

Art Review

Asian American Art Associations in New York City

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[Asian American Art Centre \(AAAC\)](#)
[Asian American Women Artists Alliance \(AAWAA\)](#)
[Conclusion](#)
[References](#)

When most Americans hear the word “Chinatown,” they think of thousands of Chinese immigrants crowded together in San Francisco or New York City. Chinatowns are more than that. Manhattan’s traditional Chinatown may be the oldest in New York, but it is not the largest. The biggest Chinese community in New York is in Flushing, Queens, where 148,000 Chinese, 70,000 Koreans, and thousands of Southeast and West Asians make up 55% of the borough’s pan-Asian population. While most immigrants to New York have moved away from



their first neighborhood by the third generation, Chinese have tenaciously clung to their Chinatowns since the passage of the racist 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that had been in effect until 1943 (Lin, 1998). This Act denied thousands of working Chinese men the opportunity to bring their families to America or import brides, thus a bachelor society was created (Waxman, n. d.). After

America’s transcontinental railroads were completed in the 1870’s, Chinese workers, derogatively referred to as “coolies” (unskilled day-laborers), were prevented from entering other trades and occupations, including fishing and farming. The unemployed Chinese were stereotyped in newspapers and the penny press as the *Yellow Peril* and linked with gambling, opium dens, gangs, street crime, and prostitution.

On the surface Chinatowns in New York look like neighborhoods in decline. Most apartment buildings are tenements built during the late 19th and early 20th century, but the rents are as expensive as prime locations in Midtown

Manhattan. Today's Chinese immigrants arrive in New York's Chinatowns and remain there by choice rather than exclusion. Manhattan's Chinatown has a special appeal to local residents and millions of tourists each year. The hectic community is a self-supporting entity with its own visible and invisible social structure of employment, housing, economic aid, social services, religious institutions, schools, medical professionals, and thousands of small businesses providing the essence of Chinese urban life—excellent food, shopping, conversation, cultural events, and a generous serving of 5,000 years of culture. The Chinese benevolent societies and Tongs (associations), based on family names, dialects, and regions, unofficially ran the former bachelor society. These associations began to lose control when Chinatown became a popular tourist destination.

One important practice of Chinese immigrant communities is their commitment to teaching the Chinese language and culture. The immense cultural heritage of dynasties that ruled China for thousands of years still reverberates in Chinatown. While historic European, South American and African empires, kingdoms and city states have declined or disappeared, China compete for super-power status. For many Chinese, their homeland remains the middle kingdom (Zhonggou), the proverbial center of the world. However, their desire for material success has grown at the expense of support for the fine and performing arts in Chinatown. Making and spending money seems to have become more important than supporting fine and performing arts. Who then is responsible for supporting, preserving, and presenting the cultural essence of China and its admirers, Japan and Korea?

Within New York's Chinese communities, there are more than 10 associations that support Asian culture. Two of these non-profit centers have consistently provided aspiring Asian and Asian American artists with a place to exhibit their artworks. These art havens are the Asian American Art Centre (AAAC) in Manhattan's Chinatown, directed by Mr. Robert Lee, and the Asian American Women Artist Alliance (AAWAA) in Brooklyn, directed by Ms. Yan Kong. Each center supports a variety of cultural activities with an emphasis on art exhibitions.

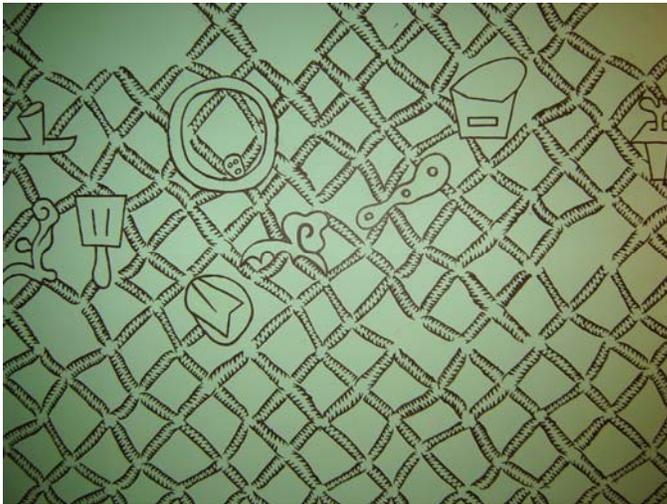
Asian American Art Centre (AAAC)

The AAAC, situated above a fast food outlet on 26 Bowery Street, was founded in 1974 as *Asian American Dance Theatre*. During its 33 years of history, the Centre expanded to include performances, exhibitions, folk art research and



documentation, catalogue publication, and education. For 25 years the Centre has sponsored live performances and exhibitions that toured in the United States and China. Ongoing activities include maintaining a 60-year history of Asian American artistry in the United States; a slide and research archive of 1500 artists, primarily Chinese, Japanese and Korean; community programs that integrate multicultural art experiences in the K-12 curriculum; and an artist-in-residence program that provides opportunities to emerging Asian American artists. The Centre has gathered a permanent collection of 400 works by Asian American artists and 200 Chinese folk art pieces. The *Mid-Career Exhibition* that showed works by two Hong Kong-born artists, Mr. Bing Lee and Ms. Bovey Lee, between March and May, 2007, illustrates the Centre's ongoing support of emerging Chinese American artists.

Bing Lee



Bing Lee's site-specific installations are built upon pictographs from his pictodiarly, which form a pattern of uni-cell repetition. His vocabulary is an evolving expression of choices. His 50-foot-long two-part installation, entitled "No Choice," is a carefully constructed intellectual web of Braille pictographs that spell out "no choice." In a Yin/Yang dialogue, Bing believes that artists have more choices than

any other group. Doing nothing overcomes everything, as Taoism explains. Artists speak a universal language, which they choose either to express or not say, that crosses and engages all cultures. Mixing Chinese calligraphic art, Bing's ordered installation vacillates between the known and unknown, said and unsaid, and mobile and immobile. His delicately-colored installation mural provokes the viewer to deconstruct his cartoon versions of Shang Dynasty (1766-1050 BC) pictographs and ideographs. Bing draws the viewers into his world to reflect on their world.

Bovey Lee

Bovey Lee's paper-cuts combine two types of cutting—cutting edge digital technology and the most delicate form of Chinese paper-cutting (*jianzi*)—to express epochal events in her diasporic life, slowly exchanging a Chinese identity for an American one. Viewing her works provides a retrospective of the struggle and success of an immigrant from Hong Kong in America. A poignant 2006 work in the exhibition, "Power" (14" x 7"), commemorates the ceremony that

made Bovey an American citizen. Her paper-cuts, which took 60 hours to incise, are nuanced by shadows that create tone on tone. Chinese paper-cutting is usually done with red paper, which connotes good luck, but Bovey selected off-white Xuan rice paper and, through the careful placement of light and shadow, created a three dimensional effect. Her works linger between the past, present, and future of surface barriers that reject empty materialism. They capture natural objects like the skin of a fish and a constructed security fence in front of the presidential White House.



Asian American Women Artists Alliance (AAWAA)

Located in the spacious ground floor of a three-story building in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, the Asian American Women Artists Alliance (AAWAA) operates a non-profit women's gallery founded by four Asian women in 1998. AAWAA's objectives and achievements include cultivating an appreciation and understanding of diverse cultural expressions by enabling Asian women artists to promote and present their works in New York. AAWAA sponsors exhibitions in Soho, Chelsea, and Brooklyn; provides community-based education activities in public schools; and produces local access television programs that share artworks, music, dance, lectures, films, and panel discussions encompassing the Pacific Rim. With 75 active members from China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines, their programs and exhibitions have enriched the cultural landscape of New York's Asian communities and provided overdue recognition to female artists.



From its inception, Director Kong has been the driving force behind a wide variety of exhibitions, programs, and performances designed to engage visitors and transform them into informed viewers. AAWAA is a successful vehicle for transformational cultural diversity. An ongoing 3-year project, named *Home Room*, recreates historic eras in Asian culture by furnishing one of the AAWAA's two galleries with typical furniture and artifacts of Chinese daily life at the end of

the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD). AAWAA has close contacts with public schools in Brooklyn and provides affordable multicultural workshops in Chinese fine and folk arts, such as calligraphy, shadow puppet making and paper-cutting.

Three artists, Yan Kong from China, Heejung Kim from Korea, and Chie Nishio from Japan, represent the ethnic and artistic media diversity in AAWAA. Yan, an acrylic painter of dynamic and vibrant expression, fills her large canvases with colorful expressions of energy, discovery, and reciprocal harmony (Li), a common theme in Chinese paintings. Her 2004 painting, "Razzle Dazzle" (40" x 50"), poses questions about what is important in life and whether people who are subsumed in materialism can rank order their emotional and intellectual priorities.



Heejung Kim's sculptures are wrapped in a Korean cloth (*pojagi*) used to cover, carry, or store objects and food. Her constructed objects carry and represent items of personal and cultural identity such as faux eggs, plastic babies, eyes, cloth, pins, and wood. Her 2006 work, "Reincarnation" (29x50x10"), is filled with sculpted eyes wrapped by a black cloth protected by thorns. The all seeing, all knowing eyes retain accumulated emotional experiences. The immigrant yearns to be nurtured and

accepted but, wary of rejection, is protective of his or her cultural identity during reincarnation and rebirth in a new nation.

Chie Nishio, a photographer with an international reputation, has taken thousands of photographs and color slides whose composition, panoramic perspective, and thematic figuration injects each one with an emotional presence. Her photographs of common New York scenes and Native Americans in the Southwest provide the uncommon experience of symbolic beauty and the evocative power of a Japanese iconographic view of nature. Her 35mm color



slide, "Gondola Venice" (1993), turns the bows of three canal gondolas into the rising and falling forms of elegant swans undulating beneath a pinkish sky.

Conclusion

The Asian American Art Centre in Manhattan's Chinatown and the Asian American Women Artist Alliance in Brooklyn are two outstanding examples of non-profit art associations in New York, striving to preserve and present Asian art and artists. As under-represented minorities, Asian artists face racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender barriers that marginalize their artworks. New York is one of the most competitive and expensive cities in the world. Identifying and obtaining funding is a daily struggle for non-profit organizations that help the public gain an appreciation and understanding of East Asia's cultural traditions and contributions. Asians, with their continuous cultural history of 5,000 years, have a desire and an obligation to exhibit their artistic roots and talents while acculturating in America.

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