

Asian American Life

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### Asian American Life

A variety of factors have an impact on Asian American life, and many of them are related to identity, gender, and culture. The exhibit, *Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter*, which is curated by the Smithsonian Institute and the National Portrait Gallery, uses different visual mediums to provide its audience with commentary on these life aspects. Culture, gender, and identity coexist while having a tendency to influence one another. For this reason, many of the artists featured often do not attempt to address these issues individually, but rather simultaneously and subtly. Historically, Asian Americans have had to struggle with integrating themselves into a new culture while being seen as foreigners. In addition, Asian American women have had the unique challenge of being denigrated because of their ethnicity as well as their gender (Perez, 2010). Naturally, the challenges that Asian American women face are often connected to the way Asian American men are viewed. This paper will examine the impact of some of the themes presented on the Asian American men and women in our society, explore additional literature that is related to Asian American acculturation, and provide a personal reflection on Asian American life.

#### **Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter**

The works featured in this exhibit seemed to have a complex entanglement of themes regarding Asian Americans such as personal identity, ethnic tradition, cultural assimilation, social perception, and gender stereotypes. Throughout the exhibit, most of the subjects or themes showcased represented women or femininity and all but one of the artists featured were female. Although it is unclear why the curators chose these specific works and artists, many of the concepts depicted can be applied to a larger context that deals with both men and women. Commentary and themes regarding identity and gender often appear very subtly throughout the exhibit.

One collection of works by Satomi Shirai seemed to depict women in somewhat ordinary scenes,

but typically included strange or unexpected elements that challenged the normalcy of the scene. The women in the images were, at times, almost inanimate such as in the work titled *Breakfast*. In this photograph, the woman is posing in a somewhat unnatural reclining position, and the man is sitting normally across from her while eating. This work is one of the few that show relatively clear distinctions between male and female subjects, while also showing a sort of dichotomy in behavior. A stereotype associated with Asian Americans is the idea that they come from a tradition where men and women are traditionally humble, reserved, and respectful. The women in particular fit into this image because in addition to these traits, they must also be submissive and attentive towards the men (Pyke, 2010). The woman that is literally bending over backwards in front of the man might be a representation of how Asian American females figuratively bend over backwards for men in a society that values masculinity and denigrates femininity. The man and woman being in the same scene can be seen as a representation of a gender power struggle. While the fully clothed man is sitting in a seemingly comfortable position, the woman is completely nude and awkwardly balancing on a sphere. This somewhat suggests passive domination, which relates to the stereotype that Asian American women should be complaisant. Asian American women are challenged by the choice of embracing their traditional role as quiet, obedient Asian woman, or living up to expectations of stereotypical modern American woman who are more opinionated and independent. Although the woman in *Breakfast* depicts this struggle, Shirai does not seem to offer immediate resolution, emphasizing the currency of the issue and the notion that there is no definitive answer to the question of how Asian American women should behave in our society.

Another series done by the artist Tam Tran involves multiple photographs of herself as the only subject, with each differing in pose, attire, and photographic composition. In *Catatonic Rouge*, Tran is depicted as a somewhat lifeless doll who is partially clad. The work *The Trophy* also shows Tran being

seemingly empty, but holding herself by her own hair. Both of these works focus on the concept of a woman as an object rather than a person. Although her identity does not seem to be completely lost, it does seem to be, to an extent, fading or challenged by what might be either an internal struggle or an external oppression. Consistent with the aforementioned stereotype of Asian women being submissive, Tran suggests that women can be perceived as being objectified. Asian women have historically been framed as being mere sexual objects (Perez, 2003). One interpretation of *The Trophy* could be that Tran is symbolizing women as being some sort of a prize that is owned by another person, either sexually or otherwise. This can be also related to societal pressures that Asian American women are faced with by living in the United States while perhaps being raised in an Asian country or by family members that were committed to traditional Asian values. Despite this, Tran depicts acceptance and/or resilience in the face of this struggle, suggesting that it is something that many Asian American women must simply endure and persevere. Tran's works do not seem to show the subject as being resistant to the idea of being objectified, but instead accepting, to a degree. Tran's subjects do not show obvious signs of struggle in these works, and she depicts generally neutral facial expressions. On the other hand, the image that Tran creates could suggest that the Asian American women's struggles are internal and difficult to express or address outwardly.

I feel as though the material in the exhibit does, at times, paint a picture of Asian American lifestyle, including meaningful depictions of struggles and realities that many Asian Americans experience today. Conversely, many of the works are often vague in addressing Asian American issues regarding power and gender. The intension of not explicitly providing commentary on such issues may be to avoid trivializing the experience of Asian Americans or offering a over-simplified story to those who are not Asian American. In general, I think that the impressions of Asian American men and women are not strongly swayed positively or negatively by this exhibit, and therefore not have a large effect on

gender stereotypes. Given this, exhibit mainly focuses on the image and the issues of women. The themes and representations of women seem to reflect larger societal issues regarding gender, and many of the works can be indicative of Asian American women's struggles in this domain. One of these themes is explained by Tran as she describes a process that she experiences when she must conform to a role, which is expressed in her works (Fernandez & Tran, 2011). This highlights the reality of some of the issues seen in the exhibit overall and lets the audience know that they are not only historical, but also current.

### **Societal Implications**

The works by the artists mentioned above have a unique impact on our society today. Because the cultural beliefs of Asians and Americans are in question, the effects on our society span across both traditional Asian and traditional American culture. That is, Asian American women must simultaneously address issues with balancing their Asian background with their current American lifestyle. Since this multicultural dynamic is introduced in a largely multiethnic society, interactions can deal with not only Asian Americans, but Americans in general. The stereotype that Asian women are weaker than men and should be subordinate is seen in the issue regarding an industry defined by Asian Americans seeking partners from other countries in hope of becoming financially stable as a result (Perez, 2003). A similar correlation can be made with Shirai's *Breakfast*, where the woman is seen as being on a different level than the man physically and in terms of role. The fact that Asian American women often continue to conform to these stereotypical standards, accepting subordinate gender roles, creates a larger societal impact that essentially perpetuates the stereotypes. Perez suggests that the mail-order bride industry presents women as inferior, which gives a negative image to Asian American women in general. In addition, the power struggle between gender as a result can promote dominance and violence (2003). Asian American women who simply conform to the standard of being taken advantage of in relationships

indirectly support male domination over women. An over-extension of this domination can result in acts of violence towards women, both physical and emotional. Works such as Shirai's can portray this struggle in a photograph, symbolizing the real-life possibilities that may result. An Asian American woman that bends over backwards in a relationship, perhaps losing their contribution to decision making and/or their personal identity seems to be more at risk of becoming subordinated and possibly the victim of violence.

The inability of an Asian American to acculturate may also be linked to mental health, especially for adolescents. In a study looking at minorities and mental well-being, Asian American youth were found to experience difficulties involving family relationships relating to the idea that they could not conform to American cultural norms because of their own family's culture (Romero et al., 2007). Some of the captions associated with the photographs from CYJO seemed to discuss the struggle that many adolescents have of being both Asian and American, such as one woman who described her thankfulness towards her parents who played a part in teaching aspects of the American culture to her as she grew up. Combined with the traditional gender roles that male and female Asian Americans face, this struggle can, in fact, have repercussions on Asian American's mental health. The difficulty is defined by the fact that tradition often clashes with modern culture, but perhaps more so because of the wide differences between Asian and American culture.

### **Personal Reflection**

Being a Hispanic minority in the United States, I can personally relate to many of the struggles that Asian Americans are faced with based on the literature and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery exhibits. It is interesting to see that many of the stereotypes that Asian American women are challenged with are also present in Hispanic culture. The idea that women should be obedient and reserved is common and often passed down through generations because of the value that tradition has

in both cultures. Being a part of a diverse community, I had a chance to come face to face with many Asian Americans. It seems to me that although there are many similarities between Hispanic and Asian American cultures in terms of the identity and gender struggles in regards to tradition and cultural assimilation, many Asian American adolescents are often held to a higher standard than other minorities. This idea and perception may, in itself, be a stereotype that Asian Americans are held against when confronted with some of the issues that minorities face. As a result, many Asian American families become entrapped in an intergenerational cycle that can lead to an array of societal pressures and personal difficulties. The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery exhibits put many of the issues involving Asian Americans and identity, media representation, and gender into complex multidimensional art form that emphasizes the idea that these issues should be confronted simultaneously because of their nature to be entwined with one another. Many of the exhibits not only represent who Asian American women are, but also provide a contemporary context that encapsulates cultural tradition, cultural assimilation, and gender issues often all at once. The intricacy of the art gives the audience an in-depth analysis of the status of Asian American women, while also providing commentary of the role of men as a result. The images of the exhibit provide not only a foundation that many Asian American women can use to identify themselves, but also provides people of other cultures with ideas and themes that can inform our society as a whole.

#### References

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