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## MELISSA WANG BIO

Melissa Wang is a self-taught artist. She researched science-fiction literature as a PhD candidate at UC Davis, California, before segueing into tech. In late 2019, she began full-time art-making as a means of inspiring social and ecological liberation. Since then, she has exhibited nationally at the Stay Home Gallery, Kala Art Institute and the de Young Museum with a solo exhibition at Root Division (Frank-Ratchye space). Her work can be found in corporate collections, including Facebook in Menlo Park, CA. She is an artist resident at Root Division in San Francisco, CA.

## RUMINATIONS

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

The racist fallout from the coronavirus pandemic is a reminder that belonging for Asian-Americans in the US is conditional and contingent. Prior to that, the absence of any overt campaigning towards Asian-American voters during the primaries reflects where we stand in terms of political identity/clout. Either foreign or invisible, Asian-Americans inhabit liminality.

In this space, we continue to perform assimilation - model minority rites that do not disrupt or threaten whiteness - like our persistent absence en masse against police brutality, ICE deportation orders or the Muslim Ban. Furthermore, our complicity reinforces the myth of "bad minorities:" the contingency that in order to belong, others must have their powers stripped away.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's text, *The Word for World is Forest*, the "othering" of sentience (be it alien, animal or environmental) becomes justifications for violence and oppression. This, and other ecofeminist sci-fi texts, inspired my new art series. I consider the human response to fear, desire to belong (the premises of "othering") and ultimately, (im)permanence. How does fear enable a cycle of conditional / contingent belonging? What kinds of violence are enacted through othering? What kinds of lives matter? Who gets to exist?

### **What is Asian America art?**

Like other American "ethnic" arts - e.g., African-American, Chicano, Native-American - Asian-American art is inherently cultural production and/or social engagement. Forged from a term that only broadly categorizes the Asian-American experience, it aims to highlight or fill its gaps. One gap would be the intersectionality of race and gender. As an Asian-American woman, my lived experience is deeper than the mainstream visual representations of Asian-Am women as hypersexualized or infantilized objects of desire. The loss of maternal histories (my great-grandmother "disappeared" during the Communist takeover in China), the elision of the feminine experience in conversations about Asian-American identity, "Western" liberalism confronting Asian patriarchal values - these are real problems that persist to deny me a full life. So - when life fails the imagination, art leads the way.

In my works, I alternatively use water and paint to create layers; I scrape through these to allow warm and/or cool colors to permeate. Through these diffuse and spontaneous actions, I intend to generate organic patterns that resemble light on a forest floor or an atmospheric cloud, signaling cosmic life. The invitations for stillness and deep connection are windows to other wisdoms (e.g., natural, spiritual, Eastern), guiding us past manmade (e.g., Westernized, capitalistic) conditions of fear. In doing so, what new worlds could be made? As bright, vulnerable shapes balance, circulate and even collide, I imagine a universe in which nothing is untethered - and everything belongs.

### **Does such a thing exist?**

This is a trick question, yes? If it doesn't, it would be a glaring omission in the art world - one that we could dedicate our lives to changing.

## **Q&A**

### **Do you have thoughts on rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans? Do ideas about the model minority myth perpetuate and influence your life and/or artwork? As anti-Asian hate speech makes its way into media, what effect does this have on AAPI identity?**

I grew up in San Pedro, an industrial wasteland in Los Angeles. I went to a performing arts school where I was tokenized for my artistic talents and bullied by Black, Brown and yellow kids while white teachers turned a blind eye. Early on, I experienced how whiteness molded society by encouraging minorities to fight or compete against each other for scraps instead of forming alliances. This is how the model minority myth and scarcity mindset are simultaneously born.

Growing up during the Rodney King riots, I saw how mass media fueled narratives that erased histories of trauma while amplifying biases and stereotypes about Black and Korean communities. False narratives effectively tie our hands behind our backs by forcing us to excavate truths while dispelling misinformation. This psychological oppression is white supremacy on autopilot - a distraction from the economic and political disparities that persist in our highest institutions of power to detain and deny far-reaching changes for all (e.g., law and policy).

### **Has your identity as an artist shifted in any way during the pandemic? if so please explain.**

I recently co-curated a virtual exhibition called *Pandemic Journal* with Alicia McDaniel. In our artist talk, we discussed what hopes we had for the future. I noted that while it was inspiring to see Chloe Zhao win a Golden Globe, it was against the backdrop of a long-standing dissatisfaction in BIPOC communities about racial gatekeeping in art and cultural institutions.

To some extent, the pandemic showed us that societal conditions can change overnight. Instead of a relapse of "norms," are we bold enough to tell new stories, invent new worlds and imagine new systems of recognition and reward?

### **Do any of these prompts materialize in your work?**

Who I am, where I come from and what interests me - these intimacies are foundational to my work. They manifest as the material and philosophical concepts driving my processes and pursuit of social and ecological liberation. I chose genres of speculative feminism and abstraction because

they are replete with prescient responses to the man-made ills of our time. In doing so, I align myself with a lineage of critical thinkers that believe art is the vehicle for sparking renaissances or revolutions.

**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?**

*All About Love* by bell hooks is a primer that I wish I read earlier in life. It conceives of love as an ontological, activating and universal force that can counteract fear. The polarization in the US has dipped so far into estrangement that it seems irreparable: an existential crisis. Having lost a family member during the pandemic and knowing that the nation is in mourning for 500,000+ lives, the most apt and radical responses I can think of during this time might be love and compassion for our collective suffering.