

## KEVIN BALCORA BIO

黃兼鋒 (Wong Gim Fong) | Kevin Balcora

Born in Oakland California in 1987. Balcora creates textured paintings featuring atmospheric formations of dissolving calligraphy set against weathered textures and embossed logographs. His technical foundation is in drawing, and the practice of rendering curvature in line strokes. This preoccupation carried over into the world of graffiti, abstracting orthography into new unreadable forms. These early subconscious pursuits cultivated skills that, years later, became the crucial foundation for working in Chinese calligraphy.

Balcora grew up in the Oakland hills and in East Oakland. These two environments, within 5 miles of each other, provided formative experiences witnessing stark economic and social divisions. Early in his life, vernacular was a consistent object of scrutiny. Identity and authenticity were apparent in one's dialect. This eventually led to an examination on the origin of his family, their village dialect, and the history surrounding them. When he began studying Cantonese, a professor informed him that his pronunciation was in fact Toisan Dialect.

Balcora created a system for notating Toisan by combining traditional characters based on their dialect pronunciation. Though care has been taken to demonstrate comprehension and execution of traditional calligraphic forms, the words are unreadable to native speakers. Inspiration for creating this system initially came from seeing Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy and Gu Wenda's gu Script. Their work led towards research into writing systems, exposing him to fascinating historical scripts and linguistic concepts. The unique orthographies of Old-Uyghur, Mongolian, Phags-Pa, Manchu, Tangut, Tibetan, Nushu, Sawndip and Siddham have been concurrent systems for writing in China at various points in History.

In Chinese painting there is a tradition of studying the brushwork of past masters so as to develop a personal style through comprehension. In his work, he attempts to incorporate a sense of time and history as a component of this comprehension. Combining cursive forms and seal script like impressions, with character strokes truly derived from graffiti. Large installations of his work have been featured at SOMArts gallery in San Francisco and American Steel Studios in Oakland. The development of the Toisan orthographic system is ongoing, and he continues to live and work from Oakland.

## RUMINATIONS

### **What is Asian America in 2020's?**

Being Asian American is like something out of science fiction. The term itself carries the connotation of being between worlds. The experience of growing up Asian American has

reverberations in my perception of reality, like any defining experience would for anyone else. For example: A worker in a grocery store might peel leaves off broccoli stalks and throw them into a bin. For some people those leaves are garbage, but for my grandparent's that would be food in the garbage. Probably a feeling they picked up from times when there was true scarcity, and imbued behaviors from that experience down generations. Yet my family and I maintain and dispose of a food surplus all the time. It's almost like a ritual to prove that things are different now. Our interaction with abundance places us into a very different perspective, it has made my reasoning different. Consequently, my grandparents would probably have struggled to understand my life decisions as an artist, just as I would struggle to envision their experiences through war and leaving an ancestral home behind.

At a Dim Sum restaurant, my inclination is to say thank you every time a server does anything for us. For other members of my family, chewing is more important, and tapping two fingers on the table is enough. Toisanese, my family's language, might sound like an argument to some or country folk banter to a Cantonese speaker, or ordinary conversation for people from the Sei Yap region. For me it is a language I would have spoken every day in another life. It's a dialect that persisted and developed for hundreds of years and is disappearing among my generation. I use these examples of language and food because they are ordinary to daily life, they carry such different meanings for different individuals' lived experiences. When I think of my family's history, I think of how they lived a rural life with slow changes for so many generations. I think about how they shared similar experiences farming in a village, sharing a language, with multiple generations living in one home. I share none of these things with them. Fundamental changes have happened where my family came from, and that place doesn't really exist anymore, except in the lives of my relatives. Their stories, like many Asian Americans are snapshots that go on living.

It's hard to quantify aspects of what Asian America is today, because the substance of our lives is up for presentation. My perspective is largely influenced by people curating a view into their lives over the internet. I enjoy the diversity and eccentricity in their stories, but there is this strange feedback loop where show-business is becoming part of our personal lives. The ubiquity of self-documentation is increasingly a part of our culture. This self-consciousness is a dramatic difference between my generation and my ancestors, whose individuality was in many ways invisible. I can feel in myself a narration about the meaning of events in my own life, in a descriptive language that is self referential and too personal to achieve communication. Thinking about words to describe what Asian America is brings to mind what Confucius wrote about the "rectification of names" ; that words must have a precise correspondence to reality. This concept is Utopian in its insistence that the reality of many can be given one name.

### **What is Asian American art? Does such a thing exist?**

Since being Asian American is a reality, any art produced through that experience could be filed under Asian American Art. For me, any pursuit in art starts from exploring some kind of internal truth. That truth could be simple, like an appreciation of nature or a concept of beauty. Or it could get into the interpretation of events and memories where truth is harder to define. But life is full of undeniable events to ponder over. I would extend my assertion that art and truth are in a close relationship, and therefore the categories all point to the same thing: Art in one way or another is a true expression of an individual's experiences. Those of us that make art could be categorized,

but labels are deficient. There is no taxonomy that could encompass even one Asian American story.

## Q & A

### **Does a racialization and racial formation of the US affect your work as an artist?**

The terms racialization and racial formation, bring to mind the bureaucratic use of racial labels. I think those of us who've been raised with these "people genres" and continue to contend with them, struggle against persistent simplifications and an overall lack of depth. I don't necessarily seek to convey political opinions in my work, I have sought to express something that is true to my own experience. I haven't picked up on any direct effects of current events so far, but I do wonder if this anti-Asian sentiment affects people's decisions and perceptions about purchasing and displaying artworks that present clear cultural aspects.

### **Are you responding or adapting to the political landscape, social landscape? Is this directly or subconsciously expressed in your art?**

To me, many political issues domestically and internationally are echoes of identity crisis. Domestically, there is extensive diversity even within ethnic groups, and the mainstream perception suffers from the lack of depth in categorization. Categorization itself has become the literal and figurative matter of black and white. In other countries national identities have a similar political and social affect. China for example, has the outward facing political identity of "Chinese" which does not encapsulate the actual diversity of what are in reality many different peoples classified as Han, whose dialects are mutually unintelligible, who've experienced specific regional histories, not to mention the diversity of the many other ethnic groups.

I focus on language because it is fundamental to peoples' lives and it can signify a locality, a perspective, it shapes outward views and incoming perceptions. Language systems have diverse approaches in constructing and applying meaning through metaphorical symbols. This act of abstraction is a principle apparatus shaping our perceptions, and potentially our conflicts. As the world has become more complicated, more interconnected, our stagnant definitions and identifications struggle against reality.

### **What in your work comes from your own culture? Heritage?**

I use a system of constructed characters which have been taken from written Chinese but deployed phonetically to represent the Dialect of Toisan, where my mother's family and many Overseas Chinese originate from. The written contents are idiomatic phrases, folk philosophy, and slang specific to Toisan and Cantonese culture. There is a long tradition of studying past masters' brush work, in order to gain a comprehension and appreciation of how technique has developed over time. However, my brush work really owes its development in honing graffiti lettering when I was younger. My interest in dialect, slang, and regional identity really started when observing the differences of how people speak just in Oakland.

### **Is your work immune to social political context like hate crimes or demonization of Asian Americans?**

I like to think my work is not about contemporary political and cultural conflicts in the US, however I've pursued themes partly because social political issues are pervasive. I'm mixed Italian

and Chinese, my appearance is ambiguous and depending on how I talk or dress, people will perceive me differently. I grew up in the Oakland hills, and simultaneously spent most of my time in East/West Oakland as a youth. I went to public Schools, and lived life in an interstitial space between worlds with very different daily experiences. As many people growing up in Oakland, we see and are desensitized to a violent environment with drastic inequity. Historical violence has become violence in the streets, and is essentially part of the culture of the city. I don't think anyone or anything here is immune to it.

### **Do you have thoughts on rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans?**

When I was very young, my cousins took care of me and my brother. They lived in East Oakland, and they were thoroughly more connected to traditions than me and my brother. They spoke Toisan and Cantonese every day, and their home was like a portal to a Lingnan village, complete with crops and livestock in the backyard. They experienced robberies, home invasions, and consequently were always on alert about their surroundings. I never heard them blame anyone or anything for their problems. I think their experience of growing up where they did, having relationships with people in their neighborhood, facilitated an understanding that didn't degenerate into fearful generalizations.

Back home in the Oakland Hills, my family would hear these stories and become filled with fear. To this day they harbor beliefs and stereotypes which they knowingly maintain, while having very little contact with other people outside their bubble. Meanwhile, the mostly white society my family was trying to integrate into, harbored deeply racist beliefs just below the surface. Many of them armed themselves, and the topic of crime was frequent, despite the reality that their environment was very peaceful. These bubbles prevent people from having the confrontations necessary for deconstructing inevitable ignorance.

The recent rise of hate crimes feeds fears and because of this, I reflect on how fear has manifested in our community. I think for myself and many other Asian Americans, we are pressured to approach our environment with humility and succeed in society as it is. But financial and social success have usually been synonymous with abandoning our points of entry. These are the communities like Chinatown where people are often targeted. The phenomenon of escaping into suburbs cuts us off from important community relationships. I understand peoples' desire to be safe, but there is a climate of violence inherent to this country because it has an violent unresolved history.

Lastly, I think the credibility and acceptance of institutional law and order is fundamentally undermined by the lack of historical accountability. I also think our international credibility suffers from the same hypocrisy.

### **As anti-Asian hate speech makes its way into media, what effect does this have on AAPI identity?**

It's a reminder that we will have to fight and that we need the support of people outside our community, and to support them. I think that shared struggle can contribute a new dimension to our identity and the perception of us. Maybe it is an opportunity for growth. However, I do think that great energy is wasted in contending with these constructed racial identities and it is

degrading to everyone's intelligence. I think a growing fear of China is probably the biggest factor in the media's contribution to this current climate. I feel that there is an ongoing battle against simplification, and our identities are caught in this struggle against stupidity. I am optimistic about the future though. I think there is a quiet majority of people around us who do possess respect for each others' humanity.

**Most importantly - all please answer how are artists (you personally) going to respond to these occurrences and communicate with viewers with optimism, or as a path forward with resilience and vision?**

I remember in my early years that social groups as children were unselfconsciously diverse. As the world's problems began to influence us, we started to splinter off into identifications and facades. Our walls became more convoluted as we tried to make and pay our way through society. Knowing people with very different perspectives was very challenging at times, misconceptions led to many miscommunications. But it was very important for understanding each other as real people, and putting into perspective the beliefs we had about each other that didn't actually come from our own lived experiences. We depend on so many abstractions in our lives just to get a cursory understanding of our environment. It is very easy to mistake our information as knowledge. I don't think there is any substitute for knowing through experience and I recognize that there is a great deal of discomfort in store for anyone looking to reach outside what they know. Forging relationships across cultures and backgrounds is the activity that nullifies hate, which thrives in a vacuum. Creating the opportunity for children to grow up in communities together is probably the ideal big-picture way to ensure a high level of cross cultural understanding, but forming these relationships at anytime has an impact.