

“Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century”
Wing Luke Museum of the Pacific American Experience
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We can't just look at the exhibition “Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century;” we also have to understand that the brave stories and images offered in the exhibition are inside all of us. We are all affected by racism, no matter who we are. If we have an appearance that is privileged in our society, we are affected unconsciously. We are affected by our thinking about “the other” as a dehumanized person. That other can be old, young, poor, homeless, differently sexual, differently colored, differently raced, differently abled, differently clothed, pierced, tattooed, tall, short, fat, thin, so many possibilities for prejudice. This exhibition mainly emphasizes race and racialized experiences, but its main purpose is to open our minds and hearts and to create a conversation.



Fumi Matsumoto
“Ibara no Michi (Pathway of Thorns)” 2012
Wild rose branches, grass, teabags, coffee filters
12” x 12” x 12”

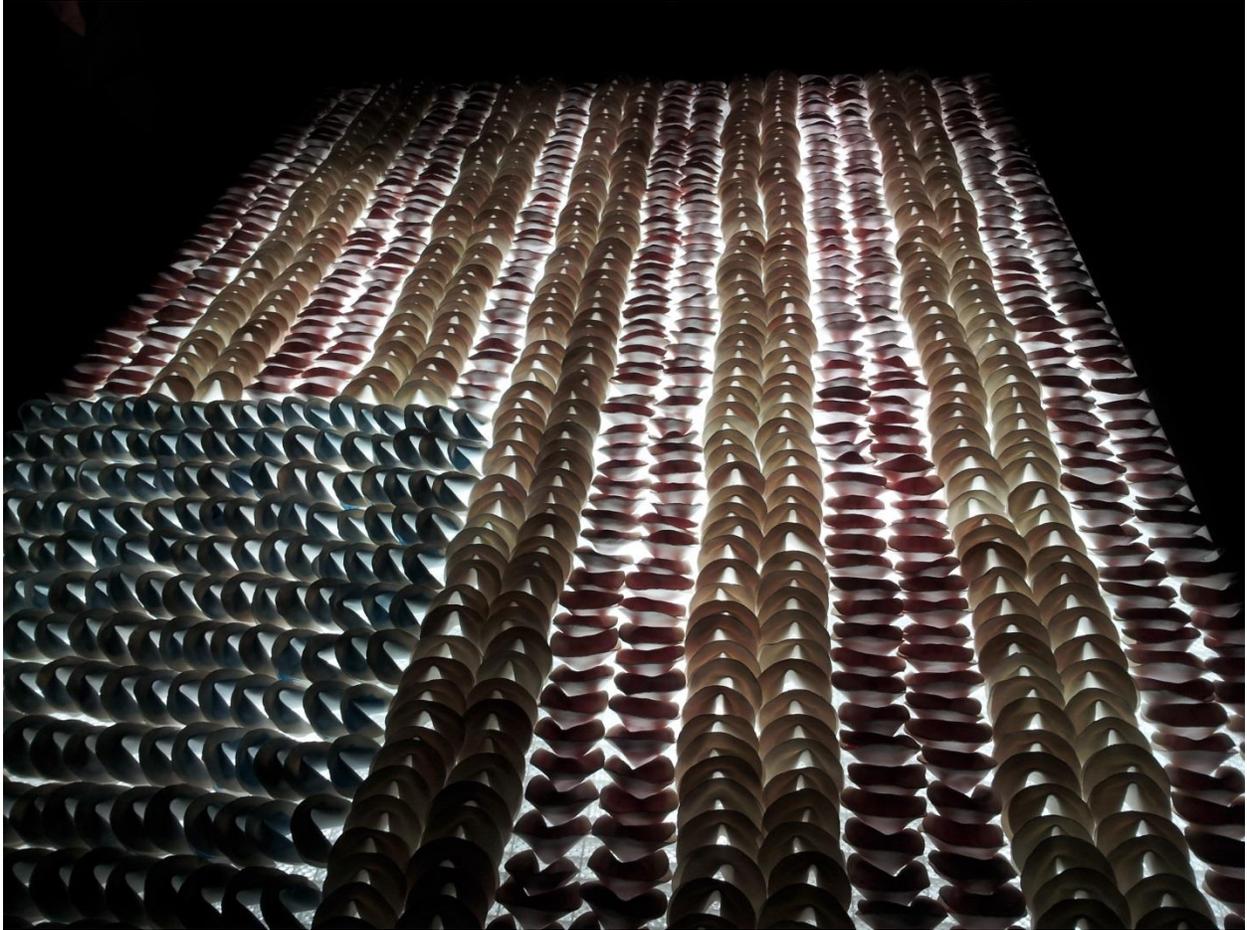
Some of the artworks are on familiar subjects, like Minidoka, one of the Japanese internment camps of World War II, or violence both random and targeted. But every work is original and provocative. So, for example, Fumi Matsumoto from Juneau, Alaska presented Minidoka in terms of thorny rose branches woven together with paper cranes made from recycled teabags flying off. This simple idea affects us immediately because of its tactility, the rose is so delicate and so painful, dangerous to hold, hard to weave. She must have torn her skin to create this work, just like internment tore the lives of the people who were taken from their homes. But the birds suggest the spirit of the people who were in the camps, and their will to be free in their spirits.



Jasmine Iona Brown
 (all pieces: egg tempera and gold leaf on wood)
 "Tanaja Stokes Icon," 2011
 "Till & the Tallahatchi," 2012
 "Land of 1000 Hills & 800,000 Gone," 2012
 "Trayvon Martin Icon," 2012
 "A Girl from Homs," 2012

At the entrance to the exhibition Jasmine Iona Brown presents an altar to those killed by urban violence, in genocide, or hate crimes. Trayvon Martin occupies a central position. Jasmine Brown bravely told us at the opening of the exhibition that two of her foster sons were killed as teenagers by random violence. "I want my art to cry out," she says. "I wanted to give a voice to those who maybe don't have someone to speak up for them. I see the news about a shooting. I think, 'What about all the kids who are shot down every year? Where's the news coverage and the public outcry for them?'"

Targeted violence is the subject of Tatiana Garmendia's work, about which I wrote here earlier this year. One of her large figures made of burned paper cut with the words of victims of violence was paired with three paintings from her *Lamentation* project in which a woman covered in black holds the body of an American soldier in a pose resembling a Christian Pieta. A sound track gives us the words of women who have been victims of violence, as well as those who have resisted. The artist explains "Perhaps because I am a child of revolution and political asylum, my work is driven by existential questions that probe ideas and values, history and culture. These questions are expressed by the human figure as it twists and turns into suffering and into sublimation."



Ling Chun
American Born Chinese, 2013
Ceramic, light installation
6' x 4' x 1.5'

Several of the works approached the theme of racism with iconic signifiers, hair in the work of Akiko Jackson, who creates a striking installation with an 800 foot winding braid of synthetic hair. She herself has very long hair, but as she assimilated she began to cut it shorter: "Long hair is part of your soul. Part of who you are." Another signifier is the fortune cookie. An artist born in China, Ling Chun, made a large flag from ceramic fortune cookies. When she came from China, she discovered that this was an identity for Chinese people here; of course the fortune cookie actually comes from 1950s San Francisco. It has nothing to do with China. "It's a false icon," she says.

Cross cultural adoption was the subject of Darius Morrison's work. Invoking the memory of an adoption as a baby, the work focuses on the first flight across the ocean from Korea, rather than anything that happened later. "I'm hoping to speak for a lot of other adoptees who might feel the same way. How disjointed it can be to be an orphan of the world, to be searching for one family, clan, tribe or however you call it. It's not so simple for us."

Becoming white is the subject of two works. Erin Genia's ceramic clock has times marked by a small masks that becomes lighter and lighter. As she explains "My status as a tribal member, my political status is determined by blood quantum, which leads to a kind of internalized oppression of Native people: You're a member of this tribe but you're only this amount of Indian." Laura Kina's series of large oil paintings mark five generations from her great grandmother "picture bride" to her daughter, by now a mixed race child including Spanish Basque and Askenazi Jewish, a blue eyed white child.



Naime Lowe
"39 Questions for White People" 2013,
letterpress on index cards

Naima Lowe turned the tables with her series of "Questions for white people" probing and personal as well as innane and awkward, these questions suggest the dumb questions both asked and implied that people of color have to deal with all the time. "My own experience is that there's this kind of pressure on 'racially-marked' subjects to be the ones to talk about race. . . . What does it mean to have a large segment of the population that we identify as a racial category – it's on the damn Census! – but we don't have to talk about it?"

Mary Coss's graceful wire sculptures of six East African girls who wear hijab offers a refreshing insight into a culture that is obscured for most non muslims. "The girls were so visible wearing their hijabs," she says. "They tended to be very quiet in a large classroom. But when I got them alone, they had these large personalities. I thought, 'I want to create an opportunity for the girls to have a place to get together and talk and give them a voice and put up their artwork.'" Coss organized a conversation with these girls in Columbia City, not long ago, and that conversation is playing in the gallery. They also wrote poetry and created art work.

There are many photographs, both color and black and white that speak for themselves. Perhaps the most subtle and beautiful are by Canh Nguyen, in which he photographed his father with a view camera. His father had come to this country as a refugee from Vietnam. "There's a distance between me and him. Him being from Vietnam. Me being born here," he explains. One photograph shows his father holding the only picture of himself as a child that survived the trip. These photographs were a way for Canh to get to know his father, who had raised him and his brothers as a single parent.

The crazy thing is that skin color is absolutely irrelevant, as Gail Tremblay, one of the juror's for this dazzling exhibition pointed out. "Race is a social construction. We are all alike. But it affects people's lives in terrifying ways."

I filled in the passport offered by Carina del Rosario on a computer in the exhibition. Skin color? Pink with brown spots. I realized right there what a great idea this piece was for everyone. White skin is usually the great generality of privilege, generically referenced, unlike brown or black in which nuances are carefully identified, chocolate, caramel, honey, etc. I saw all the spots and blotches on my face in the camera and thought, hey, what's white. But of course, white still is privilege, still is the accepted, easy, relaxed, unquestioned place to be.

At the end of the show there is a place to sit and talk about racism with some guidelines. Ideally we should go to the show with a friend who is different from ourselves and have a conversation on these comfortable sofas. That would be a real breakthrough.



Ronald Hall
Seeking Mulberry, 2007
Oil and collage on canvas
30" x 42"