

Reflections on the Asian Arts Initiative and Representational Art Politics in Philly—That’s the Jawn

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I was just finishing graduate school when a friend suggested I should be part of this Asian art “thing” at the Painted Bride Art Center. I didn’t know at the time what I was getting into, but it seemed interesting enough. Painted Bride Executive Director Gerry Givnish and the Bride’s Asian Arts Program Director Boone Nguyen had put together a Steering Group and were hard at work on an Asian American Arts Festival, *Live Traditions—Contemporary Issues*. In the *Painted Word*, the Painted Bride’s publication, Gerry Givnish described the Asian Arts Initiative as follows:

At first, the Bride sought to address community racial tensions with programs that brought cultures together. But the Steering Group led the Bride in a different direction. Foremost on its agenda was the articulation of the breadth and depth of Asian American culture. It felt that a higher level of visibility was needed to increase public awareness. The goals of the Asian Arts Initiative were therefore redefined by the Steering Group to focus on Asian cultural expression, with cross cultural understanding as one of the primary results (Spring 1993).

My practice as a visual artist, at that point, had been a solitary one, just me in my studio (with my dogs), addressing issues of race and diaspora but from an academic cocoon. My involvement with the Steering Group—which was to become the Initiative’s first board—immediately engaged me in Asian American issues in Philadelphia as well as with an Asian American arts community more broadly. Although the Asian Arts Initiative had begun as a response to anti-Asian violence in Philadelphia, it evolved as a voice for Asians and Asian Americans in the city, an aim expressly articulated in an early iteration of the AAI’s mission statement.

Thinking back to my first meeting with the Steering Group twenty-five years ago, I can’t really be sure what memories are accurate and what is nostalgia. I recall an Andy Hardy-esque energy and enthusiasm that was infectious and exciting. Despite the gravity of the issues facing Asians in Philadelphia at the time, our group personified a kind of hope. We were visual artists, performing artists, writers, musicians, arts administrators, and community activists who had come together sharing similar experiences and a desire to do something meaningful. I was amazed and honored to be part of that group.

My early memories are of “humble beginnings”: sitting around someone’s apartment on the floor, eating takeout on paper plates, or holding a meeting at a little Indian restaurant on Sansom Street. Our beginnings were also about helping fellow artists write their first résumés or attending other artists’ first performances. We didn’t know what

all this would add up to, but we were figuring out next steps, each successive one more assured than the previous. When a group from outside the Bride first approached us about mounting an Asian American exhibition, I remember the thrill of being seen and heard. We began to recognize that mainstream Philadelphia wanted to see and hear more from us Asians. Although that particular exhibition was in a bank lobby, it did reflect growing visibility for Asian American concerns and Asian American arts in the city. We were ready!

Trained as a painter, I contributed most directly to the group's visual art programs. When I joined the Steering Group, planning was already well under way for the first AAI gallery exhibition at the Painted Bride, *Race, Sexuality, and Gender—Realities of the Asian American Artist*. As it turned out, planning was not finalized, and I was invited to join the exhibition. As an MFA student back then, I never expected such an opportunity would come my way. Looking back, I wonder how many other artists felt my same excitement thanks to opportunities cultivated by the Initiative. That excitement was based both in a validation of my work as an artist and a renewed sense of belonging to a vital artistic community.

Moreover, the *Race, Sexuality, and Gender* exhibition situated itself securely within a national discourse on pluralism in contemporary art. Artists and curators, as well as viewers of art in general, confronted questions of inclusion and otherness relative to identity and, in turn, what is or is not art and who is or is not an artist. The exhibition's not-so-concise and rather literal title announced to Philadelphia and beyond that Asian artists were taking an active role in a far-reaching conversation. Charged with writing the exhibition essay, Huong Hoang of the White Oak Dance Company and I, along with the other members of the Initiative, brainstormed the key elements of the message we were sharing. In retrospect, perhaps our biggest message was simply that we as Asian Americans would not sit quietly by and let ourselves be defined by a society and culture unable to acknowledge the complexities of who we are. *Philadelphia Inquirer* art critic Edward Sozanski directly noted as much in the title of his exhibition review: "Including Asian American artists in multicultural dialogue" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 4, 1993).

In his piece, Sozanski mentions that the 1990s witnessed an abundance of exhibitions addressing "dual cultural patrimony." The word patrimony may be limiting, however, given the breadth and fervor of what occurred in contemporary art during the 1980s and 90s. That period did indeed witness many exhibitions that expanded the boundaries of art beyond white, western, male hegemony. A sea change surged in contemporary art as artists of color, LGBTQ+ artists, women, and any artists identifying as "other" asserted their rights to own their identities and make work that expressed them. More specifically, our local exhibition rode the coattails of that year's infamous Whitney Biennial of American Art, dubbed by some as the "politically correct" biennial. Implicit in that labeling was a disdain for work that critics regarded as identity politics and nothing else. Critics of the Whitney exhibition variously decried the 1993 Biennial as whining, didactic, victim art, non-aesthetic, and, generally, bad art. Notions of inclusion and pluralism/diversity relative to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality often translated pejoratively as multiculturalism. Head Curator of the 1993 Whitney Biennial Elisabeth Sussman demurred, opting instead to describe art at the time as needing "representation of a refigured but fragmented collectivity" (Whitney Biennial, exhibition catalogue,

1993). With our exhibition, we extended the idea of a fragmented collectivity with a call to action: “Prevailing norms will continue to be questioned, challenged, and tested as these artists have done” (*Race, Sexuality, and Gender* exhibition pamphlet, 1993).

For me, the artists of *Race, Sexuality, Gender* comprised a kind of pantheon of contemporary Asian American artists of the period. To exhibit alongside artists such as Tomie Arai, Yong Soon Min, Margo Machida, and Ken Chu not only elevated my work but also motivated me to question, challenge, and test. Our exhibition, furthermore, offered strong representation from Godzilla: Asian American Art Network, a New-York based collective founded by Ken Chu and Margo Machida. Godzilla undertook arts advocacy and activism and positioned Asian American artists as a critical mass, a force to be reckoned with. Demanding respect. To have members of Godzilla in the Asian Arts Initiative exhibition felt like we Philadelphia-based Asian American artists also belonged to a tremendous force ready to effect change across any number of arenas.

The next year, Asia Society in New York opened its first Asian American exhibition, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, guest-curated by Margo Machida. While the Asia Society’s mission focuses on art from Asian nations, this particular exhibition shined a light on Asian immigrant artists, especially their relationships with their sending countries relative to American-ness. Then Director of Galleries, now President Emeritus of the Asia Society, Vishakha N. Desai wrote in the catalogue’s foreword that “the changed cultural and political landscape of the world and the United States now demands that we reexamine traditional assumptions about ‘East’ and ‘West’ and acknowledge a more hybrid and fluid sense of relationships” (*Asia/America* exhibition catalogue, 1994). Like the 1993 Whitney Biennial and our own exhibition at the Bride, *Asia/America* at the Asia Society contributed to the ongoing deconstruction of American narratives of identity, nation, and home.

A major element within Asian/Asian American arts as a whole remains the relationship between diasporic Asians and their native countries. Through gallery exhibitions and other work, the Asian Arts Initiative has actively sought to represent the experiences of Asian Americans born in the U.S. and Asian immigrants who came to the U.S. at various ages and under various circumstances. While the inaugural exhibition at the Painted Bride addressed related issues, the Initiative turned to the migrant artist-Asian-sending country relationship explicitly in a collaboration with the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in 1996. The Fleisher was hosting the exhibition *Fly to Freedom: The Art of the Golden Venture Refugees*, works by Chinese detainees from their U.S. prison. The Golden Venture was a cargo ship that ran aground in New York in 1993. It carried almost three hundred Chinese migrants who were subsequently detained by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and incarcerated at the York County Jail in Pennsylvania. During their detention, waiting for immigration hearings, the Chinese migrants passed their time making delicate folded paper works out of recycled materials.

The Initiative’s companion exhibition to *Fly to Freedom* was entitled *Half the Other/ Explorations of Home in America*. The Golden Venture migrants’ experiences offered a profound metaphor for the experiences of both Asian Americans, treated as foreign in their native country, and Asian immigrants made to feel unwanted in their new home. As the *Half the Other* curatorial statement explains, debates about “American” identity “resulted in unprecedented attacks on immigrant rights, affirmative action,

bilingual education, and other strategies of survival among people of color. [The exhibition] explores the strategies of 14 Asian and Asian American artists who, rather than seeking to resolve issues of 'identity,' pursue the immediate needs of constructing and claiming an America as home" (press release, 1996). Exhibition viewers were asked to consider the viewpoints of artists not as the "other" but as further dimensions of a pluralist, multicultural society. The title of the exhibition draws on the term "1.5 generation," describing individuals who migrated to the U.S. at an early age. Technically, these individuals would be considered first-generation Americans, although their life experiences compare more similarly to second-generation Asian Americans, hence 1.5. Perceived as neither wholly American nor fully "other," these artists inhabited a liminal space to which many Asian Americans felt relegated.

Respecting and honoring the native countries of Asian immigrants, the Asian Arts Initiative consistently strove for inclusiveness in the presentation of artists and their work. From the outset, Initiative programming cast a wide net, conscientiously valuing traditional arts as much as contemporary arts. *Race, Sexuality, and Gender* included Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk, a Hmong artist in the textile art of *paj ntaub*. The *Live Traditions-Contemporary Issues* Asian American Arts Festival also included *Tipsongva*, a Cambodian folk opera, as well as classical Korean chant and percussion. Exposure to these types of classical traditions empowered me as an audience member as much as curatorial and gallery work empowered me as an artist.

To be in the audience for AAI programming, whether as a board member or simply an admirer of the organization, has always been rewarding, often provocative, and consistently enlightening. Reflecting on the Asian Arts Initiative's original purpose, I wonder if an audience unfamiliar with Asian and Asian American arts can resist connecting with the richness of so many traditions. Understanding this richness would mean Asian Americans being able to walk through the park at night more safely or drive through the streets of the city without fear, or being seen, which is a big part of what the Initiative was and always has been about. My own response to the wide-ranging beauty of this work enables me to see Asian Americans as individuals propelling each art form, my heart beating with the boom of the taiko drums.

One of the art forms I have most enjoyed seeing over the years has been prints made by youth at workshops with artist Tomie Arai. Tomie kindly offered a number of youth workshops throughout the Initiative's history, and each produced vibrant, engaging work. Although I was not directly involved in the Initiative's youth programming, a focus on youth and their needs has always played an important role in the Initiative's mission and evolution. Youth have explored their communities' histories and cultures via dance, visual art, the spoken word, and other forms. In the print shop, youth often explored how they wanted to present themselves visually, creating inventive, personal self-portraits in various print media. When I knew Tomie would be in town for a workshop, I enjoyed sneaking into the print studio and seeing the work everyone was cooking up.

Thinking back on these memories of the Initiative, I have to say that Gayle Isa, the Initiative's one and only director as of this writing, *is* the Initiative. Her name is synonymous with AAI. Every mention of the organization implies Gayle. Everything the Initiative has done, achieved, and become is due to Gayle. She has marshaled the organization with her vision and commitment and sustained it to the present day. A

great part of my pleasure in working with the Initiative was the opportunity to work with Gayle. I will always remember her unabashed excitement over a good idea, and her measured, pursed lips at a questionable call. I can't recall if, when we interviewed her, a Swarthmore College intern over twenty-five years ago, we had any sense of the powerhouse before us. Even if we did, I'm not sure we would have ever imagined the Initiative would become all it has. It is difficult to describe all that Gayle is and has done; words can hardly come together sufficiently to convey what she has meant. She is the person who infused the organization with the fire of a tiger burning bright. Any discussion of AAI, any mention of the organization, includes Gayle.

Following my board years with the Initiative, I had the great privilege of collaborating with Gayle and AAI again on an exhibition in 2010-2011. That show, *Inscrutable*, revisited a number of Godzilla artists: Ken Chu, Paul Pfeiffer, Lynne Yamamoto, and Tomie Arai. Since the "identity politics" turmoil of the late 80s and early 90s, conceptions of identity, though ever present, have played a less conspicuous role in constructing how we read art. Our two-venue exhibition—the Asian Arts Initiative gallery on Vine Street and the former University of Delaware space in the Crane Arts building—essentially examined how Asian and Asian American artists may think about their work in the 21st century.

The question we posed in that exhibition was: can an exhibition predicated upon ethnic identity still serve as a productive exercise in the USA [of 2010]? While the exhibition may not have answered the question, we may look to the Asian Arts Initiative as an answer of sorts. Invoking that historical feminist mantra "the personal is political," we might say that it doesn't really matter what you call it. Ethnic identity doesn't have to be a "thing," it just is. AAI has grown and thrived under strong leadership, dedicated staff, and superlative programming. Most important, however, the organization—now an institution—continues to serve a community and its needs. AAI has evolved with its community, and that community, with every generation, defines itself. That Asian American Arts "thing" that started twenty-five years ago has become a ubiquitous element of the city. In Philly terms, you might say it's an Asian jaww.