Asian Diaspora Art

Mary Kate Zimmerman

Professor Steen

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The term diaspora was originally used in the early third century to describe the expulsion of the Jewish population from their homeland following the fall of Jerusalem. Today, the term diaspora has been expanded to include cultural groups, individuals and even art objects. This expansion is due in part to factors of global capitalism, mass media, and scholarly studies of diasporic communities. The framework of diaspora research studies tends to focus on three basic features; (1) continued connection to a country of origin, (2) a strong group consciousness sustained over time, and (3) a sense of kinship with diaspora members in other countries. While these factors are important in understanding the experiences of diasporic individuals, they also do not address the complete story. This paper will illustrate the need for an additional methodology of diasporic study, the inclusion of art produced by diasporic individuals. This study of art can help us understand diasporic people in several ways; (1) Art is a form of expression conveying complex ideas and feelings that may be difficult to express into words, and thus giving insight into their experiences and perspectives. (2) Art is a reflection of cultural hybridity for diasporic communities living at the intersection of different cultures. Here we stand to gain a better understanding of how cultures intersect and influence one another. Finally, (3) Art is a tool for remembrance in communities that have strong connections to their country of origin, allowing us to gain insight into ways in which diasporic people maintain connections to their homelands. Studying arts in this form can provide a unique and valuable perspective on the experiences of diasporic communities, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, perspectives, and cultural identities.

For the purpose of art examination based on diasporic experiences, whether it is historical or contemporary, our current context of the terms *individual* and *home* require a

redefinition. In Tobias Wofford's "Whose Diaspora" the author argues that special attention should be given to the experiences of individual diasporic subjects in order to fully understand the diverse narratives presented in art and culture. Because people experiencing diaspora often struggle to uphold cultural affinities with a homeland, assimilation into their new dispersed contexts usually ends up highlighting their own differences through various acts of remembrance. Art is often the stage for their cultural remembrances and thus theories of diaspora could be further explained and historically reassessed to include this artistic framework. As of now the current methodology suggests the lasting effects of diaspora are attributed to some kind of cultural amnesia in order to assimilate fully. Rather this new methodology will offer an exploration of "how art can shed light on notions of origins, narratives of dispersal, and cultural difference under the conditions of globalization."[75]

To redefine the *individuals* experiencing diaspora, Wofford provides four guidelines to follow. (1) The study of *individuals* in communities of diaspora are constantly changing into new contexts with and by the experience of dispersal. Simultaneously, "diaspora cultures produce their difference with other populations in their dispersed contexts, a difference that is often expressed through an orientation toward origins and that always result in new hybrid subjectivities." (2) The study of diaspora is inherently historical, emphasizing the narratives of homeland nations and dispersal. Diaspora culture represents the lasting effects of globalization and the production of individual differences, and therefore should not only focus on hybrid subjectivities but also explore how these subjectivities came into being. For example, Allen Sekula's photographic series, *Polonia and Other Fables,* documents the Polish diaspora in the United States, revealing the ways in which their Polish identity is created and maintained

through family gatherings, religious communities, and cultural events, despite being a part of the same mundane global system as most Americans find themselves in. In this way, Sekula's work provides a better understanding of globalization processes through subjects in dispersed communities like Chinatown, Little Ethiopias, and Little Italys all over the world. (3) This form of study also provides an avenue to explain how some artists express resistance to universalism that are frequently associated with concepts of transnationalism, nomadism, and/or cosmopolitanism due to the nature of their work often challenging national borders. Meaning artists often employ the universal language of concept while maintaining significant cultural signifiers linking works to their homeland roots. As these works travel globally, they acquire new meaning and context grounded in differences that represent the diaspora. For example, a works global communication of concepts will vary in western interpretations versus eastern interpretations. (4.) Finally, valuable insight is not only given into the diasporic community of topic, but also to the "host" community. "Through the lens of difference, the study of diaspora offers the possibility of reassessing dominant cultural modes in new ways. As described, diaspora embodies a sidelong glance with which to reassess Western visuality."[78] The above points highlight the constraints of the current methodology of diasporic study and how with the inclusion of the *individual* in art analysis of diaspora cultures, allows for avenues of thought-provoking exploration in diversity-oriented works.

Along with the established *individual* analysis in this art focused model of diaspora study, we also need to re-examine and re-define the concept of *home*. Author Benzi Zhang explores the theme of re-homing by pulling from her own experiences with diaspora and through examination of poetry from fellow Asian diasporans in Canada. When addressing the

notion of modern diaspora, she explains the disruption of the closure of home when leaving creates a “translocal community” where location is no longer relevant as a dimension of self. It’s important to note that our sense of home is intimately tied to our sense of identity and belonging. Experiences within our homes and/or communities shape our understanding of where we belong, where we come from, and who we are. Home can also represent a cultural space where we feel comfortable and accepted, allowing us to express our true selves. For many people, the idea of home goes beyond a physical location and encompasses our personal sense of connection to cultural heritage, language, and shared traditions. Zhang explains this trans-nationality and global culture are results of the merging intersection different cultures of people that are no longer defined by the traditional sense of home. Home to these people has become separate from their particular worldly living space, meaning the place that people find themselves most comfortable and safe is no longer available for them. As a result, “the emotional, cultural and psychological identification is often related to the difference, distance, and dislocation created by the substitution of so-called home.”[104] For diasporic subjects to redefine their safe place home they must redefine their own identity, the very framework of who they are while facing new political, economic, and cultural environments. Zhang highlights when readers of diasporic poetry or viewers of diasporic arts exchange the sense of “home” within the defined meaning outlined above, the work means something entirely different and expresses a clearer understanding of the diasporic subjects. The author challenges viewers to reconfigure how diasporic art and poetry are viewed in the sense of home-haunting and home-hunting. By changing the context of home, we see how diaspora is more than an out of country displacement (as current methodology suggests), it is also a mix of out of language, out of

culture, and out of oneself experience. Diasporic art proves to be a powerful expression of a sense of self, a sort of splitting of previous oneself (while knowing you are fundamentally different from those around you) and a reattaching of self-contradictions. Therefore, the concept of home in diaspora art should not be overlooked as this theme can play a significant role in defining one's sense of self, and their place in the world.

We can see the practical application of the re-defined diaspora terms, *individual* and *home*, in artist Susan Chen's, *Block Watch.* This Hong Kong born and raised painter based in New York, NY explores portraiture highlighting her own struggles with adaption into American society. Compounded by the lack of representation of her culture in Western art institutions, Chen's work expresses her yearning to feel a sense of belonging and the need to empower others to have a greater sense of worth. Through her art Chen investigates her sitter's sense of home, race, community, immigration, prejudice, and family. Her curiosity of how art is surveyed by communities and through political potential aimed at enacting social change for people experiencing diaspora has led her to seek out strangers for her four-hour paint sessions to explore their story while she creates works addressing her own explorations of identity. Her brightly colored works of marginalized communities have led to increased awareness and notoriety, such as Forbes 30 under 30, and Social Justice and Activism awards.

Through works like Chinatown Block Watch, Chen portrays the necessity of neighborhood patrols starting in February of 2020 by resident Karlin Chan. Chan explains when news coming out of Wuhan China of the global spread of the Corona Virus, many residents in Chinatown were becoming victims of xenophobic attacks, he took to patrolling the street in the once a bustling tourist destination. Because these attacks were often going unreported due to

the complicated relationships between the people of China Town and the police, mostly steaming from miscommunications from language barriers, Chan gathered a group of volunteers to patrol three times a week to help his neighbors deescalate and report xenophobic attacks. The men always wore safety vest or brightly colored polos to show both the neighbors and the attackers that they were there to steam any issues. Here we can see a patrol unit on the streets of Chinatown, many of the business and street signs have oriental names attached to them, and they show themes of Asian culture, such as tea parlors, herb and pacific fruit stands. Though Chen's works are always brightly colored, the men in yellow and orange are easily identifiable as the Block Watch unit, though there also seems to be a man in the background in what looks like a bulletproof vest. This could be a representation of the escalating attacks people of Asian descent were experiencing from President Trump's remarks on China producing the Corona Virus, resulting in many ethnic people being outright attacked for fears of furthering the spread. It should also be noted that no people featured are pale skinned, allowing for Chen's expression of lack of visibility in western arts to show people of her culture. In relation to our new definition of home, we can see both a past and present aspect represented here. To the older generation they have created a micro version of their home country China, a part of the act of remembrance. To younger generations, such as Chen, this neighborhood is all they have of their country of origin. Their sense of self is tied to Chinatown, in both sharing similarities to the surrounding people, and highlighting the differences of those surrounding them. When thinking on the individuals of this work, by Chen's own expression she has established a kind of invisibility to the western world she lives in. However, with the spread of the Corona Virus, her town is finally visible...but only in the spectrum of hate. This hate is

pushing on each person living in this neighborhood, and thus becoming part of their sense of self. Each person is a hybrid of their cultural past and yet must carry the weight placed upon them by their host nation, resulting in a splitting of previous oneself, and reattachment of self-contradiction. So too is the entire neighborhood alone in their host country, so much so that they must police themselves for protection. Yet another form of invisibility experienced here.

Another artist who shares in this theme of invisibility experienced by the Asian diasporic communities is Dominique Fung, a second generation Chinese Canadian with Cantonese roots. Her paintings and installations are often full of allegories of her view of ancestral memory, artifacts, and histories. She often describes her work as revisiting a theme of telling a story, with no one listening. Her works often explore themes of Asiatic femininity, and Chinese cultural objects with a Western force of view. Fung's work is inspired by what theorist Anne Anlin Cheng has coined as "the figuration of the yellow woman" in her book titled *Ornamentalism.* Fung references *Ornamentalism* while creating her works to express what Cheng describes as a "ornamentalist" paradigm in which certain races are valued primarily for their ability to decorate or enhance the world of the dominant culture. Cheng looks at various examples of ornamentalism throughout history, including the use of "Oriental" motifs in Victorian decor, the fetishization of "exotic" women in early Hollywood films, and the appropriation of African art by Western artists. She argues that these forms of ornamentalism are not simply superficial or decorative, but have real consequences for how we understand race, power, and identity. Like Cheng's research, Fung's work addresses the crisis of a person experiencing diaspora. In fact, many of the cultural subject artifacts in her surrealism like paintings are found in auction house catalogs and museum collections, which only highlights

the further fragmenting she feels from her culture. In her installation titled, *It's Not Polite to Stare*, Fung makes a powerful statement of the cultural identity of her oriental heritage. This installation is packed with powerful allegories and gives off a sensation of being studied closely. The room is decorated in "things" that are classically oriental to the westerner's eye. Cranes fill the wallpaper around the room accompanied by tea pots and leafy vegetation drawn in an 18th century Nanga style. Suspended along the room are artesian crafted birdcages with ceramic teapots in varying ornamental styles. One could walk through this room and enjoy the fine details of the craftsmanship and leave satisfied. But when our diasporic terms are applied, this room has a very different interpretation. From one perspective this installation shows a truth about the "host" nation and how it views diaspora peoples of Asian descent. Western eyes just see the common symbols they have learnt from Hollywood. Perhaps they pass over the cranes that symbolize longevity and wisdom. Do they just see teapots and miss the symbolism of friendship? What does it say of the teapots in cages? Fung has spoken of how items and people are viewed "can physically and emotionally alter the subject being perceived." To her, she may feel that she must lock up her long-standing Asian heritage to reach her cultural hybridity of her western life. This installation could almost be a warning to other diaspora transplants, prepare yourselves to be romanticized and dehumanized.

The purposed new methodology of diasporic study highlighting the analysis of the individual and their association of translocal communities of re-homing explores these diversity-oriented works of art in a new meaning. This framework of study is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and the cultural identities of diasporic communities that is lacking in the current narrative of diasporic study. The complex

narratives presented in arts such as Chinatown Block Watch, and It's Not Polite to Stare are just a small sampling of larger mediums waiting to re-assessed to acquire new meaning and context grounded in our differences.

Chen, Susan, *Chinatown Block Watch*, Oil on canvas, 74" x 84", 2022

Dominique Fung, *It's Not Polite to Stare,* Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2021. Photo by Cooper Dodds and Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, New York.

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