

ARTIST STATEMENTS

Salma Arastu

Over the past two or three decades young Muslims have been coming to America in increasing numbers in search of freedom and opportunities. Due to geopolitical upheavals we are seeing growing misunderstandings and a divide between Muslims and non-Muslims in America. Issues relating to culture and community are not discussed commonly and in informed ways. Even the media talks about these issues looking through political lenses and that does not really help.

As an artist, I see this missing or incomplete dialog as a social and cultural “undercurrent” that demands an artistic space to find expression. I have always tried to address themes of unity, peace and spirituality in my paintings, sculptures and poetry. In an effort to foster understanding and tolerance among people, a couple of years back I started my new painting series where I combine lyrical human forms with Arabic calligraphy to convey celebratory messages of diversity, unity, love and compassion from the Quran for all people.

I want my life experiences and my pain to bridge the deepening divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims that are so prevalent in our culture today. I find a new motivation in and through my art for bringing about understanding true values with the universal message of love.

Jung Ran Bae

For me, the boat represents myriad aspects of the realities of life manifested as a physical space. The realities of a boat in the vastness of the oceans are fraught with unpredictable circumstances that threaten while also providing me with protection from the external elements. Perhaps as humans we are all metaphorical boats struggling to find safety in numbers or as a community.

The human heart represents all that is at the core of our being. It is where love is felt and where spirituality is born, and where the human soul dwells. The heart in the boat speaks of my inability to find stability and the concept of racial minority (represented by the small heart) and/or majority and the lack of equal opportunity representation as an Asian American artist. I continue to navigate toward some kind of utopia with my own instinct in the secure sense of who I am with humility and compassion.

My work expresses for me the quiet struggles for physical spaces we occupy as Asian American artists for representation and recognition as viable force within the context of American art scene.

Michele Benzamin-Miki

Firstly I am Japanese and American mixed. The 'undercurrent' of my life has been, fitting the culture of my heart - Japanese, within a culture that I view as mirror opposite - American. Feeling a dissonance between assimilating values that are not my own, and creating the 'space' for myself, inside and around me, to show up and be seen for my own values. America is a melting pot of cultures, races, and ethnicities, and what I am addressing is a colonization of values, that shows itself as racism.

My art describes the ways we put things in neat little boxes, and what it would be like to think out of those boxes, for me being visible means accepting myself, in behavior, culture, presence and voice and that will lead to a greater visibility and taking ownership of space here in American culture.

My work here is directed at being an (tongue-in-cheek) Asian woman.

There is little disclosure around Asian American hardships and suffering, and that is partly cultural too. I am excited about the images and discussions that will come from this show! It has already inspired my art further.

Manon Bogerd-Wada

"Where are you from?" is a question that follows me. Lingering after is a sense of alienation and an invisible need to explain my origins. I was inspired by this exhibition to explore and visually represent my experience as a woman of mixed cultures. This exhibition gives voice to underrepresented, marginalized communities and threads our experiences together with common roots.

"Burning Both Ends" is an exotic, mutant object. The burnt candle encased in a light bulb exhibits a transformation of light defying the vacuum tube and filament. The other side of the candle has a seemingly endless wick that represents origin and infinite journey. The title references the idiom "burning the candle at both ends" where the multiplicity of where I come from and where I am going, burn at the same time.

"It Is Not" is an appropriation of René Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." In the same way a painting of a pipe is not a pipe, these encaustic photographs are not a person of mixed cultures. Furthermore, a person may belong to multiple places but also belongs nowhere. This piece speaks to the conundrum that a person is but also is not the sum of parts.

Mitsuko Brooks

My photographs continue a discourse on what is to be of the Asian Diaspora, and my personal experience from growing up in a transnational childhood overseas and in the states, yet never having set foot on my mother's country since I was three years old. The photo series submitted investigate the emotional and physical space I feel trapped and disillusioned by: constructed western landscapes in America. Feelings of disillusionment and depression are a result of my daily battles against racial stereotyping I experience on a daily basis in an urban environment, even from so-called educated people. She is naked, she is whole and she exists as a person, not an exotic Asian female. My visual communications are of a deep longing to belong to Japan, yet identifying so much with my ingrained American upbringing. My photo series "Dissonances of the Diaspora" depict a hapa woman immersed in constructed landscapes, expressing my feelings of environmental abandonment and a unifying life/death moment with nature. My textile body sculptures begin to map these fragments of land with moss, bark and pine cone scales. There is a search to become one, to feel whole, despite being bisected racially.

Karen Chew

My current pieces and pieces begin to explore how my mom's third generation Chinese-American childhood (1932-2010) differs from my experience. My mother was the epitome of a "good Chinese girl" and upstanding citizen. With my role model and very likable parents at the helm, I grew up much like them, but with blurred edges and more questions. As my mother donned cute little dresses, I donned skinned knees, licenses for fishing and climbing trees, championing for underdogs and other good causes.

My mother and I had many commonalities in our respective childhoods. While she took on the brunt of prejudice and Asian influx of the 40's and 50's, I, too, was often the only child of color in my classes, resulting with a few internal bumps, bruises and a few more edges.

Although my mom always donned those ladylike dresses, white socks, and Mary Janes, her photos often reveal looks of questioning, impatience, and a level of perpetual concern. Looks that she never quite gave up, even into her senior years. But in the long run, my mom never defied authority. She was visible to her friends and family yet always choosing to remain in the shadows.

My internal questions begin to reveal themselves in this series - should I be a good girl or a girl with an opinion, do I behave like everyone else or don't I, is it easier to side with the many or do I stand up and question.

Samantha Chundur

As individuals, we are constantly in a quest to find our space in the world - be it physically, artistically or socially - and as minorities, this search gets amplified and highlighted. This exhibition fascinated me for a number of reasons. When I read the premise, the words that stood out for me were 'space', 'physically', 'artistically', 'political implications' and 'minority'. My goal was to combine these words to create art that investigates the space Asian Americans as minorities physically occupy in San Francisco, which in turn will help us understand the political implications we will have. To achieve the above, I used census data coupled with my fascination with maps to understand how we are distributed in San Francisco. I have tried to present this information artistically, in a style reminiscent of Indian 'Ikat' textiles. I would like to conclude with these words: "Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better." - MLK Jr.

Shari DeBoer

In trying to understand the roots of misperceptions and their continuing impact today an unexpected viewpoint came to me - assumptions and stereotypes disadvantage the perpetrator as well as the person being misperceived. Without looking beyond the surface and questioning one's assumptions, he/she misses out on deeper personal, business and political relationships and better understandings of cultures and individuals.

I started this series of photo etchings to tell the stories of others and their quests to be understood for themselves as individuals. But the series developed into a sort of self-portrait. The works do not portray literal images of myself but symbols of my sources of strength and self knowledge.

Reiko Fujii

As a third generation Japanese American, I am the eldest and only daughter in a family of five children. My father is a Kibei, born in America but educated in Japan. After his release from American concentration camps, he became a gang member for many years. My mother is a Nisei, second generation, the eldest of seven children who grew up on a farm. She had a psychotic breakdown when I was born and never completely recovered. Even so, my mother has been loving, kind and gentle to everyone she meets. She was a natural-born artist.

Growing up, I had a sense that people thought I was really smart because I was of Japanese descent. I, being an average student, was secretly relieved to be offered that stereotype. But, as the years crept by, I sensed how much pressure I was putting on myself, trying to keep up the model citizen façade. Unattainable perfection made me feel depressed and insecure, accompanied by low self-esteem.

As a result of using art as a transformative process, I created "Catalog Cards." The drawers contain bits and pieces of my life, my dreams and my heart, representing the person I am glad to have become.

Kate Hers

As an Asian-American visual artist and cultural producer, working in the field of social art practice, and working in Berlin, Germany, my cultural and national identity is always in flux and always being challenged. In my work, I create conceptual happenings which engage both public and private spheres while instigating encounters which can cause both discomfort and laughter. I believe in occupying intervals of discomfort; there is a great potential for spiritual transformation, not only in the perception of the spectators, but also within myself. I am interested in submitting to this exhibition, because the premise seeks to address the issues beyond "identity politics" essentialist matters, while redefining and reshaping the notion of the Asian American identity and community.

Zilka Joseph

My work as a poet is often influenced by how we move/live in and through America and the worlds that are familiar and unfamiliar. How we look, speak, what we do or don't do seems always to be judged strange or inadequate and pushes us to inhabit an "ethnic" space and other than "mainstream". I struggle with being pigeon-holed either way, and deal with everyday invisibility and discrimination, but strangely, that creates its own paradox –as I find myself having to prove myself because my voice never seems to loud enough or clear enough. And yet, I am competent and comfortable in my own skin and continue to create art that is unique and exceptional because it is mine and mine alone. I feel my audio entry reflects these constant tensions that exist within and without.

Kay Kang

A central theme in my art, as well as in my life, is alienation and assimilation of immigrants in foreign cultures. As a Korean woman in the United States, I have been confronted not only with the obvious issues of race, language and geography that face nearly all immigrants; I have also struggled with the cultural conflict that exists for women born in Asian cultures who must learn to cope with a new startling social model in the West.

"It's a Girl!" is an altered representation of the Korean custom of announcing births. When a female is born, charcoal is attached to a hemp rope and hung outside of the front door, as an expression of disappointment. However, when a boy is born, red peppers – which signal joy – are hung in celebration.

Many works of mine address ubiquitous Korean patriarchal customs. I speak in a voice that directly speaks to the experience of the Diaspora of Asian feminine identity and the experience of female submission in a male-dominated society.

"Jungwhan" consists of a series of charcoal pieces on which I have written the names of each of my female university classmates. Historically, many Korean parents gave their daughters male names in hopes that the next child would be a son. Although this tradition is no longer widely practiced, many women in my generation were given male names – including my own daughter – and today continue to wear this badge.

In Korean culture, the family name is considered as blood line, so married women keep their maiden names after they are married. However, once I moved to the United States, I lost my maiden name. "Personage-Yoo" is abstract reclamation of my maiden name, Yoo, in Korean. Most of my paintings use words and characters to convey the frustration of incomprehension, while demonstrating the beauty and universality of understanding.

I paint these various forms of iconography to both offer a way to illuminate the unspoken oppression of women, and at the same, to reclaim my individuality.

Mihyang Kim

My work deals with the common experience of being an immigrant and the struggle to define us. As an artist in America I want to be recognized for being an artist no matter what kind of artist I am, and feeling uncomfortable being confined within the boundary of labels. Through my art I want others to understand the struggle of being an Asian artist, a woman, an immigrant and a minority. I interact with other people being disconnected from their past, living as immigrant, and expecting their death. My work represents my sympathy and compassion for the pain they endure because I understand and share similar experience. I appreciate the opportunity to share their experience and mine.

ATYL (Alexandra Lee)

Text of the Chinese Exclusion Act with the letter "I" redacted, found historical immigration documents altered, faces in old photographs cut out or covered up – these are the motifs of the artwork in this proposal. The pieces are from series, "*Sovegna Vos*" – Be mindful – which are words from Dante's Purgatory, and used in T.S. Eliot's poem, "Ash Wednesday". Multi-layered, the work is about addressing one's experiences and transcending them with new constructions, and recovery, and the need for grace.

My artwork investigates conventions and cultural traditions vis-à-vis time, and challenges the binaries we re/construct between Self and Other. Each piece questions the conditions of appearance of an image, its context and tensions implicated below the surface, and the possibilities achievable through subversion.

In some ways, the pieces in the "*Sovegna Vos*" series are semi-autobiographical. "Lost two ponds of fish" was my great-grandfather's response when he was asked the gender of his newborn child. Overnight, two of his fish ponds flooded suddenly – this was the story of my grandmother's birth. Being the only daughter of an only daughter, I was brought up with sometimes paradoxical ideas and expectations of what and who I should be, and what should be visible, or hidden.

Mido Lee

After 12 years of sexual abuse from members of my family, male bodies have become the forbidden thorns of my life. These stings have stabbed into my throat, my heart, and my relationships. After years of ineffective psychiatric treatment, I have become a drug addict and an alcoholic. It was not until I moved from my motherland that I realized the only way to save myself was to look into the source of my problem: Men.

I first used a 4x5 camera to document the faces of male friends. Later I began to shoot their nude figure in darkness. Eventually I was able to document their full naked body in the light. Analogue photography helps me with my treatment and the camera provides a comfort zone.

Through this therapy, I was able to see the beauty of male bodies and their souls. In order to show this new appreciation, I asked about my model's history before each shoot. According to their stories I composed a scene around their bodies.

I am really thankful to the models for giving me permission to own the images of their bodies. To memorialize this gift, I asked my models to bring an item they had and then destroy it. I would then place one of my belonging—jewelry, a watch, an earring—on their body. These two items symbolize the trust and the exchange between photographer and model.

To position male nudes as a female photographer, I finally regain the faith as an able person instead of a helpless victim. Because of the support of these models I can finally pluck the thorns from the wound and live free again.

Brenda Louie

Since I graduated from Stanford University with an M.F.A. degree in painting and drawing in 1993, I have been practicing as a professional artist and art educator. My childhood in the communist China and my early art training in classical Chinese literature and calligraphy in Hong Kong have been a vital ingredient toward my creativity as a visual artist. My art is my identity that reflects my Chinese Diaspora experience as a Chinese woman who carries on traditional cultural values living in the contemporary American society.

The title of this arts exhibition, "underCurrents & the Quest for Space", helps to explain the content of my work. As a person trained in two different traditions, I constantly seek to demonstrate the uniqueness of cultural experience and to explore similarities and differences as an approach toward a visual language. I am proud and grateful that I have had the opportunity to work seriously in attempt to achieve my goal. Although my work has been receiving positive feedbacks from afar, I would also like it to be shared with my fellow citizens in the Bay Area especially for those who live in the large Asian art community in the city of San Francisco.

Li Ma

My work is about my notion of longing for an idealized space full of amazement and harmony. My daydreaming creates a world where everything comes to life. The mundane daily objects dance around my mind and become symbols in a pictographic lexicon informed by my Chinese heritage which borrow from Buddhism, Taoism, traditional Chinese imagery and Asian architecture. The repetition of shapes creates a rhythm that is the essence of my contemplation. These shapes become the components parts of structures that tell a story of my personified spiritually-charged world.

My installation piece is made out of translucent fabric that will highlight the high ceilings and the ambient daylight of SOMArts Gallery. This pavillion like structure is an attempt to surround the viewers with fabric space that creates a semi private atmosphere which creates a microcosm. It provides a three dimensional lens through which my imagination can be glimpsed. The structure of the piece refers to a gazebo or a shrine referring to a kind of spiritual transformation. By mixing commonplace shapes within the architecture of the transcendental I hope to response to the world where anything and everything can be a portal into the mystical.

Choppy Oshiro

I find it quite infuriating to continually see issues in this country framed in terms of only black, white, and Latino. No disrespect to the brothers and sisters in any of those communities. But what about the Asian American-Pacific Islander point of view? So, with this lack of representation, my piece was created to address the stereotypical misconception, or the assumption in the many facets of American society, about sex and the API woman. (Plus, I just love blowing up ideas in peoples' faces.)

The piece I am submitting for consideration is entitled "Akogare," which is Japanese for "yearning." This piece is, in part, my response to the freaky, or kinky, enjoyment of sex by women, specifically API women despite the constraints put onto them by culture(s). At the same time, this is a celebration of "I do this because I like this. A lot!" Also, the BDSM flavor symbolizes "yearning" for honesty and control in sexuality.

**** Isabelle Thuy Pelaud**

Yoshie Sakai

My videos challenge the myth of the “model minority” to reveal the complexities that lie underneath the guise of superficial “perfection” of being both Asian-American and a woman in this society. Although I may seem to fit the stereotype of the quiet, hardworking, and serious Asian, who diligently and intently shoots to get ahead in my personal and social life, it is simply a small kernel of what undoubtedly encompasses a vast array of anxiety, fears, and hopes of being both, in my case, Japanese and American. My parents, whom are of first and second generation Japanese descent, have preconceived notion as to what would constitute happiness for me, but one mold does not fit everyone, and I am one of them.

I create characters that function as avatars that act out responses to contemporary society, addressing the social, cultural, and personal. I induce intimate situations between my created personalities and the audience that are pushed to exaggerated and imaginative levels and give form to a sort of vulnerability – a nervous laughter. It would be an honor to have the opportunity to address through humor and video, the deeper universal intricacies that can be found while exposing the “model minority” myth.

Shizue Seigel

After the sudden deaths of my mother and my father-in-law in 2011, I was forced to curtail creative endeavors to focus on family affairs. I thirsted for expression during my self-imposed dry spell, and I can't think of a better way to re-connect than through this exhibition. I have enduring connections to AAWAA, APICC, and SOMArts because of their commitment to arts that enlarge our collective understanding of overlooked communities. And this year's theme, “undercurrents and the Quest for Space,” is a painfully accurate description of enmeshed family dynamics. The high walls of the light-filled Main Gallery inspire me to work larger and more abstractly than usual and to literally use the artistic process to transmute aspects of my parents that have been difficult to discard. Notes, calendars, letters, Christmas cards, dress patterns, clippings and photos revealed many different aspects of the departed— how they presented themselves, what they aspired to, how they secretly saw themselves, and what they presented to their children. I look forward to working with this material and the images they unfold.

Pallavi Sharma

The work attempts to address the farce of model minority and speaks about under-discussed issues related to multiple kinds of marginalization of South Asian American women and delves into the discourse of power and control. Due to the low divorce rate among South Asian families in US it is assumed that most of the marriages are successful and very less domestic violence exists. But the fact is, due to common myths, stigma and prevailing stereotypes, very few cases get reported, and as a result very few women gets help to come out of their situation. The work specifically enters into the isolation as a tool used by the oppressor where the victim's choices in life; what she does, what and whom she talks to, reads etc. are controlled.

Cindy Shih

I read an article today that quoted Bill O'Reilly saying, "Asian people are not liberal, you know, by nature. They're usually more industrious and hard-working," reinforcing the "model minority" stereotype and presuming that being Liberal was synonymous with Lazy. This is exactly why the exhibition premise, "underCurrents" is particularly significant to me, as a first generation Asian-American woman. It reminds me that even in 2013, the myth of the "model minority" is alive and well, and we have an obligation to open up discussion of these topics through Art and encourage others to think differently.

The pieces I've submitted for this show all have deep, personal meaning for me because they were created during in the past two years where I have experienced tremendous personal growth. "The Dress" is a haunting, yet serene reflection of "what could have been," and the fruitless, relentless pursuit of the ideal. "Reflection" and "The Forgetting of Air" speaks to the power imbalance of female beauty, as it relates to the male gaze and objectification. Finally, "Losing My Religion" reminds me that, the ultimate rejection of establishment and hegemonic doctrine isn't anger or violence, it's choosing to allow your inner child to dance in the fallen ruins.

Judy Shintani & Hiroko Tamano

Our installation and performance creates a space for gallery visitors to ponder the identity and visibility concerns of Asian Americans in a multicultural society. In the space we explore Asian American intergenerational thoughts and experiences.

Using the cultural icon and uniform of the kimono and the vocabulary of the body through BUTOH performance, we will explore what lies below the surface of cultural stereotypes that are put on us by others and ourselves.

Valerie Soe

My experimental documentary *The Chinese Gardens* excavates the hidden history of the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest, specifically in Port Townsend, WA, where at one time the Chinese made up a quarter of the town's population. *The Chinese Gardens* looks at the lost Chinese community in Port Townsend, examining anti-Chinese violence in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1800s and drawing connections between past and present race relations in the United States. Although Chinese Americans are often cast as the so-called model minority, in fact the history of Chinese in the U.S. is fraught with discrimination, racial violence, and oppression. *The Chinese Gardens* documents some of this historical discrimination when the Chinese were brutally repressed and driven out. Through text, brief interviews, and images of the empty spaces of Port Townsend's former Chinatown, the film examines early instances of racism against the Chinese in the U.S., from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through various lynchings, beatings, and murders. *The Chinese Gardens* also documents Chinese American resistance to these crimes, illuminating the hidden history of that tumultuous time.

Cynthia Tom

My paintings are meant to encourage women to own their power and for others to see them out of their traditional context. I believe we as artists have the power to educate deeply and create profound changes in how people perceive their communities, urging the call for social justice, like no other media can. I do work that brings attention to:

1. Chinese women were interned and interrogated at Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. Researching my grandmother was my starting point and where my feminist voice started.
2. Empowerment of the women's movement through societal education about our current state of human trafficking and domestic violence.
3. A feminist viewpoint that urges women to find their voices and stop buying into the victim concept. Women have to be ready to take the reins whenever the opportunities arise.
4. Asian American Art is a genre.

Laura Ming Wong

One evening in San Francisco, as part of a lengthy undercard that preceded a friend's mixed martial arts fight, I watched a match between two young women. It was the most spirited, active fight of the evening, ending decisively in a knockout. As the young winner stomped out the cage, I wondered why the promoters had featured only one female fight: was the public not interested in them, or did they disapprove of them? Or were there simply not enough women in the sport? These questions led me to create *Fight Like a Woman*, a photo series on women who train competitively in various martial arts. I wanted to learn what motivated those who committed a significant part of their lives to a regimen of grueling physical, mental, and emotional discipline. I wondered whether pursuing an athletic career presented a unique set of challenges for women, and how it affected their identities.

As an Asian American woman, I am interested in the underCurrents & the Quest for Space exhibition to bring attention to women participating in sports that historically excluded them, and by doing so, offering alternative examples of femininity in Western culture. My photographs depict the reality of

female athletes sustaining injuries, exhaustion, and resilience that transcend notions of gendered behavior.

Leslie W. Zeitler

Having lost two female family members to suicide, I have long wondered about the cultural and familial factors that might contribute to the incidence of depression and suicidal behavior. In speaking out about these losses, I encountered resistance both in the majority culture and in Chinese American communities. I feel that there are cultural and societal undercurrents that deeply affect Chinese American communities: considered a 'model minority', we are under pressure to make our families and communities look good on the outside, even if the cost is the destruction of our inner selves: our talents, our passions, and our creativity.

Although the intention in telling the truth about my family history is to simultaneously honor my ancestors and work to prevent suicide, for a long time I felt there wasn't cultural space in Chinese American communities for someone who chooses to speak out on this taboo topic. However, through AAWAA, I found a place for this kind of truth-telling. It is my hope with this essay that the conversation about the mental health needs of – and supports for – Asian American women continues.

Stella Zhang

Perhaps, the most difficult challenge an artist faces today is: to find an original voice. We live in a world which is overwhelmed with easily accessible information, but at the same time has become commonplace.

My voice often comes from unexpected places. I was born in China, then went to Japan and come to the US around 10 years ago. Therefore I look to my own experience for inspiration. With this an amalgamation of my multi-cultural background, where I often find contradictory images. Which I find makes my work richer. It also causes me to pass through a multitude of reflective ideas, allowing for the opportunity to grow and change.

Xiaojie Zheng

Growing up in China, then relocating to Holland and ultimately living in the U.S. for the last fourteen years has produced a rich and unique perspective in my life. Much of the inspiration for my artwork has been shaped by the three distinct and diverse cultures.

Being an Asian American female artist put me at a disadvantage in some areas but also gave me an uncommon vantage point from which to make observations about life. The most noticeable cultural differences have to do with philosophy of life, traditional values, reliance of government institutions, law and society and how non-Asians relate and interact with Asians, especially with those who have immigrated to the U.S. as an adult.

My six piece works represent one Asian American woman's true-life experience to showcase the cause and result of discrimination in the family court system and the hope for our future. They displayed the frustration and confusion experienced by those of Asian heritage and how the justice system bureaucracy traps one in a cold, unfair and discriminatory environment. I have hope for the continued integration of Asian culture into the American scene. These representations are universal and the struggles of Asian Americans are relative to everyone who enters a culture dominated by a mainstream philosophy. There is always hope that the future will be better, but, where does this "hope spring" come from? Is it reform the legal system or from our hearts? This series of social practice artwork will explore this reality and the questions it raises.