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# Asian Americans express pain and growth

ASIA AMERICA

Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art.

List Visual Arts Center

Through March 31st

**By Craig K. Chang**  
Arts Editor

While isolation has long been the crutch of a foreigner's identity, the act of leaving home for a new country often reconciles disparate traditions. The Asian American experience at once emphasizes that immigrants are adrift on a lonely vessel in a strange world, and that leaving home refracts an entire spectrum of new perspectives.

The List Visual Arts Center's new exhibit, *Asia America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, takes us on a tour of these ideas through the eyes of Asian artists who migrated to America. The show begins its argument clockwise from the lobby. The premise of isolation in the Asian American experience opens with May Sun's *Underground* (1991). Like flags of testimony, shovels and hoes center the spiral in her piece and complement pictures of Chinese laborers in California toiling under the watchful eyes of their white bosses. Made anonymous by time, the faces frame a forgotten history of early migrant workers who helped build America.

Anonymity as expressed by Sun relates to the sense of loneliness and angry displacement in the next few works by Baochi Zhang and Takako Nagai. The metal bed in Zhang's *A Thousand and One Restless Nights* (1989) reflects the self-inflicted torture of being an Asian artist in America. The flames of a burning kimono in Nagai's *Self-Portrait* (1990) dramatize the inevitable loss of the artist's Japanese culture upon moving west.

Whereas many of the works in the exhibit examine these personal implications of change, several bolster inner conflict with pieces of history, like the explicit violations of personal rights in Vietnam. For instance, artist Long Nguyen paints and carves the atrocities and lingering damage of the Vietnam War. His *Survivor No. 2* (1992) is a wooden sculpture of a scarred Vietnamese man, ravaged by open wounds and torn limbs. Like an abused carcass, the weathered bust is a loud statement about how the West has intimidated the East.

The rest of the works explore beyond these raw emotions of loneliness and pain, and thus save *Asia America* from a one-sided slant. Pacita Abad's *How Mali Lost Her Accent* (1991) urges caution to the ladder-climbing of many Asian Americans. A fashionable Asian schoolgirl stands among images of Ivy League schools and computers; but the portrait hides behind a confusing drizzle. The work of Abad and many others question who she has become after assimilating Western ideals.

Indian artist Zarina's *House on Wheels* (1991) urges the exhibit beyond mere recognition of the East-West conflict. "You draw the space around yourself and it becomes your house," she writes besides the work near the center of the exhibit. In a tile of twenty-five flat metal pieces, Zarina melds a house and wheels to create a new symbol of home, dynamic and grounded even when separated from the place of one's heritage.

Zarina's work blends nicely with the final room's pieces in a clockwise tour of the List Center. Jin Soon Kim's *Years; Instants* (1994) expresses her transformation after arriving in America. Through encasing discarded furniture in copper wire and steel lattices, Kim bridges the distance between the poverty she endured in Korea and the industrial burgeoning of America. As if spanning attitudes of both lifestyles in her mind, Kim wraps her heritage in the building blocks of Western life and makes them one.

Yong Soon Min's *Dwelling* (1994) unifies the concepts of heritage and struggle with new ideas by hanging a translucent hanbok, a type of traditional Korean dress, over a burning Western book. Min reaches some sort of closure with the writings inside the dress: "To us a birthplace is no longer our home. The place we were brought up is not

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either." Luminescent and wrapped around a complex branch, these words shine new realizations on evolving tradition, imbued with the smoke of smoldering books beneath.

The foreigner's early hesitance, which breeds anger and hurt, evolves like the sequence of expressions throughout Asia America. The term "1.5 generation" for those who emigrate from their country early in life misleads, as if the adventure of growing into a new culture makes one incomplete. Foreigners - not just Asian Americans - seek a spiritual place for themselves. And according to many artists in *Asia America*, adjustment does not halve the soul, but makes a new, magical whole.

# THE ARTS

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Several of Masami Teraoka's works are featured in *Asia America*, a display now showing at the List Center. This watercolor, *Café au Lait* (1992), is from his *Tale of 1000 Condoms* series.

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## List Center exhibits cultural journey of Asian artists

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