

Charged at the AHL Foundation

Reviewed by
Jonathan Goodman

The AHL Foundation, established in 2013 to promote the careers of Korean artists working in the United States, and in recent years increasingly showing work by artists who are not Korean, has moved to a small gallery space at 139th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem. The gallery is currently presenting the highly successful *Charged*, curated by Hyewon Yi, assistant professor of art history and director of the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery at SUNY Old Westbury. *Charged* features art by four Asian-American women: Keiko Fukazawa, from Japan; Sammy Seung-min Lee, from Korea; Maryrose Cobarrubias Mendoza, from the Philippines; and Joo Woo, from Korea.

Fukazawa, who headed the ceramics department at Pasadena City College, is represented by a series of decorated ceramic plates mounted on a gallery wall. Set on pedestals below the plates are four ceramic replicas of handguns (part of the ongoing series *Peacemaker*, begun in 2017), exquisitely crafted and set in dark blue or red silk-lined Chinese calligraphy boxes. Each of the white porcelain guns is covered with small ceramic flowers native to the states in which the shooting took place, each flower representing a victim of random handgun violence. The plates belong to the series *Perception Plate* (2022), for which the artist made use of the Ishihara color vision test, inserting ‘Abortion’, ‘Jan. 6’, and ‘Truth’ among colored circles. The words carry potent political weight, shifting the plates from dining utensils to something deeply confrontational. As Fukazawa’s art merges unusual beauty with social critique, it is fair to say that she is attempting to transform the violence we live under into some kind of grace.

Lee's installation, *A Very Proper Table Setting*, placed on the upper middle of the left wall as the viewer enters the gallery, consists of bowls, plates, and utensils closely covered by off-white *hanji* (Korean mulberry paper). This work is an iteration of an ongoing long-term project: Lee invites museum and gallery visitors, or strangers encountered in parking lots, from outside Korean culture to create table settings using traditional Korean bowls and utensils in place of their own culture's dinnerware. She will then preserve the table settings by draping *hanji* over them to form a casting, a laborious, meticulous process that memorializes the moment of their creation. These social activities produce emotional closeness that is meant to promote dialogues about the different ways that affection is expressed across cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The results are wall mountings of quiet, contemplative beauty.

Lee, whose background is Korean and who now lives in Colorado, came to the US as a teenager. Her wall installation is subtle but telling, as articles of a shared meal are hidden by the mulberry paper, a well-known material of Korean culture. Despite their coverings, these items are identifiable by their outlines, functioning as elements of a bas-relief. This work, then, can be seen both as a sophisticated visual statement and as a means of bringing people together via Asian notions of shared feelings. The increasing presence of Asians in America demands their recognition, and Lee's installation, subtle and complex, asserts Korean values while including them within a broader spectrum of beliefs and practices identified as "American."

Filipina-American artist Mendoza, whose family brought her to the US when she was three years old, presents three works, all tied to the historical presence of her culture while also referencing the racial prejudice against Filipinos in general, and her family in particular. Resting atop a pedestal is a substantial bag of rice whose commercial markings have been recreated by

the artist's hand. *Botan* is the brand of rice preferred by Asians in California, but Mendoza has changed the brand name to *Baton* and exchanged the central image of a rose for a lotus flower. Her modification of the name has been pointed out by curator Yi as a lightly hidden reference to the Bataan Death March led by the Japanese army during World War Two, during which thousands of Filipinos died.

Mendoza's drawing, *Portrait of a Man* (2022), is based on a photograph taken in the early 20th century, now housed in the Field Museum in Chicago. Small, sharply detailed, and placed at the center of an otherwise blank sheet of paper, Mendoza's drawing is meant to recall the dignity of a Filipino person during a time when such dignity was hard to come by. All the artists in this show not only attempt to memorialize their culture, they also revisit the past, with its racial prejudice that so profoundly affected Asian culture, both long ago and now, in order to repair the tattered fabric of Asian memory in the US.

In her large printed sheet titled *If These Walls Could Talk* (2020, reprinted 2023), Mendoza uses the green and white colors of US paper currency to reproduce racist images of Filipino people subjected to economic hardship and cultural contempt a century ago. Mendoza is a very good political artist, announcing her frustrations with the country that is now her home, yet which offers little support, personally or publicly.

Joo Woo presents beautiful red cut paper that covers one of the walls extending into the center of the gallery space. A large, complex work, *Do Not Draw a Red Star* (2022), is based on the stern admonition issued by the South Korean anti-communist government of the 1980s, which sought to destroy all references suggesting sympathy for the Left. Viewers also discover in this intricate work references to Korean folklore, family stories tied to the experience of racism, and images of protests against racism.

Woo's large, complicated design announces that she is neither surrendering the craft of her culture nor letting that craft go untransformed by the severe social stigma imposed by the dominant American culture whose antagonism toward people of different backgrounds remains profoundly troubling. Interestingly, all four women are focused more on preserving their cultural dignity than with mounting an attack against the dominant culture despite its persistent inclination toward racism. The origins of dislike that so often drive the art in this show demand objective study—the antithesis of the intuition artists customarily use in their work.

We might ask, not so much for political reasons as for a social understanding of Asian life in the US today, if these gifted women's work addresses healing. The objects are meant to claim survival in the face of a long-running disregard for artists as a class while also addressing their particular ethnic or racial affiliations. It is important that we not allow rhetoric to push us into a corner. While good art always moves quickly into an artist's awareness, reading that art requires effort and the time in which to reflect. The urge to create enables the artist to make work that will be quickly accessible, so there is plenty of art capable of bringing immediate satisfaction to the viewer, thus delivering an immediate point, but only when art is driven away from personal concerns into relations with public concerns does it assume the true mantle of its purpose. This approach may elude artists belonging to the dominant culture, but it is natural for these Asian women artists to have developed an awareness keen enough to read hardship as a platform for achievement.