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History of Art 132AC

The Asian American Identity and Community

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Asian American activists at UC Berkeley kicked off the Asian American movement with the formation of the Asian American Political Alliance. They promoted anti-imperialist and antiwar sentiments, in direct response to what was seen as an unjust Vietnam War. In addition, they rebelled against the use of “Oriental” as a descriptive term and introduced the term “Asian American” as an alternative descriptor. While the Asian American Political Alliance was short-lived, various artists and art collectives took the term and essentialized it into their practice. Many art collectives and artists of the Asian American movement, such as the Basement Workshop, Tomie Arai, and the Godzilla Network centralized and cemented the idea of the “Asian American” identity and community into their works and in their artistic practice, while continuing to achieve the goals of the AAPA.

Shortly after the disbandment of the AAPA, the Basement Workshop, an organization that would help unify the Asian American community, was being built on the other side of the country in Manhattan's Chinatown.¹ Taking after the black power and black unity efforts of Black Panther Party, the collective helped specify the Asian American identity through its support of Asian American artists and the creation of community resources. Artists affiliated with the workshop, such as the Great Leap, created works that fought for anti-imperialism and self-determination of the Asian American identity, “We have sung about Asian ‘identity’ or racial pride, Third World Unity, and unity with world struggles against U.S. imperialism.”²

¹ Alexandra Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts; from Godzilla, Godzookie, to the Barnstormers*. Beijing: Timezone 8, 2009: Chapter One.

² Great Leap, liner notes to *A Grain of Sand*, Great Leap, Pardeon P-1020, vinyl, 1973

Inspired by Great Leap's album *A Grain of Sand*, writers and artists of the workshop came together to publish a collection of art, music, and poetry titled *Yellow Pearl*.³ This collection helped emphasize the notion of a unified Asian America at a time where this idea had just come into fruition. The Basement Workshop also published a nationally circulating paper, the *Bridge Magazine*, and created other resources for the Asian American community at large with the establishment of the Asian American Resource Center and the Asian American Dance Workshop. While helping to create a physical presence for the Asian American identity in the local New York area, the Basement Workshop also formed an imagined community of Asian Americans with the *Bridge Magazine*. With its national presence, it helped update Asian Americans of all kinds with the happenings of other Asian Americans all around the country. However, artist Yong Soon Min would note that the early focus of the Basement Workshop's "Asian American" identity formation revolved around Chinese and Japanese Americans, partially due to its initial location in Chinatown.⁴ The majority of the collective's members were Chinese and Japan ethnically, and this bias caused the term "Asian American" to be associated with East Asian heritage. In whole, the Basement Workshop merged engagement with the Asian American community and collective identity into the art practice of artists affiliated with them.

Tomie Arai was one of the Basement Workshop artists who extensively engaged with the ideas of Asian American identity and community. Her public art pieces engage with the histories of local Asian American communities, such as *Swirl* in Philadelphia, and also the international Asian community, such as *The Shape of Me*.⁵ *Swirl* reflects on the history of Philadelphia's Chinatown and its connection to the China of past with its jade *bi* form, while *The Shape of Me*

³ Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, Chapter One.

⁴ Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, Chapter Two.

⁵ "Public Art." Tomie Arai. Accessed May 17, 2019. <http://tomiearai.com/tomie-arai>.

engages with America's imperialist policies by connecting the needless killings of both the War in Afghanistan and the Vietnam War. Her works compel viewers to consider the past "Oriental" identity of Asian Americans as well as the effects of war and imperialism on Third World Countries, issues that were critical to the early Asian American activists. Another work that incorporates her own Japanese American identity is *Momotaro*, a series of wood panels based on a Japanese folk tale about a boy who emerges from a giant peach and becomes a demon-slaying hero. She collages pictures of her family with traditional Japanese motifs and pop culture materials to create "a story of hope and redemption,"⁶ reflecting the narrative of World War 2 *nisei* GI's attempts to change US perception of Japanese Americans. In Arai's own words, she demonstrates a "fusion between folk traditions and a contemporary art practice that is grounded in the recording of personal and social experience."⁷ Her work is a reflection of the fusion of Asian and American identity as experienced through the postwar world.

In collaboration with a host of other artists, such as Yong Soon Min, Tomie Arai helped found the Godzilla Asian American Arts Network. While some of the founding members had been part of the Basement Workshop, it was not formed to continue the workshop's legacy, but rather as a focused space for a community of artists and art critics to come together to discuss issues in the art world.⁸ They described themselves as an Asian American art network and continued the Basement Workshop's work for the Asian American community in the art sphere. Part of their work as a network included increasing the visibility of Asian American artists in local and national exhibitions, sponsoring symposia on Asian American art, and publishing newsletters, much like the previous collective. *The Godzilla Newsletter* proved to be a critical

⁶ Tomie Arai, "Momotaro." Center for Photography at Woodstock. December 29, 2013. Accessed May 17, 2019. <https://www.cpw.org/past-exhibitions/tomie-arai/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chang, *Envisioning Diaspora*, Chapter Two.

part of the network's practice, as it publicized listings of Asian American art exhibitions from around the country and advised Asian American artists on best practices for getting their work accepted at various exhibitions and museums. Godzilla was instrumental in getting the identity of the Asian American artist more representation in the art realm and was crucial in the expansion of the ethnicities associated with the Asian American artist. One of the initial goals of the network was increased multiculturalism, compared to the Basement Workshop, and it was reflected in an increase in Southeast Asian artist participation. Artists like Allan deSouza brought their identity to the forefront in their works, and deSouza's *The Lost Pictures* brings into play his Indian heritage as well as his Kenyan upbringing.⁹ In his destruction of his deeply personal photos, he creates meaning by exploring the link between photography and memory along with an inspection of cultural perspective.

Through the efforts of the Asian American Political Alliance, the use of the word "Oriental" was widely discontinued and replaced with "Asian American." In the continuation of the Asian American movement, art collectives and artists such as the Basement Workshop, Tomie Arai, and the Godzilla Network, advanced the anti-imperialism and anti-war agendas, while also engendering new forms of art making through the formation of the Asian American identity and community. The Basement Workshop's efforts included the publication of an Asian American art collection and the creation of various resources for the Asian American art community. Arai worked on many public art projects that engaged with the Asian American identity and also created *Momotaro*, which was a unique reflection of her own experience as Japanese American artist. Lastly, the Godzilla Network helped build the visibility of Asian American artists and increase the representation of Asian Americans in the art sphere.

⁹ "Allan DeSouza - The Lost Pictures." Talwar Gallery. Accessed May 17, 2019. <http://talwargallery.com/allanlost-pr/>.