

'Hungry Ghosts': Asian archetype manifests in haunting exhibit

By Nirmala Nataraj Published 6:41 pm, Wednesday, April 22, 2015

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IMAGE 1 OF 3

Kaitlynn Redell's Anna May Wong inspired collage Reoriented 1, 2014, from Hungry Ghosts

The concept of the hungry ghost (*preta* in Sanskrit, *ogwi* in Korean and *gaki* in Japanese, among others) is fairly universal in Asian cultures. Typically, a hungry ghost is represented as a female spirit who roves Earth in a state of loss, sorrow and insatiable desire, generating chaos through her obsessive search for something to fill the void.

Now the hungry ghost is the subject of a multidisciplinary art exhibit co-presented by the [Asian American Women Artists](#)

Association, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center and Manilatown Heritage Foundation. A collection of 15 Asian American and Pacific Islander artists explore this common trope not through the representation of unsatisfied ancestral spirits but through examinations of the hauntings that continue to plague us — especially the lingering specters of racism, sexism, homophobia and socioeconomic inequality. From the gentrification of San Francisco’s Chinatown to the “Seas of Famine” in North Korea to the destruction of our ecological habitats, the artists raise questions about longing, trauma and what may be required in the proper care and feeding of our own hungry ghosts. Curator **Michelle A. Lee** sheds light on the assembled works.

Q: What are some of the major themes that play out in the artwork?

A: War is a general theme throughout — World War II, the Japanese internment, as well as the Korean War, specifically. Artists’ relationship to American popular culture, such as **Kaitlynn Redell’s Anna May Wong**-inspired “Reoriented” series, is also quite strong. We’ll also see representations of unresolved struggles for civil rights and Asian American solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Many of the artists also look at gentrification, past and present, in San Francisco in works such as Vida Kuang’s video “Home Is.”

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Q: What are some of the highlights of the exhibition?

A: The first piece viewers see from outside the window is Nicolas Oh’s “Memories of War” sculpture, composed of warped, eroded and broken ceramic rifles and water canteens. The piece resonates with many passersby, including the local elderly Chinese and Filipino population. To the right of Oh’s piece is a transparent gray fabric sign with “hungry ghosts” in white. The main wall in the back of the exhibition features **Juliana Kang Robinson’s** “Seas of Famine” series of works of meticulously detailed ink, gouache and collage paintings of bears floating on a sea of bones. One piece in the series, “Nampho Refugees,” references the Nampho dam construction projects in North Korea, which flooded farmland, contributing to the great famine of the 1990s. Another piece, “Supreme Leader,” is inspired by propaganda photos of Kim Jong Un riding on horseback.

Q: What kind of experience would you like to evoke in viewers overall?

A: I would like viewers to feel appreciation for Asian American artists’ work. I want them to be inspired by and reminded of our collective hungry ghosts and to feel respect for how historical events, people and memories continue to shape our contemporary life.

Nirmala Nataraj is a freelance writer. E-mail: 96hours@sfchronicle.com

If you go

Hungry Ghosts: 1 to 6 p.m. daily. Through Wednesday, April 29: closing reception 6 to 9 p.m. International **Hotel Manilatown Center** gallery, 868 Kearny St., S.F. (415) 252-7996. www.aawaa.net.

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