CNN style

Chelsea Ryoko Wong: "Tired of being 'fetishized and invisible,' Asian artist are changing the narrative"

By Ann Binlot

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Credit: Courtesy of Chelsea Ryoko Wong, Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jeffery Deitch, New York

In much of Western art, Asian women have often appeared as one-dimensional characters -- sometimes seen as meek and docile, and at other times hypersexualized and exoticized. But such portrayals fail to show individuals coming from a myriad of cultural backgrounds, their identities rooted in distinctly different countries and histories.

"Wonder Women," a new exhibition at the Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New York, seeks to counter stereotypical representations made by outsiders, presenting works by Asian American and diasporic women and non-binary artists "portraying themselves or their family members as heroes in their own ways," explained show curator Kathy Huang.

"I had always grappled with ideas of being both fetishized and invisible in pop culture and visual culture," said Huang, adding that she drew inspiration from the 1981 poem "Wonder Woman" by Genny Lim.

"In the poem, the narrator is observing the different lives of Asian women," she explained. "That's something that I had wondered myself ... because I have my individual experience as a Chinese American woman, but there were so many other experiences that I don't know about."
More than two dozen works presented tackle themes of identity, with women in many of them depicted as strong and powerful, but also at times introspective and fragile. Some are confronting -- as is the case with Jiab Prachakul's "Purpose," a self-portrait that sees the artist cast an unfaltering gaze at the viewer, while others emphasize community, like Melissa Joseph's "Smells like Pre-Teen Spirit," which shows a diverse group of teenage girls.

"Purpose" (2022) by Jiab Prachakul. Jiab Prachakul depicts herself in a mirrored self-portrait, comparing how she sees herself to the way others do. Credit: Genevieve Hnason/Courtesy of Jiab Prachakul and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

The exhibition, which opened during Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage month, also features works that play on history.

In Chelsea Ryoko Wong's "Celestial Women Swim in Gold," a small group of Asian women are found leisurely bathing in turquoise waters. Its title is a reclamation of the word "celestial," a derogatory term used by White people to describe Chinese immigrants around the time of the California Gold Rush because they were thought of as bizarre and otherworldly. "They are reclaiming what it means to be 'celestial,' celebrating this commonality of sisterhood and culture, together," said Wong.

Artist Tammy Nguyen, meanwhile, depicts two famous Vietnamese warriors known as the Trưng sisters, in her watercolor "Anno Domini 40, 1945, 1969." The sisters, who drove out Chinese Han Dynasty overlords from Vietnam in 40 AD, are seen flanked by famous images from two historical events in American history -- the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945 and Buzz Aldrin on the moon in 1969. In doing so, Nguyen brings the history of the sisters -- who are celebrated in Vietnam, but relatively unknown outside of the country -- to light.

"Anno Domini 40, 1945, 1969" (2022) by Tammy Nguyen. Credit: Genevieve Hanson/Courtesy of Tammy Nguyen and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

Nguyen thinks that things are a lot different from when she grew up in 1990s America, where one of the few Asian characters on screen was the Yellow Ranger Trini Kwan in "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers." While she looked forward to watching the show every day after school, she remembered feeling disappointed that the Yellow Ranger was "flat," in comparison to other characters' storylines.

"It wasn't so much that I needed the Yellow Ranger to fall in love, but it was like I wanted to know more about her and never did."

Representation on screen has vastly improved in the US, especially in recent years -- with strong Asian characters at the center of movies like the ground-breaking "Crazy Rich Asians" and recent

"Everything Everywhere All at Once," to comedians like Ali Wong and Mindy Kaling openly discussing their experiences as Asian women.
"We're in a really exciting time right now where there's a lot to see that's easily accessible and so slowly, hopefully, this variety of cultural pieces will start to enter the public consciousness so that the embrace of the large Asian agglomeration in America can be more intrinsic to everyone's daily lens," said the artist.

Installation view of "Wonder Women." Credit: Genevieve Hanson, Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

It's a hope shared by Huang, the curator, who said violence towards Asian women -- in particular during the pandemic -- may partly stem from being "overly fetishized and sexualized or being seen as almost robotic figures" in traditional pop culture. Exhibitions like "Wonder Women" can help bring further depth to how Asian women are seen.

"Transmigration: Water Watchers" (2022) by Nadia Waheed. Credit: Genevieve Hanson/Courtesy of Nadia Waheed and Jeffrey Deitch, New York

Nadia Waheed, whose work "Transmigration: Water Watchers" is included, said that, while her "brownness is an integral part of who I am as a human being," she is "not only 'a South Asian Woman.'"

"I am a human being with passions, fears, hopes, dreams, anxieties, all of which exist so beyond my racial identity. I make my work from the deepest part of my soul," she shared.

"What I want to convey is that we are allowed to exist in whatever shades of gray, nuance, and complexity that we want to exist in, we do not have to exist as we are told to be, to be legitimate or valid."

"Wonder Women" runs until June 25. Top image caption: "Celestial Women Swim in Gold" by Chelsea Ryoko Wong.

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