



CULTURE CUE

An Expanded Approach to Asian-Americanness at Vessel Gallery

Two massive paintings by Oakland artist Dave Kim meet the viewer at the entrance to Vessel Gallery's Excuse me, can I see your ID?, an exhibition that aims to unravel over-simplified understandings of Asian-American identity.

The first is a rendering of a young Korean-American boy — actually, Kim himself — sporting a small cowboy hat and playfully pointing two toy guns at the viewer, a little holster attached to his jeans. Per Kim, it's called "Double Exposure" in part because the reference photo is literally double exposed — and you can see the effect in the painting as well, as a streak of light running across the bottom. But the title works, too, as a short poem about the experience of growing up between two cultures and the youthful naiveté of thinking they could be reconciled with a costume.



'Double Exposure' by Dave Kim.

The second is a reflection on Kim's teen years, during which he joined a Filipino gang in Los Angeles called Maplewood Ave. Jefrox. To those who can decipher them, the aerosol scribbles on the gray-painted background tell a story. There's the name of the gang, RIP messages to two lost members, a diss by a rival gang, then a rebuttal by Jefrox. At the reception for the show, Kim points out that he joined the Filipino gang because there were no Korean gangs, just as the Filipinos had joined Latino gangs before they had their own. "Even though we're

Asian, we took on the characteristics of Latino gangs in every way, from claiming a neighborhood, to the attire and even the language we used,” he writes in his artist statement. “I think the thing to remember is that I joined it not to be violent or become a criminal, but to be a part of something, to find belonging, importance — find purpose.”

Kim chuckles as he points out that these days, he’s the one having to paint over tags that show up on his home in West Oakland — even though, when he went back to paint that aerosol piece, the script didn’t take long to come back to him. Now, he says, he tries to find belonging in other ways.

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Kim’s pieces are an effective primer for the show in part because of their reflection on seeking acceptance and attempting assimilation. But they’re perhaps most appropriate because they surprise — by embracing the slipperiness of Asian-American identity and the complicated ways in which Asian-Americans sometimes adopt tropes belonging to other identities in order to fill out their own relatively ambiguous cultural slates. That fluidity was, in part, what curator Lonnie Lee was trying to get at when she started developing the show two years ago.

“It’s really forcing people to see the range that is encompassed within our communities,” says Lee, who was determined to avoid any recycled Asian tropes and include works with challenging, contemporary approaches. Her intention was also to expand people’s understanding of

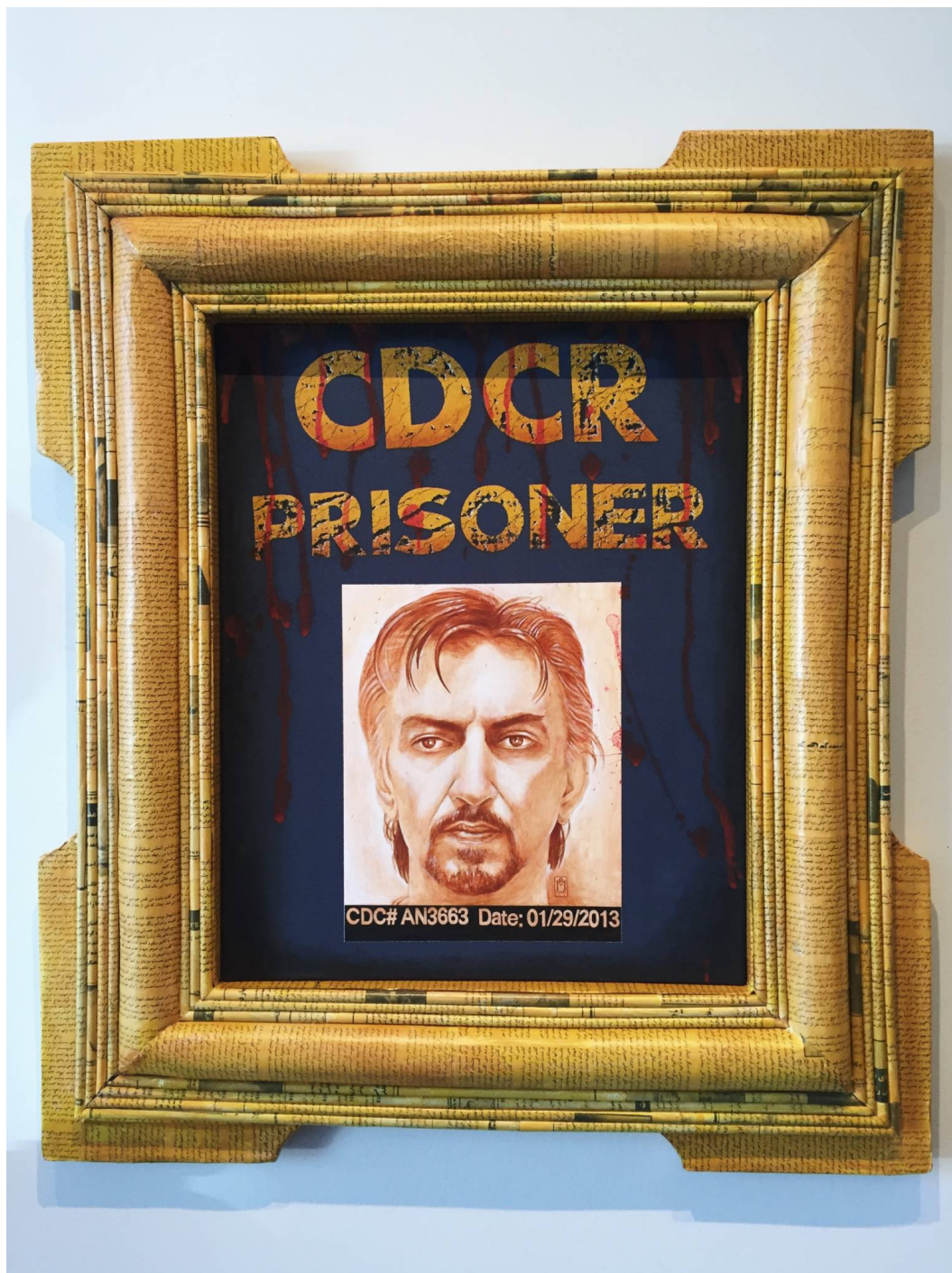
what constitutes “Asian” beyond the assumed Chinese and Japanese backgrounds. Or, as Jasmine Lee Ehrhardt (Lee’s daughter, and the curator of a cinematic supplement to the show) quipped at the opening: “It’s not another show about having mono-lids.”



'All American' by Sanjay Vora.

Indeed, the works range widely — as do the backgrounds of the artists who made them. Indian-American artist Sanjay Vora’s artworks are always meditations on memory, often executed as abstracted paintings that work as metaphor for foggy recall. But his “All American” is a bit more racially loaded than typical: A watercolor portrait of himself in a basketball uniform, clutching a ball beneath his arm, is obscured by a thick layer of basmati rice. In another piece, he creates a canvas out of tiled burlap rice sacks, the repetition of which he says alludes to the rhythms of Indian music. “I grew up with a lot of Indian classical music, and actually rejecting it because I was so American,” he says,

“and now I’m coming back to how it’s so engrained in my mental processes.”



'Cruel & Unjust Punishment' by Omid Mokri.

Meanwhile, Rea Lynn de Guzman — one of many Filipino artists in the show — contributes ghostly monoprints of delicate “Maria Clara” garments from the Philippines, which are made from pineapple fibers (a plant brought in

by the Spanish) and functioned as a way to assimilate to Western beauty standards. And incarcerated Iranian artist Omid Mokri reflects on his own imprisonment in the form of a hand-made book and frame bearing his own mug.

One of Lee's intentions for the show is to shine a light on systemic injustices that affect the AAPI community, rather than simply dwell in identity politics. The title, in part, serves that goal.

“It's an interesting deviation from ‘Where are you from?’ or, ‘Where are you really from?’” says Ehrhardt, pointing out that that's the question typically associated with Asian-Americanness. “The question of, ‘Excuse me, can I see your ID?’ takes on this other meaning that's not just identity, place, home, belonging. It suddenly can turn into something like: How does this state view you? How does this state categorize you? Are you documented? Are you undocumented?”



'Raj in the Tree' by Sanjay Vora. (Courtesy of the artist.)

Ehrhardt's curatorial contribution to the show comes in the form of a short film festival entitled *Which ID?*, which will take place at Vessel on April 15 (2 p.m.) and again on May 18 (6 p.m.). An Asian and Asian-American cinema buff, she chose short non-fiction, narrative, and experimental films that she hopes will provide political context to the show, touching on themes such as gender, incarceration, imperialism, and harassment. A portion of the ticket sales will benefit the Asian Law Caucus and Asian Health Services.

"I think that people forget that imperialism happened to us, and continues to affect our communities, and continues to affect the ways that we move through this world," says Ehrhardt. "So, it's really important to me that I show films that are grappling with those themes, because so often we get so bogged down in the feelings part of identity that we forget the political forces that shaped how we even came to be having these feelings about ourselves in the first place."

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'Excuse me, can I see your ID?' is up at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland) through May 27. More details [here](#).