

VIRGINIA

Eight Paths to a Journey: Cultural Identity and the Immigration Experience

The Ellipse Arts Center
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Exposure to a heady mix of cultures is a part of life in this area, where an international melange of faces and traditions comprise vital threads in its overall tapestry. The intricacies of non-Western heritage have a special, personal import, a private significance for the eight Washington- and Maryland-based first-, second- and third- generation immigrants included in this exhibition, curated by Mel Watkins, artist and former curator of the Washington Project for the Arts. The artists conveyed diverse views of the immigration experience, reflecting the joy of escape, the pain inherent in adopting the mores of a new land, and the wonders of discovery. Yet their artistic tributes to the adventure of migration belie blanket descriptors, and offer perspectives as compellingly unique as the many paths they took to arrive here.

Two offered works praising their uncommon legacies. In eight large-scale paintings of his family members, John Lee challenges the viewer to move beyond the Asiatic features that make an undetected resettlement difficult, to appreciate the individuality of each sitter. In his portraits, Lee confronts the sometimes stereotypical views of Asians and Asian Americans that masquerade beneath a veneer of acceptance. Rather than the envied scholastic achiever, he presents a youth whose dress and attitude are more associated with teenage impudence than with ethnicity. He touts the gentle dignity of the aged, the blue-collar existence of the common folk, characteristics shared with everyone else in our society.

Kristine Yuki Aono's noble mixed-media kimonos offered another lesson in pride. In *Obasan/Grandmother Kimono*, Aono, a third-generation Japanese American, pays homage to her grandmother, who regressed to a world of her own following her internment here during World War II. Words such as *Shikaganai*, meaning "Nothing can be done; go on with your life," are formed with wire and incorporated onto the kimono, along with collaged photographic images of her grandmother on her wedding day and at other personally significant periods. In *Ghost*, Aono salutes her ancestry by choosing an ancient Samurai style kimono, tying it right over left, which signifies death, and sprinkling ashes in the collar. The stark power of the work, with its connection to the world beyond, contrasts strongly to the bondage implied in another kimono that was wrapped, hem to neckline, in thick rope.

Other works reflect the strife of resettlement, admitting the many sacrifices, like familial separation, that so often go unspoken. Christiane Graham gives breath to the feeling of homesickness in her videotape *Brief* (German for "letter"), that she has prepared for her mother in Germany. Through her loosely autobiographical narrative, the artist reflects on her mother's struggles in post-World War II Berlin. Rivaling the words of remembrance and scenes of her own day-to-day life was the drama of the installation itself: The video monitor was nestled in a cave-like setting; its entrance draped, its interior darkened, with portraits of Graham's mother etched in chalk on the blackened walls. In one corner was another, smaller television, built into the base of a sewing machine, showing scenes of women attempting to rebuild their lives following the war. The sound of scraping, reminiscent of the masonry work many of these women undertook following the war, is unceasing.

Upon the invitation of conceptual artist and photographer M.E. Fuentes, Dr. Mia Blumentritt, a social scientist and artist, offered a psychological study on how Asian and Pacific Island immigrants value limb loss. Using panels of notes and figures, Blumentritt presented the results of her study (originally undertaken for insurance companies), which revealed diminished payment expectations among the test group, figures that companies may be inclined to accept.

Costa Rica-born Rossella Matamoros's jubilant paintings captured the elation of the immigrant as well



KRISTINE YUKI AONO, "Kimono," mixed media, 1991.

as the artists' ongoing relationship with those left behind, while Maria Karametou examines her longing for her homeland, Greece, through reliefs and mixed-media, book-like forms from her series "The Books I'd Write." Hauntingly, Mansoor Hassan of Pakistan also looks back, utilizing newspaper images of refugees she has melded onto panels and their accompanying bundles of belongings on the floor.

Missing, however, was the story of the African immigrant, whose presence and artistry has contributed much to the Washington metropolitan area's urban tapestry. Philippine-born Pacita Abad's canvas collages did explore the Afro-Caribbean experience, thus illustrating an important aspect of Africa's lineage within this hemisphere. Yet nowhere was a direct link to the continent itself achieved, an omission which left a very vital story untold.

Prices unavailable.

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