Asian-American Art and Stereotypes

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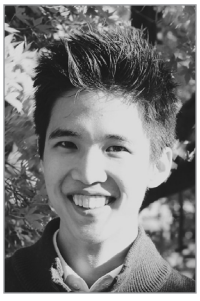
Stereotypes are everywhere for minority groups like Asian-Americans. They appear in many platforms, such as movies, literature, music and art, and it is certainly important to be aware of them. In my research, I take this idea a step further and argue that Asian-American artists are using similar platforms to challenge those stereotypes—a phenomenon that is arguably just as important to be aware of as the stereotypes themselves. I specifically look at two examples: artist Roger Shimomura and editor Keith Chow. My research was conducted during a fellowship at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, where I had access to an incredible amount of resources. Thus, my findings are based on a variety of sources, including multiple interviews, scholarly articles, books and videos on the subject matter. I look at a few of the ways that these Asian-American voices (Shimomura and Chow) are challenging stereotypes in different (yet complementary) ways while paving the way for a more accurate representation of Asian-Americans in media and art.

In 1978, Edward Said introduced the idea of Orientalism. The Arab American National Museum explains it as such: "'Orientalism' is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous" ("What is Orientalism?"). The concept of Orientalism also applies to the way East Asians and Asian-Americans are commonly portrayed as well.

In *Orientals*, Robert Lee expounds on several stereotypes of Asian-Americans and the effects they have had on Asian-American communities. He brings up a 1997 example, in which Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Hillary Clinton were portrayed in "yellowface" on the cover of the National Review. Lee writes, "Yellowface marks the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental; it sharply defines the Oriental in a racial opposition to whiteness." (Lee "Yellowface"). This trope of "racial opposition" to whiteness is visible throughout Asian-American history. Lee writes of six specific images which surround the Oriental: the pollutant (the alien presence which spreads through American society), the coolie (cheap foreign labor), the deviant (unassimilable opium den dweller and prosti-



This paper was part of a directed reading/research course with the English Department at UH Mānoa, which I took in conjunction with a fellowship at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. I have always enjoyed art, and through this project I was able to think more critically about the way that the arts and entertainment affect and shape our society. My next academic goal is to enter a graduate program to conduct further research on the impact of art on social change.

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tute), the yellow peril (the threat of coolies stealing jobs from working-class Americans), the model minority (as opposed to Blacks and Hispanics) and the gook (the generic Asian wartime threat), which "portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American family." He also notes that the "common understanding of the Oriental as racialized alien" originates in popular culture ("Yellowface"). While I could do an entire presentation on stereotypes alone, I would like to summarize this as succinctly as possible. The reason why these images are so harmful to society is not because they are merely racist; rather, even more so because they are racializing. In other words, these images are not merely offensive, but they are the catalyst for the creation of false ideas of foreignness and a perpetuation of narratives which stand in defiance to principles that America was founded on: the idea that all men are created equal, and that all deserve justice, freedom and the chance to pursue one's own happiness and livelihood.

If popular culture creates narratives and Orientalist images, then surely counter-narratives must also stem from popular culture. Enter Roger Shimomura. Shimomura was an artist born in 1939, a few years before the United States entered World War II. During that time, many Japanese-Americans—even those who were natural-born citizens of the US—were seen as potential enemies and were sent to internment camps as a result. Shimomura, a Seattle-born *Nisei* (second generation Japanese-American), was interned with his family as a young boy. Lee notes that there was a sense of trauma and subsequent silence about internment by many interned *Nisei* ("The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth"). Shimomura seems to be an exception to this rule. In *Minidoka on my Mind,* a series of paintings based on his grandmother's diaries and one of his most famous projects, Shimomura depicts life in the internment camps. In an interview with C-SPAN, Shimomura stated that he was too young to have any real memories of the camp—however, one may speculate how much of an impact the experiences have had on him, since the camp is a recurring theme in his art.

I first learned of Shimomura during my fellowship at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. I had the opportunity to speak with Margo Machida, a Professor of Art History and Asian-American studies at the University of Connecticut. Machida gave a presentation on Asian-American art at the National Portrait Gallery, and a curator at Smithsonian graciously connected us for the sake of my research. Machida showed me a collection of some of Shimomura's works after giving me some information about him. His paintings employ a classical Japanese style of art, *ukiyo-e,* as well as American pop art—he often uses both in the same piece in order to create a juxtaposition and sharp contrast. While Shimomura's utilization of *ukiyo-e* is intentional, he stated in a presentation at the Smithsonian that his collection of vintage American pop culture memorabilia has influenced his works, presumably unintentionally. *Ukiyo-e* is unfamiliar to most Americans, including Shimomura, but it's visibly recognizable as "Asian" to many. Probably the most famous example is the iconic "Wave off Kanagawa" painting. As I mentioned, having grown up in the United States, Shimomura was actually not familiar with this art form—Allison McCormick writes, "Shimomura utilized generic aspects of *ukiyo-e* in order to signify Japaneseness, while not demonstrating any in-depth knowledge of the art form. The adoption of generic imagery allowed him to achieve his goal of creating stylistic anonymity that invoked foreignness" (34). This generic foreignness is prevalent in the way Asian-Americans are often viewed by the dominant culture: the "all Asians look the same" trope, the commodification of pan-Asianism, the sexualization of Asian-American women as exotic and the way Asian-Americans are quickly relegated to foreign enemies during an American war or economic competition with their "home" country (even though they may have been born in the United States). With this style, Shimomura's pieces challenge the viewer to rethink what we view as normative and how Asian-Americans are depicted in relation to what is normative.

Shimomura also used this style to cause the American public to be open to his pieces that focused on the internment of Japanese-Americans. When he created many of his internment-based pieces in the 1970's, he was told that most Americans were not interested in the topic and it would therefore be difficult for the pieces to receive publicity if painted in a standard American style. Shimomura was conflicted as to whether or not he should employ a Japanese style of painting, as he did not want to perpetuate stereotypes. His wife was even strongly opposed to the idea. However, he liked the idea of someone unwittingly purchasing the art, then later learning of the backstory (Shimomura). In the end, the classical Japanese style became a highly effective way to get his work to the public while simultaneously subverting and challenging the stereotypical images that Americans hold of Asians. For example, he created a piece in this style which featured his grandmother, in the internment camp, wearing

a traditional *kimono*—playing on the absurdity of those stereotypical images. Through depictions such as these, Shimomura almost asks, "is this what you think we do? Is this what you think of us?" While a lot of Shimomura's work is still abstract, ambiguous, and perhaps not meant to be subversive in nature, Shimomura's most widely known pieces are generally the ones which play on ideas surrounding Orientalist representations.

Why is Shimomura's work important and significant for Asian-Americans? One significant way is that it provides counter-narratives by an Asian-American and challenges ideas of what an Asian-American is or should be. This is clear when Shimomura juxtaposes stereotypic American images of Asians with a painting of what an Asian-American actually looks like, as he did in his self-portrait *Different Citizens*. Here, he portrays a stereotypic caricature of a Japanese military man alongside a very realistic depiction of himself, showing how degrading and unrealistic stereotypic images of Asians are—images which many of us have accepted or gotten used to after being surrounded by them for so long. Shimomura also juxtaposes stereotypical images of Asians with images representing how white Americans are typically portrayed. This causes one to think about the ways that people of different ethnicities are portrayed unequally in the media and in art. Finally, as an Asian-American artist whose family was interned, he is able to pull off pieces that very few others could—thereby giving a voice and raising awareness of a situation which is still relatively unknown to or ignored by many Americans.

Shimomura has certainly shaken up the art scene, creating iconic pieces featured in museums and galleries across the nation, including the Smithsonian. However, Kazuko Nakane addresses the problems surrounding not necessarily his works, but the way that American society is not properly receptive to Asian-American culture, especially Japanese-American culture. She refers to one of Shimomura's painting which depicts his grandmother in a kimono next to a large silhouette of Superman behind her s*hoji* screen. The painting is based on a journal entry from his grandmother, which records that the US government "graciously" allowed her to withdraw $100 of her own money before internment. Nakane writes that the painting is essentially satirizing the supposed "benevolence" of the United States—however, "unless the history of Japanese-Americans becomes common knowledge…such ironies…will remain a mysterious, unexplained, 'in' joke" (Lippard et al. 25). Furthermore, she bemoans, "in the media world, there is no established positive marker for Japanese-American identity," and thus Shimomura remains a "mystery," unless as a culture America becomes more appreciative and accepting of difference (Lippard et al. 25). Nakane brings up an important point: while Shimomura's art is often lauded by Asian-Americans who are familiar with and appreciative of their cultural heritage, and who also feel the weight of prejudice and a long history of oppression, their narrative is simply not being told by popular media. The same appreciation of Shimomura and other Asian-American artists will not be shared by the general public, unless Asian-Americans are represented in cultural narratives, especially in media and entertainment.

The problem of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Asian-Americans in entertainment and pop culture is as prevalent as ever. Whitewashing of Asian roles and a lack of movies, books and TV shows being created about Asians is an issue which most Asian-Americans are all too aware of. When they are represented, it is often a misrepresentation, or a shallow stereotypic representation, such as in the movie *The Wolverine*, in which Asian actresses are relegated to the usual sexualized sword-swingers or docile damsel in distress. Thus, many individuals, who are never shown an accurate or positive representation of Asian America, will never be able to fully appreciate Shimomura's work. In short, there is still much work that must be done.

Thankfully, there is no shortage of creatives who are willing to take on the challenge of creating media and art that ultimately topples the Orientalist images which many of us have grown accustomed to. Much of this happens with mediums that are more accessible than Shimomura's art. One such example is SI Universe, a group of Asian-American comic book editors and artists who seek to create narratives that are more nuanced than the stereotypical Asian ones. They have published two comic anthologies, *Secret Identities* and *Shattered*. At CTRL+ALT, an art exhibition hosted by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, I had the pleasure of speaking to Keith Chow, one of the editors of SI Universe. When I took a class on Asian American graphic novels, *Shattered* was actually a required text—it is a comics anthology, divided into sections. Each section is comprised of several comics which address a common trope surrounding Asian-Americans (i.e., the brain, the villain, the alien).

Similarly to Shimomura's works, an iconic American art form is used, as the illustrations and dialogue are akin to American comics published by D.C. and Marvel. However, when I took the class, I was initially confused,

as most of the comics in the book did not necessarily break the stereotypes or seem to challenge them by satirizing them as Shimomura often does. Many of them are merely normal stories with an Asian-American playing the lead role. For example, in the section on the "brain" stereotype, a young girl who enjoys crossword puzzles deals with the loss of her brother (Yang 93–96).

My initial confusion regarding these comics cleared up as I spoke to Chow. He believes that there is nothing wrong with having types in fiction—there is usually not enough time to form a complex backstory for every character—however, it becomes problematic when these types surrounding an ethnicity are limited in quantity or in depth. For example, if an Asian actress appears in a Hollywood film, she is either a docile housewife, an evil villain, or a sexualized character. There are limited ways in which her character could be depicted. Asians in pop culture are also limited in depth—Chow lamented the fact that Asians often portray one-dimensional characters. An Asian is often portrayed as simply the brainiac, the villain, or the docile soft-spoken one with little to no other characteristics.

Chow noted that he would not have a problem with a Fu Manchu movie—if he was depicted as a real person with a complex backstory and nuances within his character. He told me that he created a character who is an Asian-American Kung Fu superhero. He noted that he receives criticism for it, because such a character may seem stereotypical; however, his reasoning is that he has never seen a character of that sort who was interesting, and wanted to represent the type well. He discourages "running away" from stereotypes because of what they look like on the surface—rather, he dives deeper into the type, often creating a complex and interesting character with the type as a starting point.

Roger Shimomura and Keith Chow are Asian-Americans who use art to tackle Orientalist images which are so engrained in our culture. Their methods are complementary—not entirely the same, but not entirely different either. Both often employ an iconic American 20th century style of art—for Shimomura it is pop art, and for Chow it is the graphic novel. Roger Shimomura shows how flawed and misleading Orientalist ideas and images are—he also forces us to rethink how we consume media and allow it to influence our perceptions. Keith Chow and SIUniverse often do this as well, but they focus on creating nuanced Asian-American characters which offer a more interesting and accurate alternative to the dominant narratives.

SI Universe helps address the issue which Nakane brought up (that is, the lack of representation of Asian-Americans in popular media and therefore lack of full appreciation for Shimomura's art). While Shimomura creates art pieces for museums, SI Universe creates mainstream comic books for young adults, college students, high school (and middle-aged) comic geeks and an average person browsing a book store or library. In short, SI Universe creates work that is more accessible and mainstream than Shimomura's—perhaps one day soon, we will be able to see Asian-Americans in film, television and music doing the same, creating a mainstream narrative that fosters appreciation for Asian-American culture and art. Ultimately, this presentation was not about a couple of artists, but a zoomed-in look at a growing movement of marginalized minority artists and creatives who are seeking for social change.

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