobia; Asians have been denied services and verbally threatened, spat on and publicly beaten¹. Seeing these senseless acts compound an already dire situation, I was motivated to create a conceptual set of anonymously-painted murals for the hotspot cities of these incidents in America².

The murals consist of variations of an eye and a goat with its eyes closed. The eyes have irises inspired by the flags of various eastern Asian countries, as the people with these ethnic

¹ Matt Loffman, "Asian Americans describe 'gut punch' of racist attacks during coronavirus pandemic," *PBS NewsHour*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/asian-americans-describe-gut-punch-of-racist-attacks-during-coronavirus-pandemic>

² "Stop AAPI Hate," Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, accessed April 21, 2020, <http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/stop-aapi-hate/>. California-based advocacy groups created a resource for people to self-report discriminatory incidents. While it may not be a completely accurate representation of the number or distribution of these occurrences, it is one of the few outlets comprehensively recording and publishing data of this kind. Their latest report to date, released March 25, 2020, gave various breakdowns on the data, including the percentage of reports coming from each state in America. The top ten highest percentages of reports came from the following states: California, New York, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Florida, Ohio, and Washington. If possible, further research would need to be done to determine which cities these incidents occurred in, where ideally the murals would be placed. I also would not want there to be any duplicate paintings; this is meant to strengthen the value of each mural, and possibly facilitate any social media trend or coverage they would receive.

backgrounds³ might “look Chinese” and consequently be targeted for their racial phenotype. The goat, depicted as submissive or possibly dead, is meant to be a nod to the origins of the word “scapegoat”⁴ and people’s tendency to place blame during times of crisis. Each image then has corresponding text⁵, written to be somewhat defiant and induce a sense of apprehension; I want viewers to be left with the impression that they are being directly addressed, rather than let them be mere observers.

I intended for the murals’ anonymous, vandalistic nature to amplify their impact. Would viewers feel a sense of solidarity with the unknown painter? Maybe they would feel comforted that someone was speaking up for them outside the diplomatic confines of their city’s law enforcement. Would they be angry at the implications behind the mural and the fact that they do not know who to hold responsible? Would they think it is uncalled for entirely? Perhaps they would feel as though they are being watched, similar to how many Asians likely feel now. Ideally, the lack of authorship would allow these murals to become an entity of their own, allowing the focus to remain on them and the reactions they inspire, rather than their creator.

³ The flags included represent the following countries/states: Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. This is not a fully inclusive list for the nationalities that have experienced racially-based discrimination due to the coronavirus outbreak, but felt extensive enough for the purpose of this project.

⁴ “scapegoat,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scapegoat>. “In the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, God ordained a particular day during which the entire nation of Israel would set aside work, and during which the priests would atone for the sin of the whole nation.” One of the rituals involved two goats, where one was sacrificed to the Lord while another was released into the wild, carrying away the people’s sin.

⁵ “History has its eyes on you,” “History is watching,” or “Are you looking for something”

A final thought: these murals are purely reactive. Admittedly, they were born of anger, but they are not fueled by it. They are also by no means a solution, but maybe they will motivate a conversation. Especially as an Asian American myself, I hope to combat the rhetoric that this is a “Chinese virus” and the notion that the enemy is a person. I hope people speak out for the marginalized and support those in need. Because history is watching. We are watching.