

# Asian Arts Initiative

Present:



Tomie Arai  
Rodney Camarce  
Ken Chu

Jinming Dong  
Jennifer Jones-O'Neil  
Yvonne Lung

René Marquiez  
Yong Soon Min  
Paul Pfeiffer

Hiro Sakaguchi  
Rana Sindhikara  
Barbara Takenaga

Lynne Yamamoto



**UD@CRANE**  
1400 N American Street  
Philadelphia PA 19122

Opening Reception: 6 to 9, Thursday  
**December 9**

December 9 through February 4  
Hours: Th, Sat and Sun 12 to 6

**ASIAN ARTS INITIATIVE**

1219 Vine Street  
Philadelphia PA 19107  
215-557-0455

Closing Reception: 5:30 to 7:30, Friday  
**February 4**

December 3 through February 4  
Hours: T through F, 10 to 6

Co-sponsored by University of Delaware Department of Art and  
The College of Arts and Sciences

**Inscrutable Redux**  
René Marquiez

In 1994, New York's Asia Society mounted its first contemporary art exhibition that was also its first of Asian American art: *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*. Vishakha N. Desai, then Director of Galleries (now President and CEO of the Asia Society), cited the "unprecedented growth of the Asian American population" as one impetus for the show. At the same time, the exhibition clearly followed a wave of "identity politics" in art that crested in the late 80s and early 90s. Philadelphia, too, rode this wave as, in 1993, the newly formed Asian Arts Initiative, then a program of the Painted Bride Art Center, mounted its own exhibition of Asian American artists, titled *Race, Sexuality, and Gender: Realities of the Asian American Artist*.

With the *Inscrutable* exhibition, the partnership of UD@Crane and the Asian Arts Initiative reflects back on the issues and context of the late 20th century and asks: can an exhibition predicated upon ethnic identity still serve as a productive exercise in the USA of 2010? Toward this question, Margo Machida, Asian American Studies scholar and guest curator of the *Asia/America* exhibition, observes that a younger generation of Asian American artists and writers has come to question "identity politics" as "delimit[ing] discourse" and ghettoizing artists into "racialized or ideologically driven straitjackets." We might ask, however, what that discourse actually entails and who currently drives it. Did postmodern authority struggles lead to an earnest embrace of pluralism in the 90s and beyond, or did prevailing authority simply relegate "identity" to a polite and quiet corner?

The answers are certainly more complex than a single exhibition can answer. We pose these questions, however, as a means to consider the work included in the *Inscrutable* exhibition. On the one hand, freedom to fully engage one's ethnic identity means not having to authenticate or validate that identity. On the other hand, foregoing explicit acknowledgment of this identity may result in unforeseen, deleterious consequences. In exploring the spectrum of cultural production, this exhibition presents current work by artists of previous "Asian American" exhibitions alongside a younger generation of Philadelphia-based artists. Rather than simply re-present the "identity" question in a comparative, generational context, we seek understanding of our so-called "post-racial America" in relation to the identity politics of earlier decades.

The pertinent questions seem less about being Asian American today and more about being a citizen and artist of the world in 2010. The discourse of identity politics certainly established identity as fluid and ever evolving; in our contemporary context, we can also add global and borderless. As identity constantly reinvents itself, the emergence of self-determined, un-label-able selves almost, if not certainly, deny the concept of ethnic identity altogether. Perhaps we are encountering curator Nicolas Bourriaud's artist as "cultural nomad": "[T]here are no longer cultural roots to sustain forms... no boundaries for artistic language. Today's artist, in order to arrive at precise points, takes as their starting point global culture..." In a world of virtual distance and difference, perhaps what remains most inscrutable is an assumption of finite knowledge.

---

*Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, exhibition catalog, with essays by Margo Machida, Vishakha N. Desai, and John Kuo Wei Tchen; Margo Machida, guest curator (New York: The Asia Society Galleries and The New Press, 1994), from the forward.

Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 37.

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial Catalogue*, 2009, p.4.