

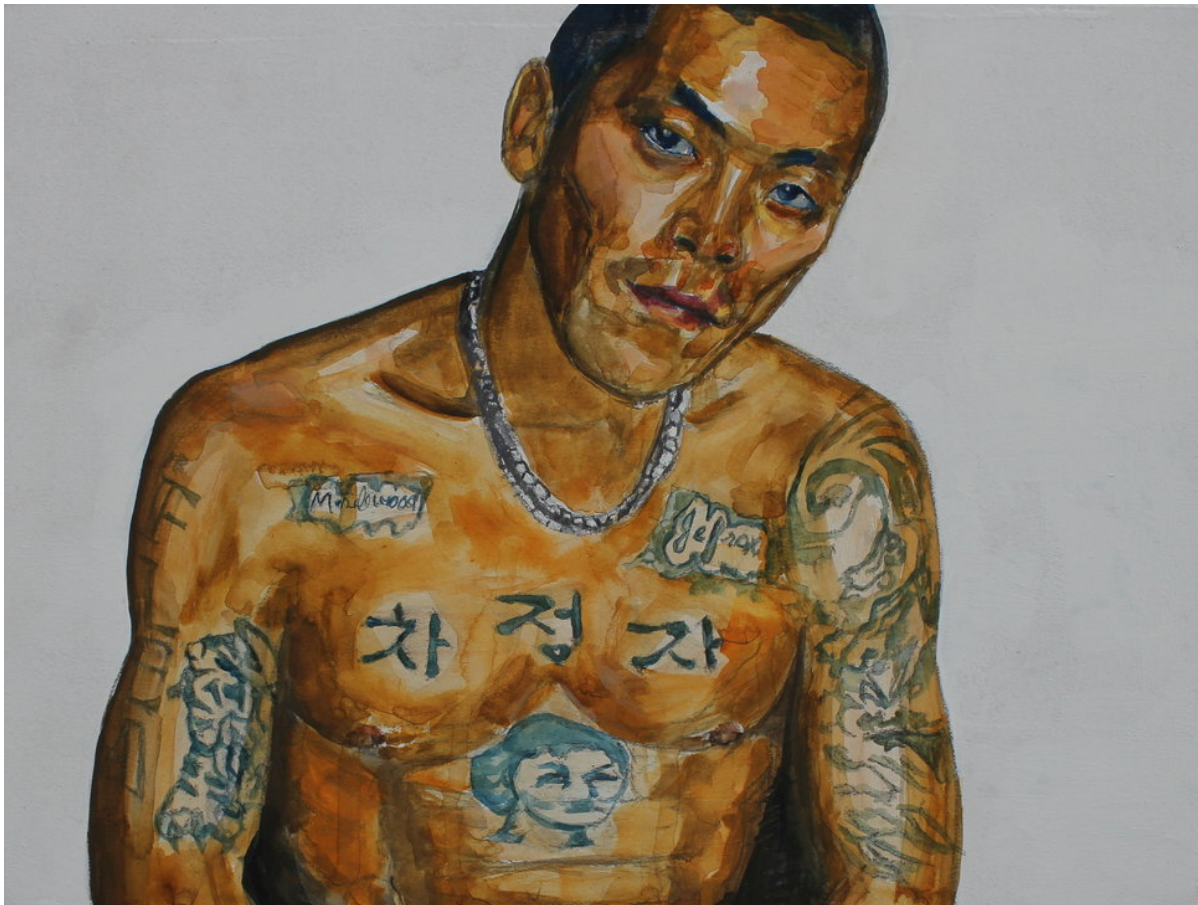
CULTURE & ARTS

Dismantling Stereotypes About Asian-American Identity Through Art

A timely exhibition called “Excuse me, can I see your ID?” is “not intended for the white gaze.”

By Priscilla Frank

04/20/2017 11:44 am ET | Updated May 03, 2017



VESSEL GALLERY

Dave Kim, “Flea,” 2014, gouache on wood panel.

Dismantling Stereotypes About Asian-American Identity Through Art

for a final paragraph that described Asian Americans as “among the most prosperous, well-educated, and successful ethnic groups in America.”



As NPR’s Kat Chow pointed out in a response, Sullivan’s assertion lumps together a



hugely diverse population, equating the experience of a Filipino-American with that of a Japanese-American when research refutes the assumption. Chow condemned Sullivan’s

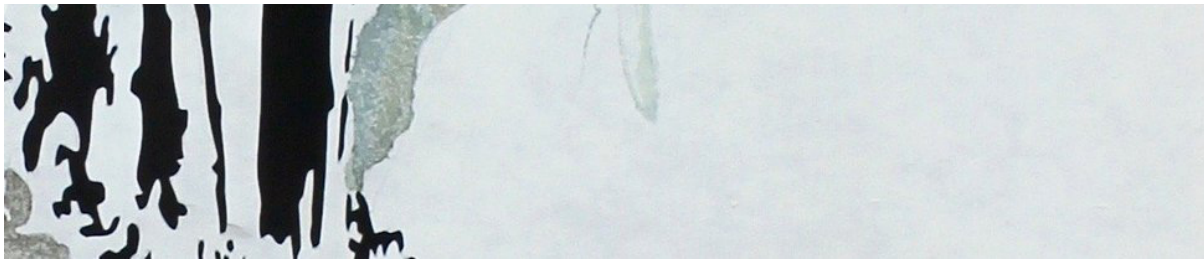
CONVERSATIONS



continuation of the “model minority” myth, which congratulates Asian Americans for overcoming discrimination and systemic oppression to achieve “the American Dream,” therefore relieving white America of responsibility and placing the burden on minorities, like black or Muslim individuals, who might not be viewed culturally with the same high regard.

Lonnie Lee, curator and owner of Vessel Gallery in Oakland, has spent the past two years thinking about the stereotypes, generalizations and myths that commonly manifest in discussions about Asian-American identity — and Asian-American art. The resulting group exhibition, “Excuse me, can I see your ID?,” complicates and disrupts the stale narratives that persist both inside the gallery space and beyond it.





VESSEL GALLERY

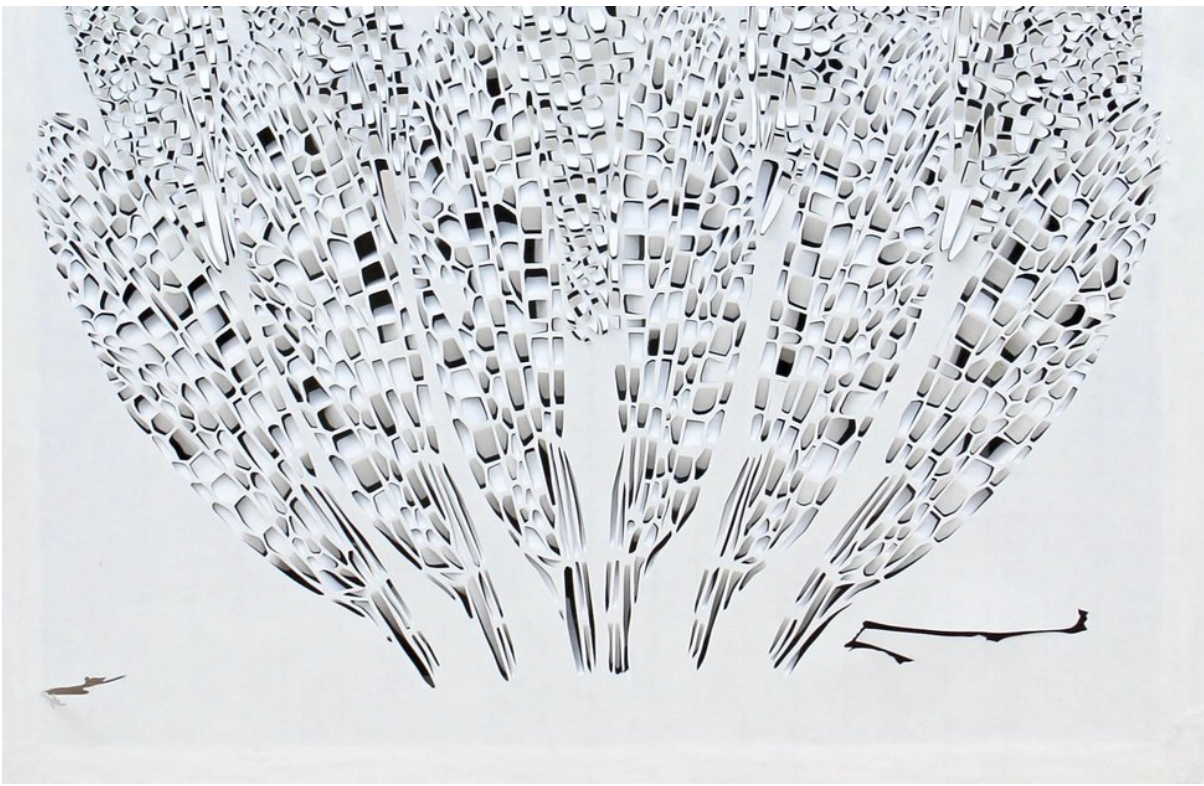
Kyong Ae Kim, "Neither Flora nor Fauna 4," 2017, hand cut triple layered rice paper (Hanji) and acrylic on wood panel.

Inspired to organize a show featuring entirely Asian-American artists after then-President Barack Obama declared May to be Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month, Lee struggled to create an identity-oriented exhibition that expanded understandings of Asian Americans rather than affirmed or constricted them. "I was looking for artworks that portrayed the identity of Asian Americans as something different than what we've seen in the past," Lee told The Huffington Post. "I was really seeking statements about identity that went beyond Asian-ness."

Race plays a critical role in how we understand ourselves and each other, but for Lee, it was important to her that participating artists had the freedom to express aspects of themselves that have nothing to do with where their lineage leads. "I was excited to portray a real diverse array of artists who happened to be Asian-American," she said. "Identity is a construct, made from many different components. Each individual artist understands identity differently. I am hoping that visitors question their social conditioning and see the individuality of each of the various artists and their narratives."

This expectation that identity boils down to race, at least for everyone who is not white, extends to the art world as well. So often, Lee explained, artists of Asian descent are expected to make art about their Asian-ness, preferably using traditional Asian techniques.





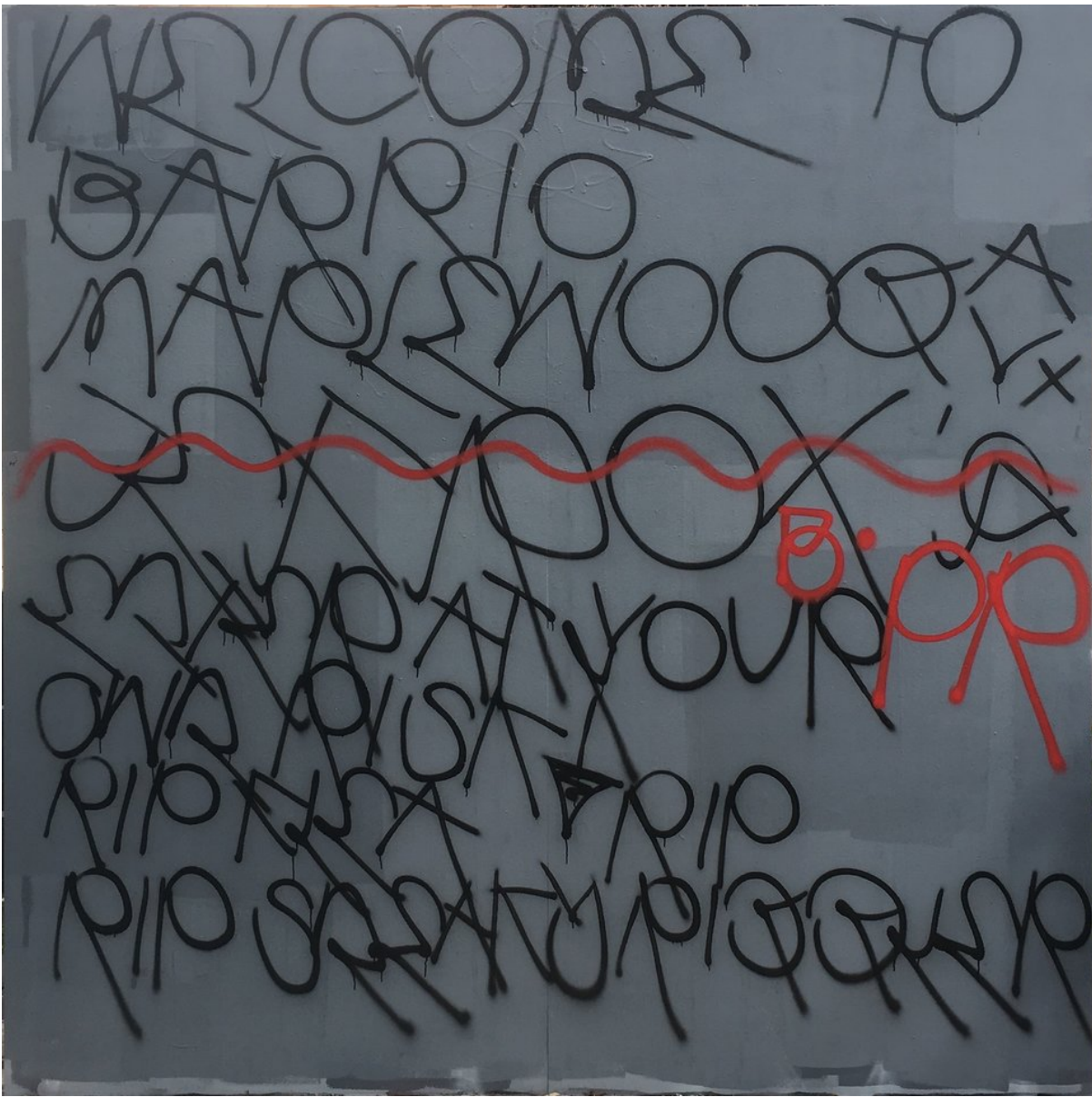
VESSEL GALLERY

Kyong Ae Kim, "Neither Flora nor Fauna 1," 2017, hand cut triple layered rice paper (Hanji) and acrylic on wood panel.

Lee's daughter, Jasmine Lee Ehrhardt, who curated a film program to supplement the exhibition, agrees. "The art world is dominated by white people," she said. "For artists of color, you have to talk about race and ethnic identity, but not in a way that makes white people too uncomfortable. This show is not intended for the white gaze. It was curated by an Asian-American curator, featuring Asian-American artists. It's not about self-cannibalizing the work that's expected from artists of color, putting themselves on display explicitly to be consumed by the viewer."

"Excuse me, can I see your ID?" is diverse not just in terms of the artists it represents but the work they create — from technique to media to style. "They are not just performing race," Ehrhardt said, "they are dealing with all these different, complex issues that I think the art world doesn't often reflect."

The exhibition got its name because, as Ehrhardt put it, "Asian people are presumed to be perpetual foreigners." The curators were specifically interested in this idea of physical documentation and how it dictates who is allowed to move freely through this country. "There are a lot of undocumented Asians and Pacific Islanders in America right now," Ehrhardt said. "It forces us to consider how Asian Americans can and cannot move through space. We're interested in the tension between these actual papers and the feelings we have inside."



VESSEL GALLERY

Dave Kim, "Heuristic," 2017, latex paint, spray paint on wood panel.

One featured artist is Dave Kim, a Korean-American man raised in Los Angeles and based in Oakland, whose large-scale paintings revisit moments in his childhood and adolescence. As a teenager, Kim joined a Filipino gang called the Maplewood Ave Jefrox, despite the fact that Kim himself was not Filipino.

Kim's experience shows a convoluted composition of identity in flux, at any given time a cluttered collage of people, places, influences and urges. As Kim explains in his artist statement: "Even though we're Asian, we took on the characteristics of Latino gangs in every way, from claiming a neighborhood, to the attire and even the language we used. I think the thing to remember is that I joined it not to be violent or become a criminal, but to be a part of something, to find belonging, importance — find purpose."

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In the painting "Flea," Kim creates a portrait of a friend who died from an overdose, shown staring at the viewer, tattoos covering his bare chest.

"This is definitely not the 'model minority' we often hear about," Lee said.



Another artist complicating predominant stereotypes is Omid Mokri, who, trained in traditional Persian miniature painting and art conservation, currently makes work while serving a 12-year prison sentence in San Quentin State Prison, for what the artist describes in his statement as an "unjust, forced sentence" for self-defense. (Lee is not familiar with the specifics of Mokri's charges or arrest.)

Mokri and his family fled Iran during the 1979 revolution. He then earned degrees from both the Rhode Island School of Design and California College of the Arts. As an Iranian, Mokri diverges from the "typical" image of an Asian American. In a time when Islamophobia runs rampant, he is certainly not immediately assessed as a "law-abiding, peace-loving, courteous [person] living quietly among us."

For his artwork, Mokri gathers the scant materials available to him in his circumstances: recycled bedsheets serve as canvases, pulverized colored pencils as paint, hair affixed to plastic spoons serve as paintbrushes. "I'm including this work because it's incredible what an artist can do with such humble materials," Lee said. "I am interested in presenting his art because I am curious how the judicial system was shaped by his face, how he looks. If he was white, what would his sentence have been?"



Each artist featured in Vessel Gallery's exhibition brings a similarly compelling narrative and utterly singular perspective to the space. Both Lee and Ehrhardt hope the exhibition sparks dialogue that diverges from the typical conversation topics.

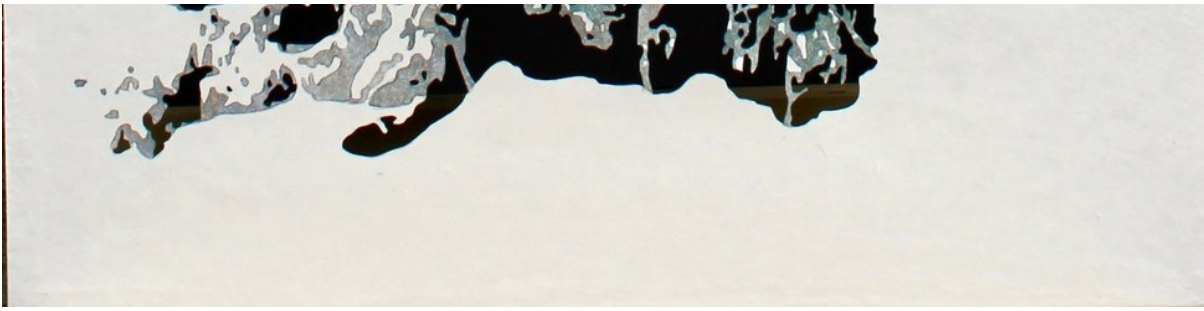
"Talking about 'Ghost in the Shell' is interesting, but that's not the only issue affecting the community," Lee said. "We want to expand the conversation, address the hard topics and offer other views of what it means to be Asian-American."

She hopes to stage an entirely Asian-American exhibition every other year during Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month moving forward. This year, however, the show feels particularly necessary.

"The administration has created this sense of urgency," Lee said. "People recognize that this is a shared struggle, a place upon which we can build solidarity. The show is not an attempt to derail larger conversations, but to say, 'This is our stake in it.' This conversation is also important."







Vessel Gallery

Kyong Ae Kim, "Neither Flora nor Fauna 5," 2017, hand cut triple layered rice paper (Hanji) and acrylic on wood panel.



Vessel Gallery

Sanjay Vora, "Raj In The Tree (Burlap)," 2016, acrylic on burlap rice sacks.



Vessel Gallery

Sanjay Vora, "Cornwall '93," 2017, oil and acrylic on VHS cassettes.

"Excuse me, can I see your ID?" features work by Cherisse Alcantara, Rea Lynn de Guzman, Dave Young Kim, Hyeyoung Kim, Kyong Ae Kim, Omid Mokri, Juan Santiago, Sanjay Vora, and Evan Yee. The show runs until May 27 at Vessel Gallery in Oakland, Calif.





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Priscilla Frank Arts & Culture Reporter, HuffPost

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