# Being in America

"Charged," curated by Hyewon Yi, brings together Keiko Fukasawa, Joo Yeon Woo, Sammy Seung-min Lee, and Maryrose Cobarrubias Mendoza, a quartet of remarkable artists with East Asian roots, to New York's Harlem and the AHL Foundation. While Harlem has been the location for several contemporary galleries in recent years in addition to being the longtime home of the Studio Museum (which has launched the careers of innumerable Black artists), it is still somewhat of an outlier and rare to see an institution that focuses on artists of Korean descent located there. But that, to me, is progress, another instance of cultural diversity and exchange. And it might be noted that while "Charged" assumes the common denominators that connect these artists, it is also about cultural diversity, since to be East Asian, not to mention South Asian, is to be from disparate cultures and histories, despite proximity and centuries, even millennia of interaction with each other. Asians know this (and know they need to forge new relationships with each other) but too often, even now, we are thought to be interchangeable by those who are not Asian, who have little awareness of the deep divides of the past, of the conflicts and complexities of the histories that have shaped that great swath of the world.

As the title "Charged" tantalizingly promises, the exhibition addresses subject matter that deals with controversial, even combustible issues, collectively creating a force field in which each artist's work activates the others to shape a conversation from multiple points of view, made more profound in the aggregate. The word "charged" is well-chosen, all its meanings apt: to designate, to impose a task, a duty; to fire up, excite, incite, to energize; to be plugged in, to be fully loaded; to be blamed, accused—and more.

The artists were born and raised in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, and are from different generations. They have also all lived in the United States (currently based in California, Colorado, and Florida) for a good part of their lives. Their voices are individual, but they draw from personal experiences and issues that have mattered deeply to them, their work steeped in autobiography, explicitly or implicitly. The stories they tell are those of immigrants, a cross-section of what it means to make a life in a new land, a place that can often seem strange, hostile, difficult, but also welcoming, clarifying, liberating.

Fukazawa, Woo, Lee, and Cobarrubias Mendoza employ a gamut of media, like most artists today, and have in common those integral to a classic East Asian vocabulary—paper, textiles, ink, and ceramics—but they are also talented painters, draftspersons, videographers, photographers, and installation and performance artists. It might be noted that the materials they prize and highlight here are often categorized as craft in the West, once considered of

lesser importance, and relegated to women and domestic production. Challenged, especially by women artists everywhere, that valuation has been amended, at least in part.

The practice of every artist is unique, as it is here, but there are vital points of convergence. All four have spent their formative years in their countries of birth and, despite their years of residence in the United States, they no doubt share a sense of in-betweenness, of straddling two worlds, two cultures, the width of that divide depending upon personal circumstances and temperament. But I also think that because of the widespread, incessant movement of people throughout the world--for reasons both hopeful and devastating—that those with hyphenated identities are/will become the norm, our sense of community both local and global, which, again, indicates progress to me since we must all live together in our ever-shrinking world.

The works on view, all recent, explore a hybrid of traditional and contemporary Asian and Western imagery and techniques. Keiko Fukusawa is Japanese American. Primarily a ceramicist, she left Japan because, as a woman, she felt she would have more opportunities in the United States for personal expression. As the two series presented here show us, her content is a balancing act between the aesthetically beautiful and the socially and politically urgent. In *Peacemake*r (2017—), she turns guns into flowers, each gun a replica of one used in a mass shooting, each flower a memorial to a death claimed by that shooting. Her weapons, however, have been incapacitated, made of fragile white porcelain instead of harsh adamant metal.

Korean American artist Joo Yeon Woo's red painted cutouts—an updated version of the venerable practice of paper cutting—form a lacy, intricately layered and interwoven wall collage of imagery conjured by a childhood recollection in which she was forbidden to draw a (Communist) red star in art class, the title repeating that injunction. Protesting the suppression of free expression under the authoritarian regime she grew up in, it is also a tribute to insuppressible memory.  A thicket of squiggles, diamonds, hearts, flowers, figures, words, letters (Korean and English)—and of course, an abundance of red stars—it again is a test of visual acuity, a series in which Woo posts her changing messages for us to decode, perhaps her version of K-Pop, the past viewed through the lens of the present.

Filipino American Maryrose Cobarrubias Mendoza's critique is the reverse, although she also reviews the past, her installation of interrelated objects taking aim at American imperialism and racism in the Philippines, including a brutally invasive war that began at the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Filipino civilians. Each object pointedly shows how the people of the Philippines were portrayed as savages, subhumans, thereby justifying the barbaric treatment they endured under American occupation that is all too familiar as a tactic of war. It includes *If These Walls Could Talk*, a nearly to scale corner

section of a pleasant colonial style room—until the pattern of its wallpaper is looked at more closely, with its demeaning depictions of Filipinos, driving her point forcefully home.

Sammy Seung-min Lee is also Korean American and is represented by an elegant white scroll that crosses almost the entirety of one wall. A bas-relief of sorts cast in hanji (mulberry paper), it resembles a frieze, and is embedded at intervals with traditional Korean serving dishes and utensils. It is part of a long-term participatory project in which the artist invited others to arrange the settings of this surrogate communal table and to share their stories, a video installed nearby briefly explaining the project. At the core of *A Very Proper Table Setting* is the idea of inclusion and hospitality, Lee doing double duty: the artist acts as the host; the person, an immigrant, is also the guest.

The question that hovers over this work, and to a degree, all the others, seems to be: what constitutes our responsibility to those seeking inclusion and security and what is their responsibility to us? It is a question that is so tragically pressing today, as millions upon millions have been displaced and in need of asylum and a place to call home, their lives upended, literally shattered, too often due to political, social, economic, and environmental factors beyond their control. Art can be charged with asking questions, but it is up to us to find the answers.

**Lilly Wei**

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