

## ART REVIEW

## A Mélange of Asian Roots and Shifting Identities

By ROBERTA SMITH

LIKE the title of the Asia Society's latest, and possibly best, foray into contemporary art, "One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now" borrows a familiar colloquialism for go-it-alone ingenuity and persistence under pressure, not bad qualities for a young artist. The phrase is also the title of the 1978 punk standard by Blondie, and thus linked to a bouncy rant that Deborah Harry, the group's slinky lead singer, delivered with a rebellious feminist snarl.

Which relates to a signal aspect of "One Way or Another": 12 of the 17 artists are women. That is 71 percent, which some people may want to attribute to the show's all-female curatorial team. Don't bother. The quality of the work speaks for itself. Furthermore, the unusual gender imbalance seems to be merely the byproduct of

## One Way or Another

Asian American Art Now  
Asia Society

the largely successful pursuit of another goal: to survey the diversity and fullness of Asian-American art today, a generation after the first waves of multiculturalism and identity politics broke across the art world in the wake of the liberation movements of the late 1960's and early 70's.

"One Way or Another" was assembled by Melissa Chiu, director of the museum and curator of contemporary Asian art at the Asia Society; Karin Higa, senior curator of art at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles; and Susette S. Min, previously a curator at the Drawing Center in SoHo and now an as-

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The Asia Society

Mughal art meets Hogarth and Rockwell: "Ignorance Is Bliss" by Saira Wasim.

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## Asian Roots, Shifting Identities

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sistant professor of Asian-American studies and art history at the University of California, Davis.

Each of the 17 artists has at least one parent of Asian descent; with two or three exceptions, all are under 35 and have spent most or all of their lives in the United States. Their backgrounds include roots in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Iran and the Philippines, a cultural diversity so broad as to render the word Asian almost meaningless.

In the show's catalog the curators, invited guests and some of the artists ponder the role and evolution of identity politics in the art world since 1990 from what seems to be every possible angle. Cumulatively they suggest that identity is one of many factors that all artists unconsciously express and that some — especially those who are nonwhite and/or non-male — consciously address in their work in ways that have always been hard to categorize. The show covers the waterfront in terms of mediums, while issues of identity shape-shift wildly and sometimes drop entirely from sight.

The men's efforts frequently prove that simplistic forms of identity art continue, and also tend to get bogged down in technical finesse and craft. "Elemental," an installation by Ala Eftekar, has a familiar one-plus-one obviousness: it brings together hip-hop regalia and the furnishings of an Iranian coffeehouse, decorating the former with Persian floral patterns while whitewashing the latter.

Binh Danh, whose ancestors are Vietnamese, practices a similar kind

of simple addition. In "One Week's Dead No. 1," head shots of American soldiers killed in Vietnam in a single week in 1969 (taken from Life magazine) are printed on large flat plant leaves. The hard facts overwhelm the work's fragile beauty.

Michael Arcega's "Eternal Salvation" is a large, handsome model of Noah's ark made of balsa; its hold is strung with aromatic strips of dried meat labeled with the names of birds and beasts (alligator, antelope, chicken, elk, yak, wild boar). Environmental damage, exploitation of animals and the biblical genesis of colonialism all figure in the conceptual equation here, but, again, the ideas seem tacked on.

The practice of passing as the member of another race or sex is cleverly deflected to the animal kingdom in Glenn Kaino's latest sculptures. One is a salmon sheathed in sharkskin, the other a pig sheathed in cowhide; both creatures wear a kind of well-tailored drag but also bring the Ku Klux Klan to mind.

Kaz Oshiro does something similar with his meticulously handmade ready-mades. They are in effect three-dimensional paintings that pass as banal objects: a fast-food trash bin, smudged kitchen cabinets and a small refrigerator. Other than the museum setting, the main hints at illusion are the objects' backs, where stretchers and canvas are visible.

Few of the women seem as interested in sheer physical perfection. An exception is Saira Wasim, a 31-year-old painter from Pakistan who came to the United States three years ago after being classically trained in the painting of miniatures. Her best images are exquisite political cartoons that conjure William Hogarth and sometimes borrow directly from Norman Rockwell. This is the case in "Ignorance Is Bliss," in which a group of European soldiers

in 18th-century dress and a group of Muslims view each other with equal incomprehension.

In the opposite vein Indigo Som takes deadpan color photographs of Chinese restaurants in the South. While much too indebted to photographers like William Eggleston and William Christenberry, these images depict the frequent isolation of the immigrant in purely architectural terms.

Installation art is pushed in different directions by several artists. In mural-size ink drawings, Chitra Ganesh subjects the female body to mutations, exaggerations and struggles worthy of Hindu deities and enlivened with beads, glitter and colored plastic. But routine female obsessions with hair, nails and eyelashes are also evoked.

Geraldine Lau uses bits of colorful vinyl to imbue white walls with a global vastness, complete with ocean currents, weather systems and scattered land masses. Although not working in installation, Jiha Moon packs even more information into large, teeming paintings on paper, creating a sense of flux similar to that in Ms. Lau's work, but also rife with references to everything from traditional Chinese brush painting to contemporary cartoons.

Jean Shin layers wool sweaters on a wall in a cuddly color spectrum, unraveling their yarn to suggest both a network of personal relationships and a spreading diaspora of parallel lives.

As genuinely promising as much of this work is, the best efforts in "One Way or Another" are more complexly and intractably engaged with both issues and materials. This involvement is physical in Anna Sew Hoy's "Dreamcatcher," an elaborate, almost violent tangle of glazed clay, knotted rope and twisted fabric whose references to ceramics, scholar's rocks and endlessly recycled

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Indigo Som

Southern comfort: "China Garden, Yazoo City, Mississippi" from Indigo Som's restaurant series.

scraps of textiles mix cultures, crafts and social classes.

Mari Eastman's wryly beautiful paintings expand the cultural mélange to include European luxury and its Asian sources. One canvas offers a loose, Dufy-like depiction of a Chinese porcelain bowl whose bird perched among peony blossoms makes it a painting in its own right. Another depicts a fountain at Versailles with sculptures of putti and exotic fish. Ms. Eastman's delirious surfaces benefit from a nervous, sometimes calligraphic brushwork and sprinkles of glitter.

Notions of luxury also figure in Mika Tajima's relatively cerebral "Extruded Plaid (Suicidal Desires)," a porous box made from layers of intersecting strips of mirror, Plexiglas and wood. Its gaudy austerity tweaks Minimalism and Russian Constructivism with allusions to disco décor and (in this context at least) Japanese lacquer boxes. At the exhibition's pre-opening reception on Wednesday, Ms. Tajima, who is also a musician, used this piece as a stage for a guitar performance, yielding a videotape that is to go on display next week.

Finally, three more completely performance-based works are especially compelling in their exploration of the power of women and the flexible nature of exoticism.

Patty Chang's 20-minute video, "A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West," centers on three studious individuals

as they haltingly translate into English a German article about the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, written by someone who becomes almost comically infatuated with the subject. The translators' struggles keep the narrative tantalizingly unclear, imbuing the entire video, and the listening process, with a cloying sense of fetishization. The credits contain an insider punch line: the essay was written by the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, whose brilliance offered no protection against his own subjectivity.

Laurel Nakadate's 15-minute video "I Wanna Be the One to Walk in the Sun" borrows its title from Cyndi Lauper's hit "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" and reveals the desperation of the male gaze. Her videos document her brief, disconcerting encounters with nerdy single men she meets on the street and often accompanies, video camera in hand, to their homes.

Ms. Nakadate — who was born in Texas, grew up in Iowa and is half-Japanese — wisely works outside New York, has an instinct for harmless individuals and enforces strict rules, beginning with no touching. An even exchange of vulnerabilities ensues. She removes her shirt only if the man sheds his. If he will twirl around on cue, so will she. But her superior power is undeniable, as is the gulf of loneliness that her work opens up, a gulf in which even a modicum of self-assurance becomes exotic.

Xavier Cha, the youngest artist in the show, is represented by a slightly disappointing version of her brilliant "Horn of Plenty," the performance-sculpture that dominated her recent debut at the Chelsea gallery Taxter & Spengemann. There the piece consisted of a large wicker horn containing a cornucopia of colorful vegetables and the artist herself, invisible except for her widely spaced feet protruding among the produce. Here we get the horn, but only a cut-out color photograph of the vegetables and feet.

The saving grace is a short video documenting Ms. Cha's original version serving as a setting for performances by invited dancers, musicians and artists, and, appropriately, the meeting of a discussion group on mythology. (Starting on Tuesday a second video will show the performance that Ms. Cha, like Ms. Tajima, gave during the Wednesday night reception.)

This turns out to be enough to show how Ms. Cha has extended an ancient symbol of fecundity into her own time and space. She has also achieved an extravagant, inclusive response to Vito Acconci's "Seedbed," a gallery performance from the early 70's where the artist remained hidden under the floorboards (in onanistic solitude) and the space above remained barren.

Where there is one way, there is always another and usually several.



Danziger Projects

Brief encounter: Laurel Nakadate in her video "I Want to Be the One to Walk in the Sun."