

## The Arts & the Mixed Heritage Experience

Mixed Heritage Art by Laura Kina

The MHC Arts directory includes visual and performing works by artists of mixed heritage. While there is no common aesthetic sensibility or artistic strategy that ties together this diverse group of artists encompassing multiracial, multiethnic and transracially adopted communities, many of the artists share an interest in negotiating, exploring, celebrating and/or complicating intersections of identity. Artists play a crucial role in envisioning, forming and reflecting (and disrupting) our communities. The mixed heritage community will be no exception.

What does it mean to be a mixed heritage artist?

As someone who has spent a good deal of time answering the ubiquitous What are you? question, I am a proponent of letting individuals self-identify. I have come to expect that the label I use to identify myself and groups I belong to today might change. Lucy Lippard noted this instability and struggle between personal and public naming in *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (1990),

For better or worse, social existence is predicated on names. Names and labels are at once the most private and most public words in the life of an individual or a group. For all their apparent permanence, they are susceptible to the winds of both personal and political change. Naming is the active tense of identity, the outward aspect of the self-representation process, acknowledging all the circumstances through which it must elbow its way.

I am elbowing the term mixed heritage even as I am leaving other labels and sampling still others. I don't own mixed heritage yet. It feels too broad. The specificity of the races, ethnicities, nationality, religions, politics, class, gender and sexuality that make me who I am are subsumed in this expansive term. I have comfortably stood under the umbrella of Asian America since my college years in the 1990's but at home, I was always Hapa. Migrating from Hawaii to Seattle, this word traveled with my family and became shorthand for the laundry list of our Asian/White ethnicities. I went on to make art about Hapa identity and used this term freely in public but now I am in the process of relinquishing this as my ethnic identifier as an artist due to criticisms that this Native Hawaiian word, which literally means portion and was intended to refer to those of mixed Native Hawaiian ancestry, has been wrongfully appropriated by multiracial Asian Americans. With the inclusion of my artwork in an exhibition titled *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* curated by Staci Boris at the Spertus Museum in Chicago (2007-2008), post-Jewish is the latest umbrella I have been asked to stand under as an artist. Boris notes the indebtedness of post-Jewish to historian David Hollinger's concept of postethnicity and curatorial projects like Thelma Golden's 2001 *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in which Golden and artist Glenn Ligon ironically (and controversially) coined the term post-black in reference to the work of twenty-eight emerging black artists working in the United States. Boris writes of such exhibitions that,

After decades of consciousness-raising identity politics, African American artist, for instance, no longer need reference the color of their skin or their presumed heritage in their work. Women artists, too, are free to concentrate on everyone's issues, not just "women's issues." This freedom, however, does not require that these concerns be forgotten or omitted in producing artwork. Rather it demonstrates that decisions now lie with individual artists, as they respond to varied personal circumstances, influences, and social forces. As viewers and interpreters, we too have choices: we can evaluate art with and without an identity context.

In this era when artists are theoretically free to be postethnic (I say this because I don't think that the lived experience of race and racism is in sync with this ideal), I am choosing to join this new mixed heritage communal identity. I am aware of both the privilege of being able to make such a public choice (remember it was only in 2000 that the US Census allowed people to choose more than one race) and the exclusions and omissions that will inevitably follow.

What is mixed heritage art?

Works in the MHC Arts directory can be as diverse as 18th Century Mexican *Casta* paintings to contemporary performance videos such as Filipino American/transracial adoptee Jon Reinert's *Twenty Twinkies* video posted on YouTube. Several of the artists included here sent in submissions in response to a national call for entries initiated by MHC community volunteers in September of 2007. Others included in this library did not set out to make mixed heritage art but we recognized that their work addresses multiracial, multiethnic or transracial adoptee experiences and as such, we choose to include them. This is, however, a living and organic resource open to community contributions. What mixed heritage art ends up being will depend on input from each of you.

Choosing to name ourselves as mixed heritage artists is one thing but how do we, as viewers, know what art to include or exclude from this category? Thinking of mixed heritage as a lens through which we can choose to look at contemporary and historic art may be a useful concept. I am envisioning this to be similar to the way in which we can understand or "read" a work of art through a feminist or Marxist lens. As we do this, it is important to take into consideration the artist's own private and public identities, the intended audiences and reception of the work and the historic context in which the work was created.

Take, for example, the career of Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), an important American modernist sculptor of Japanese and Irish-American descent. Today, we might immediately understand that Noguchi could be biracial and make artwork that drew from ALL of his experiences but during his lifetime, Noguchi was constrained by the binary of East vs. West. Being biracial he was deemed inauthentic both in the United States and in Japan. In America, he performed Japaneseness to gain acceptance of his work. At the same time in Japan, his figurative ceramic sculptures inspired by Japanese folk-art, his Japanese house and his penchant for dressing himself (and his Japanese film star wife) in kimonos was seen as "too Japanese" to be Japanese. Elaine H. Kim in her 2003 introduction to *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* explained how in Japan, Noguchi was clearly understood as an American modernist. In reference to his 1956 *Jardin Japonais* at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris she writes, *Noguchi*

brought in stone, water basins, trees, and plants from Japan, but he argued constantly with the master gardener who had come from Kyoto to assist him, as Noguchi broke rule after rule of traditional Japanese garden design. He created forms that seemed Japanese but could not be found anywhere in Japan, appropriating elements of the Zen meditation garden but concerned about very Western worries regarding the tensions between permanence and flux in nature.

While his "Japanese" inspired work was applauded in the West, when he sought to make work that addressed contemporary American issues, such as in his riveting 1933 life-sized metal sculpture *Death (Lynched Figure)* in which he referred "to a photograph of a lynched and mutilated body of a Black man that appeared in a 1930 issue of *International Labor Defense*", Noguchi was harshly criticized by the press who did not think a Japanese had the right to comment on US race relations. They considered this work to be a "little Japanese mistake." While the biographic details of artists such as Noguchi may be well known, the subject matter of multiraciality and multiethnicity is scarcely present in the visual arts in the United States until the end of the twentieth century. Judith Wilson in her 1991 essay *Optical Illusions: Images of Miscegenation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Art* further notes that while the subject of miscegenation (the sexual union of individuals assigned to different racial categories) has a long history in literary and cinematic representations (usually in the unfortunate stereotype of the "tragic mulatto" caught between two worlds), in the visual arts

Miscegenation has been a relatively rare subject, generating little artistic production and even less art historical analysis. While a classificatory obsession with the fruits of contact between Africans, Europeans, and Indians apparently spawned an entire genre of painting in eighteenth-century Mexico and Peru, corresponding works by North American are few. To the extent that they occur at all, such images in the United States seem to cluster around two historical fulcrums: the pre- and post-Civil War debate about race relations and the African-American revolt against existing racial hierarchies during the second half of the twentieth century.

In the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the rise of American Multiculturalism artist such as Adrian Piper (1948-) and James Luna (1950-) began to use multimedia performance strategies to directly address their own multiracial heritage and societal assumptions of race as something fixed and readily identifiable. In Piper's 1988 video installation *Cornered*, for example, the viewer is confronted with an overturned table that pins a video monitor into a corner. Flanking the monitor are Piper's father's birth certificates. One states that he is "white" and the other "octoroon." Ten chairs are neatly lined up in front of the overturned table and monitor. Piper addresses the presumably white audience and asks them "to consider the ramification of an estimate that the majority of the U.S. white population is, in fact, part black." James Luna's work extends the conversation of race and ethnicity beyond the dominant black/white binary. In *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Arts' Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s-1990s* (1996) Linda Weintraub used Luna's work as a representative of a "Native American Man," an ethnographic exhibition strategy common at the time. Even as he was meant to represent Native American artists in general, the first artwork pictured was Luna's black and white photographic triptych *Half Indian/Half Mexican* (1990), referring to his dual Mexican and Luiseno Indian heritage.

In the left photograph, Luna appears in profile as a "pure" Indian; his hair is long and he wears an Indian earring. In the right photograph he is shown in the opposite profile, equally convincing as a Mexican; he has crossed his hair, removed his earring, and grown a mustache. The middle photograph is a composite frontal close-up of Luna's face comically divided in half; the right half is Mexican and the left half is Native American. These deadpan mug shots reveal that this "most wanted Indian" has been genetically encoded with an alias and a disguise. Racial mixing-and-matching renders identities too deceptive to support stereotyping, be it positive or negative.

Like Luna's *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, contemporary artist Kip Fulbeck's *Hapa Project* (2006) also uses the formal structure of the frontal headshot as a vehicle to explore multiracial identity. Kip photographed over 12000 people from all walks of life whose mixed racial heritage includes Asian or Pacific Island descent. He asked each of them to answer the question *What are you?* Their hand written answers, presented along side of their portrait and a list of their self-identified ethnic classifications, give testimony to life times of stereotyping and misunderstandings as well as changing societal attitudes. The images are at once very personal, defiant, proud, functioning as rallying call for a previously underrepresented population but at the same time the photographs are eerily reminiscent of ethnographic portraits.

Irony and tricksterism, i.e. turning the meaning of something around for different purposes than what is initially apparent, have been staples of contemporary art. Transracial adoptee and conceptual artist Kate Hershiser Park Kum Young's *How to be a Proper Korean Woman* performance (1999) uses this strategy. This humorous yet painful "how-to" performance was "created as a response to the values Korean society puts on women, and the pressures they face when they do not fit the mold." Her work is just one example of a generation of transracial adoptees who are coming of age enforce and making their voice heard. New anthologies such as *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* edited by Jane Jeong Trnka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin (2006) increasingly make a point of including the arts in their examination of transracial adoption "beyond personal narrative" to "unseat the conventional understanding of adoption politics, ultimately reframing the controversy as a debate that encompasses human rights, peace, and reproductive justice." The politics of identity are not always readily apparent in contemporary works created by mixed heritage artists nor is it a requirement for artworks to carry the burden of a larger social agenda. Korean-born painter Jin Myerson's dizzying large-scale cityscapes twist and swirl visual data from a plethora of sources ranging from Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to a bombed out Gothic cathedral. His kaleidoscope images stand on the shoulders of a postmodern discourse in painting in which artists pull stylistically from multiple sources and time periods but his painterly decisions to portray the world in a constant state of flux may equally be informed by the fact that he is the adopted son of a New York Jew and a Swedish

Minnesotan.

What is the role of the Arts for the mixed heritage community?

It is my hope that the MHC Arts directory will not function as a hollow diversity awareness tool but rather as critical tool in the fight for "social justice, racial equality, and political empowerment in a culturally pluralist" society.

Whether it is a didactic performance piece, a subtle gesture, humorous quip or a painterly abstraction, the role of mixed heritage art may be to remind us that we are not "other" but rather distinct human beings. I will try "mixed heritage" on for size. It may not be the snuggest fit for me on a personal level but I see the potential solidarity that mixed heritage has to affect real social change.

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Mixed heritage artist

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