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6 AAPI Artists Reflect on the Spike in Anti-Asian Violence

Artsy Editorial

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Andrew Kung, *Wish I Had A Hero Who Looks Like Me*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

On March 16th, Robert Aaron Long targeted three massage parlors in the Atlanta, Georgia, area citing a need to eliminate the temptations they provoked. Eight people were shot to death, including six Asian women; their names were Daoyou Feng, Delaina Ashley Yaun Gonzalez, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Paul Andre Michels, Soon Chung Park, Xiaojie Tan, and Yong Ae Yue. While Long has insisted to police that the incident was not a hate

crime, according to the *Chosun Ilbo*, a major Korean language newspaper, one witness recounted Long shouting, “I am going to kill all Asians” before firing in one location.

For many within the AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) community, the recent spike in racially motivated attacks against Asians in the United States has been alarming and disturbing, but comes as little surprise. U.S. history demonstrates that time and time again, Asians have consistently been used as scapegoats, from the whitewashing of railroad construction to Japanese internment to the murder of Vincent Chin to the “China virus”—all the while being labeled the “model minority.” AAPI artists have long been at the forefront of highlighting and unpacking this often invisibilized reality. We spoke to six artists from across the country who have been working both in and out of the studio to dismantle these types of prejudices to hear how they have been processing this moment in history.

Valery Jung Estabrook

Albuquerque, New Mexico



Valery Jung Estabrook, *Hometown Hero (Ch*nk)*, 2015–17. Photographed by Samuel Morgan Photography. Courtesy of the artist.

One of my most widely shown pieces is a work entitled *Hometown Hero (Ch*nk)* (2015–17), which is a full-room installation about my growing up in a small Virginia town infamous for its Confederate history. I started making the work in 2015, when Confederate symbolism was being talked about on a national level. During that time, there wasn't really any conversation about how white supremacy affects the Asian American and immigrant experience. As someone who identifies as both a Korean American and a Virginian, I felt I needed to create something that reflected my reality.

The finished piece ultimately explores the deep pain of cultural erasure and internalized hatred that I learned from being raised within a white community. That's a feeling I think many Asian Americans can relate to: the feeling of not really belonging anywhere, of being seen as perpetual foreigners despite only knowing this country, the United States, as their home.



Valery Jung Estabrook, *Hometown Hero (Ch*nk)*, 2015–17. Courtesy of the artist.



Valery Jung Estabrook, *Hometown Hero (Ch*nk)*, 2015–17. Courtesy of the artist.

I'm angry that I live in a country in which a white man feels he has the right to take the lives of other people; that it took the deaths of eight people to finally get anti-Asian violence acknowledged. I'm also exasperated because it feels like so many people have been calling out for help for months. It's not like we just woke up the day of the shooting and this was suddenly an issue. Anti-Asian hatred, fetishization, and violence are things I've had to confront and navigate around my entire life. And ever since there's been a rise in reports of anti-Asian attacks, it's only added to the anxiety of the pandemic. As a product of the American public school system, I've been going through a long process of dismantling who I was taught I should be by educating myself on Asian histories and of American imperialism abroad. This undertaking never seems to end. It feels like there are multiple wells of knowledge that I need to keep drawing from, wells that run deep and never seem to run dry. If we as Asian Americans expect any real change, we all need to do this work; only then can we be good allies for others and effective advocates for ourselves.

Right now, I'm trying to be kind to myself and show extra love to my mom. She and I have been talking about the shootings every day, and there's a lot of mutual support happening. It means a lot to be close to her and be able to talk to her about this. I also have a couple of large, long-term projects waiting for me at my permanent studio—projects that are planned around

the subjects of family history and Korean visibility—which no doubt will slightly evolve in the next few months as I continue to process everything.

stephanie mei huang

Los Angeles, California

Regarding Atlanta, I am demolished. I have been neurotically reading from Adrienne Rich's 1972 book of poems, *Diving into the Wreck*, aloud. There's one line in particular that reads: "You dream of dumping me into the sea." I feel as if I, my mother, my father's mother, my mother's mother, and every Asian femme in the Euro-American West were all dumped into the sea pre-birth, pre-womb—immersed, asphyxiated in an ocean of whiteness and colonial mythologies, unable to ever assimilate, swallowing a forced mimicry imposed by assimilation, embodying a perpetual foreignness, and a prolonged state of melancholia.

This insurmountable geyser of grief is a violent assault on the conditions of our bodies and their codification—an assault that is unprecedented for myself, and many of the Asian femmes in my life. Perhaps what is more painful is not the shooting itself, but the fact that it took a racialized, sexualized, gendered domestic terrorist attack (that then is sensationalized in the media) to allow for contemporary society to finally provide the Asian American community a sliver of space for a political voice and chance for self-advocacy. And still, the effect of our grief is felt by just a small proportion of white people.



stephanie mei huang, *Seven Self Portraits as a Cowboy*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



stephanie mei huang, *Requiem for my Damsel*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

I know our grief will be yet again eclipsed and invisibilized by the reifying of whiteness and colonial structures. It's dehumanizing; I don't feel human right now. My body doesn't matter to most people I pass on the street in Los Angeles.

The relentless societal invisibilization and silencing feedback loop of the lack of cultural and political voice Asian Americans are afforded has been enacted upon me in the interpersonal realm as well this week. I was assaulted by a white friend and no longer feel safe in my own living space with my white roommate due to gaslighting.

The compounding micro and macro levels of trauma and white gaslighting have thrust me into an acute traumatic response—I couldn't stop shaking for a week. I'm shaking as I write this. Every cell in my body, my ancestors' bodies, is vibrating, enshrouded in embers. I have been on 24-hour suicide watch with friends. I understand postcolonial grief presents a loss that is impossible to overcome. I am just fighting to re-empower my dis-empowered self and community, and I recognize this cannot be done in the perpetual melancholic state or in residing in loss.

Alex Ito

Brooklyn, New York



Alex Ito, installation shot of *Principles of Hope (The End)*, 2019 at Franz Josefs Kai 3. Courtesy of the artist and Zeller Van Almsick.

The massage parlor shootings in Atlanta are a tragic milestone for anti-Asian violence but also a critical moment illuminating the complexities and contradictions of the Asian experience in contemporary America. Last summer, we marched for Black lives and demanded radical changes to counter racism and state violence. Today, with recent and historical events of anti-Asian violence, some Asian Americans feel invisible between the Black Lives Matter movement and white silence; questionably demanding that Asians “take up more space” without considerations to the class disparity they threaten to reinforce.

It is critical that these conversations surrounding anti-Asian violence avoid reducing into isolated identity narratives and consider the risks of inadvertently endangering Black, Brown, and other Asian diaspora communities. How are we unpacking the model minority myth? Are Asian Americans actually aiding anti-racist movements at large, or reformulating a new occupation within the existing racial hierarchy? The historical frameworks of power must be interrogated, and how our well-intended “activism” can actually be in service of oppressing others. Highly publicized accounts of anti-Asian violence have inadvertently stigmatized Black and Brown communities. Some AAPI individuals have entrenched themselves in anti-Blackness by demanding increased policing and state intervention, directly undermining Black liberation.



Alex Ito, installation shot of *Western Verbiage I*, 2020, at Interstate Projects. Courtesy of the artist .



Alex Ito, installation shot of *Old Glory*, 2019, at Zeller Van Almsick. Courtesy of the artist.

As an artist and culture worker, I experience similar contradictions with art “activism.” Many goodwill gestures within the art world often collapse into vanity projects or institutional performativity as opposed to community action and care. Art-world virtue signaling is too often accompanied with snobs, union busting, gentrification, and laughable wages (or no wages), all underpinned by white supremacy. In contrast, groups such as J-TOWN Action と Solidarity and The People’s Bodega—mutual aid groups composed of culture workers and artists—prioritize real action, such as distributing food resources or providing aid to the unhoused, recognizing the social frameworks that those actions inhabit.

Solidarity doesn’t begin with an Instagram square or a catchy hashtag. It begins with considering our implication in the violence inflicted upon others. It begins with decentering oneself to share our time, bodies, and space to protect and support communities in need. To the Asian Americans who are in pain, I’m hurting with you. To those who fear for their lives, only in solidarity with Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities will we be able to establish real networks of care to resist the violence of white hegemony.

Stephanie Syjuco

Oakland, California

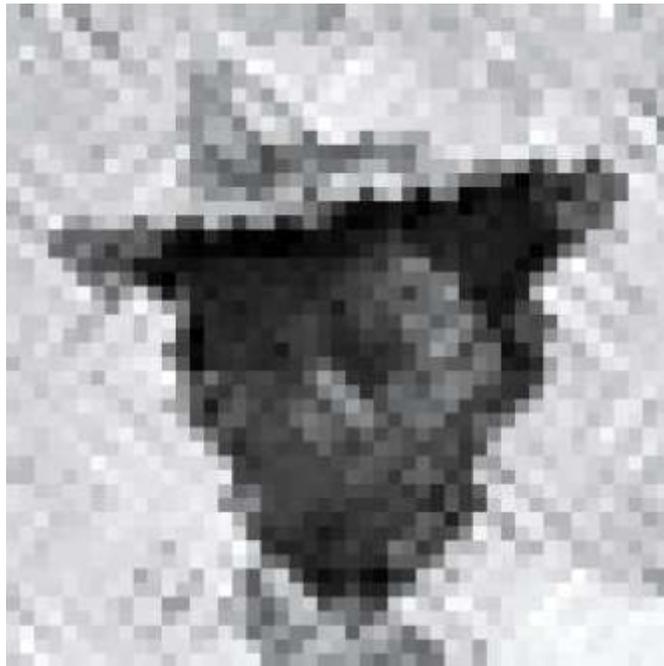


Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath (Standard Bearers)*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

My recent work has focused on American history and its incomplete ideas of citizenship and belonging. That often crosses over into issues of racial representation in this country as well as American amnesias of its own

empire-making excursions overseas. Currently, I'm focusing on national archives and their historical lack of meaningful representation of BIPOC realities.

Those of us in the Asian American community have been well aware of the uptick in racist anti-Asian activity and its lack of national news media coverage over the last year. While I think it's great to have more media coverage, it's absolutely disheartening in that something so visible—a mass murder—had to happen in order for it to even register. It's equally distressing to watch the public contortions of how to view the shooter's motivation, and whether the act should constitute a hate crime. It's crazy-making and makes one realize that the American public still doesn't see racism as a system, but as an event.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Headshots (Witness 4)*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Headshots (Witness 1)*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Speaking as a Filipinx American, while the term AAPI is useful because it gives us the ability to form a coalition, it also compresses millions of us into a perceived monolith. Folks within the AAPI community have incredibly varied backgrounds and different lineages in terms of how they have come to claim the U.S. as their home. These real differences can create internal struggles in terms of what the community does or doesn't prioritize.

I see strength when AAPI activism ties into and creates links between new and existing forms of racism and persecution across other communities—specifically Indigenous, Black, and LGBTQ+. The splitting of these concerns only serves to feed into white supremacist ideology that seeks to fracture and pit us against each other.

Right now I'm glad AAPI nonprofits and social justice organizations who have always been doing the work are getting recognition for it; the work has been constant but the national spotlight may be new. My hope is that this too won't pass in terms of a larger American consciousness of Asian American histories and futures.

Andrew Kung

Brooklyn, New York



Andrew Kung, *Desexualization vs. Fetishization*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Andrew Kung, *Desexualization vs. Fetishization*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

The past few months have been frustrating because anti-Asian hate crimes started long before COVID-19. Violence and hate towards the Asian American community has been normalized and non-urgent; it is disheartening that it

took a mass murder in Atlanta for many to wake up to the reality that Asian Americans have been hurting and yearning to be seen. My heart feels heavy for the victims and the families they left behind. The shooting made apparent such a complex myriad of issues including anti-Asian racism, the fetishization of Asian women, white supremacy, and gun control. Institutions label the act as a “bad day” and media outlets fail to denounce this act as a hate crime. Our community is left hurting and wondering: How can we keep our families and loved ones safe? How much longer do we need to convince others that our pain and suffering is valid? What does it take for us to be considered as American as everyone else? We’re left with more questions than answers.

Besides having conversations with my community, speaking out on my platform, and going to rallies, I’m focused on finishing my next body of work that highlights Asian Americans as Americans who belong in American spaces. It’s a series that challenges how we perceive Asian Americans in relation to space and environment, and seems quite timely given the state of current events.

My goal as a photographer is to create visual plentitude for our community and our stories. But even with the recent momentum towards visibility in Hollywood, a lot of us are still wondering whether more representation will actually abolish anti-Asian racism and the invisibility of Asian Americans. It might be part of the solution, but that in itself isn’t the answer. The answer probably lies somewhere between the micro (local grassroots efforts; finding your own voice given your resources) and the macro (building opportunities for our community; institutional and legislative support for AAPI and minority communities).

Hồng-An Trương

Durham, North Carolina



Hồng-An Trương, installation view of *On minor histories and the horrifying recognition of the swift work of time*, 2016, at Nhà Sàn, Hanoi. Courtesy of the artist.

I know I am not alone in feeling like the writing was on the wall in this particular moment, after four years of blatant white supremacist policies and rhetoric from the Trump administration which condoned and supported fascist groups. The centuries-long history of Asians in America is structured by violence in so many interconnected ways—physical violence, legislative violence, rhetorical violence, psychological violence.

What strikes me is that we are not talking enough about the role that class and poverty have to do with these violent attacks on Asians, many of which are happening in intensely gentrified cities where the gap between the rich and the poor is staggering. I'm also stressed out because there's so much teaching and learning that has to be done within the Asian American community around abolition. I am an abolitionist; more cops in our

neighborhoods do not keep us safe. It's a complicated, nuanced conversation that I don't see happening in mainstream media.



Hong-An Truong

Reflection: Police Brutality Protest in New York Chinatown, 1975 , 2018
Rubber Factory



Hong-An Truong

Women of Gidra , 2018
Rubber Factory

What happened in Atlanta was a lot to take in, especially as the news reports started trickling out. Seeing these headlines and hearing the news conferences truly enraged me. These murders and their subsequent representations in the media so painfully encapsulate a certain triangulation of racial capitalism that structures our lives as Asian women in the U.S. specifically. Under white supremacy, Asian women are only seen as objects of desire that must be controlled. Toxic (Christian) masculinity means that violence is naturalized as a response. Women and especially migrant women engaged in low-wage work are intensely vulnerable.

I'm also feeling a certain way about seeing all this outpouring of support. I am seeing the ways that it is really difficult to have meaningful and generative action through social media platforms.

I think the hardest thing for a lot of people to grasp is that this is part of a continuum of violence. Still, I find solace in my family and friends and comrades; I find solace in that we are here, we have been here, and we are still fighting like hell.

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<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-6-aapi-artists-reflect-spike-anti-asian-violence>