

## Wing Luke Museum goes "Beyond Race".

Judith van Praag

In 2004, the Wing Luke Asian Museum takes the message of the Year of the Monkey to heart, innovative as always, WLAM leads with imagination. "Beyond Talk: Redrawing Race", is the first exhibition at the museum that involves a multiracial and multiethnic constituency outside of the Asian American communities.

Inspired by past programming and community collaboration work addressing racism, discrimination and stereotypes, staff members and community partners gathered in the summer of 2003 –during four three-hour long potluck dinners– to explore issues of race and race relations they would like to see addressed in the current exhibition.

"Unaccustomed to speak about personal matters –such as fear and shame related to race– with total strangers, made participants feel uncomfortable at times," said the steering committee's Cynthia del Rosario.

Addressing touchy issues is the business of artists. They bring to the surface what otherwise remains hidden. And such is clearly the case with "Beyond Talk".

Greeting cards by conceptual artist **damali ayo** are right in your face. Bold and beautiful, printed on shiny card stock, they are suitable to sell at drugstores –if it wasn't for their un-Hallmark quality– the brazen texts about race; instant excuses for those who hurt people of color with callous remarks.

"What text would you like to send to someone," **ayo** asks her audience. Visitors are invited to write their answer in a notebook beside her greeting card display.

Before she knew it, your reporter had scribbled her own apology in the book. Fear and shame made her blush. Did she misunderstand the objective? She grabbed the pencil again, to erase the written text. But then she decided to leave the words on the page. After all, the artist's aim was to create dialogue,

to get a reaction out of her audience. She succeeded.

In the autumn of 2003, following the potluck Race Talks, WLAM placed a call for multicultural artists whose work inspired personal, social and/or political action and social change. During the following winter, a jury panel selected 12 out of 62 artists and 20 artworks for the current exhibition.

With such diversity -in race, ethnic make-up and artistic sensibilities- visitors of different ethnic backgrounds are bound to relate to at least some of the exhibited works.

**Roberta May Wong's** hair braid -cut off bluntly with a Chinese cleaver- speaks of severance from the past (in order to fit in), but is at the same time a tribute to ancestors and cultural background. Her ribbons of photographic images, Asian faces, woven together into one generic blur; "Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Filipinos, they all look alike," shames the Westerner into research.

You don't have to be Afro-American to understand the gist of **Ronald Hall's** paintings. Hooded KKK members on horseback, wispy ghosts hovering over a scared boy, a man's wide open mouth -the silent scream- reminiscent of Edward Munch's famous painting, those images have become universal symbols of nightmarish quality.

A wall is covered with what resembles a collection of Delft Blue china. On closer examination the white plates show images of food; menus painted in blue. In **Julie Green's** "The Last Supper" prisoners are defined by their last wishes; comfort food, reminders of the life they left behind, mothers who fed them. For some just a bag of assorted Jolly Ranchers, for others a Mexican dish with all the fixings, or a jar of dill pickles. The artist opposes capital punishment. She invites the viewer to stand still and contemplate what it means to be on death row, to receive a last meal.

On a large canvas -you'll want to create some physical distance to get the full scope of **Lun-Yi Tsai's** work- an Afro-American man, lost in sorrow, stares into the distance.

"He's behind bars" a visitor to the exhibition tells her friend, then corrects herself, "No, he's on the subway." The statement on the wall explains that the character in the painting is staring at the empty space where the Twin Towers used to be. Man affected by Sept. 11.

As a hummingbird to fuchsias, the viewer is drawn in by colors of collages on ordinary serving trays. But the joyful colors and lively compositions, commentaries to serious situations -Grandma Moses with a bite- present Caucasian artist **Deborah F. Lawrence** as a witness and activist.

**Musi Sugimura** addresses the ironic controversial side of President Franklin D.Roosevelt with her collages titled, "Exactly Who is Yellow". Central in the same space stands a plexiglas trunk filled with floating, boxed images of ancestors. A memory vault of family pride, and yet, the curator's text also speaks of fear and shame.

"Who would you like to accompany you, what is it you want to carry with you, what would you rather hide?"

**Malpina Chan** seems to answer that question with her own collage, compact yet expandable, a family history folds and unfolds in pocket book form.

With his painterly "Open Sores" **James Leong** invites the audience to understand the tenderness of what he calls the "hyphenated" generation.

**Paul McCall** portrays his twin sisters, one light, one dark skinned in the womb of their black mother. One and the same source, yet each with totally different opportunities in life.

Photographer **Polly Purvis** caught a young Native American wearing a tee-shirt with the image of an old Chief, and **Wes Kim** will continue capturing museum visitors on the spot, in front of a film screen with her astonishing "Vision Test".

Over 120 volunteers from diverse backgrounds have come together to make "Beyond Talk" possible. And the multiracial, multiethnic artists draw a mixed crowd. To paraphrase Cassie Chin, WLAM's Project Director, "Through the production process

itself, the museum has already reached the project goals."

Until Dec 12 at WLAM. After that parts of the exhibition will travel to South Seattle Community College and Phinney Neighborhood Association Art Gallery.

The Wing Luke Asian Museum, 407 7th Ave. S., Seattle WA 98104.

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