

The frontier of language and the curiosity shop: encounters of **Asian American Art**



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Marginality and integration are the anode and the cathode of Asian American art. They are as well two key processes in the definition of North American culture, and even in the definition of its internal balance. Many cultures can claim to be the outcome of fusion and grafting processes. Yet, North American culture such as we perceive it currently is not the manifestation of final static results, but of process per se, the continuous dialectic between the internal and the external.

The most evident perception is a notion of North American culture as the accumulation of assimilations, appropriations and the mixing of multiple cultural sources. What is most subtle is how this cultural reality has used its advantageous position with what is external, what is assimilated and added,

to create an illusion of order. Therefore, where as in other countries multiculturalism is the background to sincere struggles and the field of violent antagonisms, in the United States it seems to be just another bit of evidence that confirms that the ideal equilibrium is functioning, that American Dream of opportunity for all, there is room for everybody.

In truth, it isn't really a question of a "common space", but of space for individuals, within a divided and hierarchized globality. In that dialectic of margins and centres the external forces intervene sometimes propelled by the image of the finished work that in the "American Dream" generates. Immigrants are to be included among those external forces. When they reach the States they have to face a system

that is continually obliged to activate unimaginable mechanisms of self-defence. This creates shock for the immigrant who is forced into confrontation, to a dual posture of resistance to and attraction for a cultural space that marginalizes him and simultaneously encourages his integration.

The immigrant factor's importance is clearly understood in the context of present debate on identity problems in the United States. If we revise some of the most important exhibitions in the US that have questioned the issue of identity, we'll notice that in most of them the presence of immigrant artists is noticeable, if not determinant. Asians are not prevalent in these, although they are one of the most rapidly expanding communities, fundamentally in New York and Los Angeles. Obviously apprehensions to Asian art are still stronger than any that may exist in relation to other communities like the Latin one, for example.

The Asian American artist has to live with the stereotyped image that exists of the "oriental world". This simplistic and fetishistic image influences an Asiatic man's racial and sexual identity. All of this affects his cultural production, it creates an a priori, independent model, it predisposes the concepts of acceptance and tends to neutralize the contents of that cultural production that are really distanced from the simplified paradigms



Roger Shimomura. *Luci Tapahonso*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 60 in. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

that substantiate positions of essentially a racist and chauvinist discrimination. The artists reply is an extremely ironic iconography, tending to linguistic subversion and the appropriation of extra-artistic codes. In many respects, these artists treat the media with a spirit very similar to that of that pop artists and neodadaists, yet with a much more radical awareness of the political function of their art. In this manner they develop a line of politicised art that incorporates the marginal productions of racial, national or sexual communities, specifically located within North American contemporary culture.

In many cases the magnification of linguistic contradictions produces an anguished image; the double process of self-negation and identification with stereotypes appears pathetic, and the simultaneous reference to the codes of national and North American culture, to traditional arts and kitsch or postindustrial technology, derive from an eclectic, dialogical and exuberant visualness. It is curious how these works deviate from the ascetic paradigm that the Eastern spirit has been at times identified with. In truth, contemporary Asian American art is far less spiritual and much more factual, and in it the

economy of signs gives way to polyfocal structures that condemn the dialectics of multiculturalism.

These profuse images try, to a lesser or to a greater degree depending on context, to create a boundary, a semantic barrier, that acts as an allegory of the real frontier, and a summary of the immigrant's linguistic and cultural conflict. In such cases, language, (and not only verbal), is the true artistic object. It is a dense, gripping thing, that carries the signs of authorial identity and projects them aggressively.

Asian American artists have realized that the question of hegemonies and subordinations isn't a theoretical problem, or just abstract, but that it is precisely related to the hegemonies of language. That is why they frequently make use of metalinguistic resources as an exercise in resistance, relocating texts that contradict their original context and which subvert their own language-root.

Exemplary is the work by the Philippine artist Pacita Abad, *How Mali Lost Her Accent*, that ironically and directly treats the theme of linguistic "purge" that the immigrant is submitted to by the upper echelons of high texts within a marginal context, so that they maintain their significance and avoid establishing contradictions between their original context and the art work's implications. This happens with the graffiti that Pacita Abad reproduces in her painting *Korean Shopkeepers*; with the English

texts that proliferate in the installations of the Korean Ik-Joong Kang. (phrases like "Art is Masturbation", "I want to paint like I am shitting", or "My shit is thicker than others"), or with the texts in Korean, Chinese or Japanese that asian artists incorporate in their works.

There are artists who have been practising this densely textual art way before their arrival in the US, on one hand recodifying the visualness of the scriptural object, in its specific Eastern sense, on the other assuming the conceptualist pretension of an almost autonomous object in terms of significance. This is the case of the Chinese artist Xu Bing, who since the 80's developed his art deconstructing the language, writing and their technical means of his country as parts of a hegemonic system of communication and knowledge. In the controversial exhibition **China/Avant-Garde** held at Beijing in 1989 he covered the walls, ceiling and floor of a 300 m² room with supposed Chinese characters printed on paper, invented by the artist, that confused the spectator and forced him to search in vain for a meaning and a syntax. According to Andreas Schid this work combined two fundamental elements: expanding the possibilities of traditional Chinese prints and to criticize modes of fossilized communication. In the US, Xu Bing continued with these procedures similar to those of his compatriot Huang Yong Ping, who

normally reduces Western art books and Chinese art history books to pulp, transforming them into aesthetically stimulating and ideologically explosive objects. His installation, *Illegible Humidity* (1922), shown at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburg, magnifies all those connotations, while playing on the ambiguity between the artistic object and waste, and between the exhibition space of the gallery and the useful space of the library. In any case we are dealing with works that deny the possibility of reading and attack writing's prestige while also subverting the schemes of a library logic, of control and transmission of knowledge and information.

In a general sense these artists take advantage of the possibilities of writing as "transcription" of marginal contexts that happen to "authenticate" the work as a peripheral product. The verbal text appears as an ideological territory, sometimes superimposed on other territories, as for instance the human body in some works of Yong Soon Min and landscape or geographical profile in the work that Mo Bahe presented in the Fifth Habana Biennial, *Looking back at the end of my history of learning English*. This territory is at the frontier, or it is indeed the frontier, halfway between integration and rejection. There the initial fusions occur, the first distortions. There the cultural schemes that dominate the relationship between the immigrant and his host country are manifested.

The tendency to the politicization of art as a trait of late postmodernism in the US comes with the discovery of the need that power structures have of this polemical art. The public has been media directed to an attraction for things that "mean something", that establish a dialogue, that contain an evident alternative discourse. The institution of art paradoxically is substantiated by those habits that negate it, finding in them its balance and perhaps its justification. It could be a parallel phenomenon to be found in the relationship between cultural centres and peripheral art. In an almost erotic flirt, centres and peripheries construct a complaisant antagonism. To be marginal and to declare it loudly is no longer a solution to the problem of difference, but a reaffirmation, a freezing of difference, very suitable for centres of power.

Asian art doesn't escape that dangerous circumstance in the US, that pact between victim and executioner, which is also evidenced in the alluded tendency to a self-legitimizing textuality as index of marginality. However there is something in this type of art that makes it unattractive for such ideological manipulation; perhaps it is its resistance to self-mythification and its shame at a past that Westerners behold in a vulgar schematic way. For this reason Asian American art appears as a practice directed to defining a new identity that rejects the archetypes of an Eastern

spirit that has historically functioned as narcissistic justification for Western underratement. If it is true that Asian American artists haven't avoided the cliché, perhaps inevitable after all, of proclaiming their marginality as fundamental component of that new identity in the make, they have at least shown respect for their past and their present in that they have not turned their "asiatic spirit" into a banner for their cause, that has enabled them to resort as well to the elements of integration that identify them in the North American context.

It is interesting to observe the caution that the Asian American community shows in dealing with its own image, and in the way that it can be rejected or accepted in its context. A good example of this was the Curio Shop exhibition, (April 1993), organized by the Godzilla Association, with the support of Artists

Space Gallery. The exhibition took as fundamental idea the curiosity shop, that in Kerry Sakamoto's words, is "a place of cultural and economic exchange that suggests interrelated notions such as stereotypes and racial fetishes and cultural authenticity, all of which evoke static and distorted forms of representations".

Some of the forty-eight artists participating in the show were Skowmon Hastanan, Mo Bahe, Mel Chin, Betty Cano, Ken Chu, Tomie Arai and Colin Lee. The works of these artists and of others that I could also mention, would enable us to define a series of common characteristics, a kind of natural territory where Asian American contemporary art is operating. On a thematic level, this territory is marked by the trauma of migration, the voyage, exile, generational conflict, marginality, cultural memory, political issues and

symbols, the fetishes and the stereotypes imposed by the mass media.

At a stylistic level this art is characterized by a syncretism that usually combines forms and traditional or obviously Asian methods with techniques of western postmodernism. They are extremely open and polysemic works that conceptually express a will of resistance to the standardization of ethnic cultural codes, an interest in gaining recognition as non-local non-regional and non-circumstantial art: a search for acceptance that makes no concessions to the paradigms of mainstream currents, a revision, a questioning and updating of personal identity, the search for the answer to the crucial question: Is it an art that refers to an Asian being or to a North American being, or is it simply a cultural product of a new kind, determined by a double circumstance of integration and marginality? Results have indicated that this art tends to be defined in the third category, although the subject of an Asian American aesthetics is still a polemical affair. What we certainly can observe up to this moment is that these artists are not bent on maintaining archetypes that have been temporarily and spatially displaced, and that would only act in the new environment as an ostracizing factor.

Mo Bahe. *Learning American*, 1992.
84 x 120 x 12 in. Projection video & flags & electric motors. Courtesy Centro Wifredo Lam, La Habana.

