

Historic and Cultural Preservation, Art-making and Community Engagement

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As a composer/instrumentalist, arts administrator, and community member I am concerned with issues of historic and cultural preservation in the context of a changing economic, social, cultural, and political environment. This has shaped my work in two ways:

- 1) Defined the content and form of my artistic work as I work with cultural resources from my heritage, the heritage of my collaborators and that of the communities that I have worked in.
- 2) Provided a framework in which my artistic work, as well as my work as an administrator and activist, can contribute to overall community outcomes.

In pursuing this work over the past 21 years since moving back to the City of San Francisco, I have been deeply engaged in the Chinatown, Japantown, and South of Market Pilipino communities. This has taken many forms: composer, performer, artistic director, collaborator, artist in residence, producer, community organization Board member, grantswriter, strategic planner, mentor, community organizer and last, but not least a parent (my kids are 15 and 12). In this report, I will share some of the current issues related to historic and cultural preservation that these three communities face as well as approaches that artists and cultural organizations are utilizing to address these issues.

San Francisco Japantown

In SF Japantown's Centennial Year in 2006 the news came that 6 key properties in the 8 block area were being sold to outside developer interests. This has ushered in a period of uncertainty and uneasiness about this neighborhood's future as one of three remaining Japantowns in the continental US. The City and the community have since been engaged in a Better Neighborhood Plan process in order to voice this historic community's concerns and wishes for the future of Japantown. The recently released draft plan vision statement states:

"By honoring Japantown's rich history, retaining and enhancing its resources and securing its future as the heart of the Japanese and Japanese American communities with increased housing opportunities, public realm improvements and economic and community development, Japantown will continue to thrive as a culturally rich, unique and vibrant neighborhood." For more information, visit: Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan Draft for Public Review at http://www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/planning/Citywide/Japantown/01_Intro.pdf

According to an article in the 5/12/09 SF Chronicle, "Originally, 3-D (the developer) expressed interest in redeveloping the malls - possibly into condominiums and retail outlets. In October, however, the company learned that any renovation would require major seismic upgrades. The bad economy further deterred moving forward, city planners said."

The article goes on to quote Sandy Mori, chairperson of the Japantown Task Force: "It's unlikely that the malls will change in the next couple of years, but that the planning work will prove useful when the economy rebounds. We're committed to economic development while maintaining our traditional businesses; it's a very difficult balance."

5/12/09 SF Chronicle article: "S.F. searches for solution to Japan Center woes"

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/12/MNMI17CUHQ.DTL&hw=japantown&sn=001&sc=1000>

In the community discourse surrounding the future development of Japantown, there is deep concern that the community will face further challenges to its survival similar to its earlier experiences with mass evacuation and incarceration during World War II and the urban renewal program of the 1960's and 70's. Artists such as Genryu Arts (<http://www.myspace.com/genryuarts>) founder Melody Takata and Purple Moon Dance Project's (<http://purplemoondance.org>) Jill Togawa have engaged these issues with recent works *Shimenawa* (for which I was producer and music director) and *When Dreams Were Interrupted*. Both of these works explore themes of loss and healing related to this community's current difficulties.

San Francisco Chinatown

While the possible redevelopment of Japantown is a major context for some of the artists doing work in that community, the continuing struggle for economic and cultural viability of SF Chinatown serves as the context for arts and heritage organizations. In facing the changing demographics of the Chinese American community and cultural erosion due to economic pressures, the community has to once again reshape its identity and positioning as a key cultural destination. However, in pursuing this identity there needs to be a continuing balance between serving the local community (which is both historic and changing at the same time) and the need to bring in more visitors through City and region-wide engagement with Chinatown.

As such, this is the "creative tension" that has driven this neighborhood's development since the 1906 Earthquake when Chinatown was nearly driven out of the City in the quake and fire's aftermath. The Chinese Historical Society of America (<http://chsa.org>) actually utilized the story of Chinatown's efforts to survive after the quake as the central theme in its 2006 programming featuring a major exhibit and a Chautauquan one-man museum theater work by Charlie Chin. Digging into the CHSA's archives, Chin brought "History Alive" with the work *Chinatown is Burning - Hugh Liang Eyewitness to the 1906 Earthquake and Fire*. In addition to valorizing the history of Chinatown at community events and venues, CHSA was also able to collaborate with the San Francisco History Museum (<http://www.sfhhistory.org>) to place the Chinatown story in the context of San Francisco history as a whole.

Following this campaign, CHSA embarked on a multi-year initiative to explore the history of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first national immigration law to target a single nationality. Major programming touching upon this era were CHSA's Civil Rights Suite (<http://www.civilrightssuite.org/crs/>) of three exhibits: *Remembering 1882* (<http://www.civilrightssuite.org/1882>), *The Chinese of California: The Struggle for Community* a collaboration between the California Historical Society (<http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org>) CHSA and the Bancroft Library (<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/>) and *To Enjoy and Defend Our American Citizenship* (<http://www.civilrightssuite.org/OurAmericanCitizenship>).

These activities provide interpretation of Chinese immigration history and the vital role that Chinatown played in the survival and success of Chinese in America as a community – in the face of severe hardship and repression.

In the coming year 2010, there will be more opportunities for teaching moments about the lessons gained and contributions made from Chinese immigration history as the Centennial of the founding of Angel Island Immigration Station (1910-1940) is commemorated.

“Although Angel Island was billed as the "Ellis Island of the West", within the Immigration Service it was known as "The Guardian of the Western Gate" and was designed to control the flow of Chinese into the country...” - From www.angelisland.org

A collaboration between the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) and the State Parks, the Immigration Station reopened in February 2009 and major events are planned for the coming year in the many communities that went through Angel Island, including Chinese, Russian, and Japanese. Organizations such as CHSA, Chinese Culture Center, National Japanese American Historical Society and of course AIISF are engaged in this planning.

As part of the AIISF opening in February, artists Charlie Chin (*Uncle Toisan*) and Melody Takata (*Tsuki no Usagi*) showcased works in progress that evoked and interpreted the Angel Island experience for their respective communities.

SOMA Pilipino

As President of the Board of Kularts (<http://kularts.org>) and other capacities I have been involved in this organization's work since 1989. In the past 7 years I have been a part of its engagement activities in the South of Market community of San Francisco called SOMA Pilipino.

Beginning in 2002, Kularts has cultivated a very important collaboration with the Filipino American Development Foundation/Bayanihan Community Center (FADF - <http://www.bayanihanc.org>) to develop arts programs in SOMA Pilipino. From the late 90's this area of San Francisco has been in the process of intensive revitalization as a destination for Pilipino Art and Culture. Between SOMA Pilipino and the site of the old I-Hotel, there are now 4 centers for such activity: Bayanihan Community Center (BCC), Bindlestiff Studio (<http://www.bindlestiffstudio.org>), Filipino Cultural Center in the Westfield Mall (<http://thesffcc.com/SFFCC2007>), and Manilatown Heritage Center (<http://www.manilatown.org>).

In this time, Kularts has worked with FADF/BCC on 6th and Mission to develop a performance venue and gallery space including the installation of a lighting grid through a Cultural Equity Grants Creative Space Award. In addition, Kularts provided technical assistance to FADF/BCC in the tremendously successful Parol Festival (<http://www.kularts.org/parol.php>) and has established arts education programs at the Bessie Carmichael Elementary/ Filipino Education Center Middle School K-8 in the heart of the South of Market Area (<http://kularts.org/schools.php>).

What has been most inspiring about these activities is that arts organizations have played such a major role in putting SOMA Pilipino back on the map, and making a visible contribution to the overall South of Market revitalization process.

Artist Strategies

In my involvement in the Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan Preservation Working Group this past year, there was an important discussion about the relationship between historic and cultural preservation. “Historic preservation” as a field, generally limits its scope to the preservation of structures which are significant because of their age and architecture; while “cultural preservation” is a broader effort relating to language, values, art, and ways of being. The core of the discussion was the position that in the context of historic neighborhoods like Japantown, these two aspects are inseparable. As a result of this conversation, the cultural context – what has happened in this neighborhood and inside the structures – can be taken into consideration as to which buildings represent “historic resources” in Japantown. This has ramifications for the future of Japantown (and other neighborhoods) as guidelines for future development in Japantown are discussed. Based on this, a section on strategies related to supporting cultural organizations was created as part of the recommendations of the Working Group.

In pursuing this discussion further with Donna Graves and Jill Shiraki of the Preserving California's Japantowns project (<http://www.californiajapantowns.org/preserving.html>) about possible collaborations with artists they stated the need for artistic work and activities that can “animate” historic resources. In other words, to the extent that the stories related to historic resources – such as a YWCA, a home, a school, a storefront, or a World War II Japanese American confinement site – are kept alive and current, this will help preserve both the resources but the community as well.

As such, this provides a tangible role for the work of artists in contributing to the preservation of our historic neighborhoods. Working in the Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino communities these past decades has been a tremendous opportunity to pursue a number of artist-driven strategies that advance an appreciation of historic and cultural preservation in the context of our changing world. In this section I will discuss work of five of my peers in this regard. The strategies that I will provide examples for are:

- 1) Creating and sharing bodies of artistic work in collaboration with community-based organizations. Such bodies of work contribute to a sense of pride in the community as well as awareness of the history and cultural importance of the neighborhood. Moreover, in the longterm, the arts themselves become a part of the history of neighborhood.
- 2) Revitalizing community through multigenerational participation in traditional cultural arts. This strategy can engender buy-in for the neighborhood by families as well as strengthen the area’s identity as a cultural destination.
- 3) Linking our community’s history with our contemporary experience. In exploring the “origins of now” we can make a case for preserving spaces/structures that we can populate with our memories and provide a link to future generations.
- 4) Creating cross-cultural creative community. This is vital to engaging City-wide and

regional audiences, providing connection to other neighborhoods, cultural communities and communities of interest.

- 5) Working with immigrant artists to help revitalize living cultural traditions and to develop international connections on both a grassroots and institutional basis.

1. Creating and sharing bodies of artistic work in collaboration with community-based organizations - Jon Jang, Francis Wong, and SF Chinatown.

For the past three decades Jon Jang (<http://www.jonjang.com>) and I have together created a broad body of artistic work out of a process that reclaims history and culture of Chinese in America. Integral to this process has been our engagement as resident artists with Chinese American community organizations beginning in 1988 with the Chinese Progressive Association and in the 90's with Cameron House both in San Francisco Chinatown (as part of the California Arts Council Artist in Residence Program). Currently Jon has a residency at Alice Fong Yu School (the school that his daughter attends), the first Chinese language immersion school in the US. Since 2006 we both have been a key part of the Chinese Historical Society of America's programming.

It has been these relationships over the years that have provided the inspiration and most often the first venue for the sharing of our work with the public. Highlights in this body of work include Jon's rendering of the Chinese classic melody *Butterfly Lovers Song* (suggested to Jon by Mabel Teng, now Executive Director of the Chinese Culture Foundation), the suite entitled *Paper Son, Paper Songs* (an affirmation of Chinese resistance to Exclusion) and most recently *Unbound Chinatown: Tribute to Alice Fong Yu*. My works include my rendering of the patriotic song *Great Wall* and the beloved melody from my father's ancestral home, *Autumn Moon Reflected on the Peaceful Lake*. In all of these works we have collaborated on multiple levels, as performers, producers and providing artistic and cultural feedback. And it is through these works that reshape Chinese cultural resources that Jon and I have enjoyed the support of our community – a support that has been critical to our sustainability as artists who pursue our artistic practice in the context of grassroots community.

Interview with Jon Jang:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQqMOBXTIHQ&feature=channel_page

2. Revitalizing community through multigenerational participation in traditional cultural arts. – Melody Takata and Japantown.

In 2000, I began a 3 year-long Meet The Composer (<http://www.meetthecomposer.org>) New Residencies project in Japantown. I met Melody Takata at this time and became involved with her developing work as a taiko artist, dancer/choreographer and teacher. She is a complete Japantown resident artist – she lives there, has raised her two children there (bases her interdisciplinary arts organization Genryu Arts (<http://www.myspace.com/genryuarts>) there at the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC) (<http://www.jcccnc.org/>).

At the same time she has shown her work in venues in the broader community – Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Ethnic Dance Festival, Asian Art Museum, nationally (Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago) and internationally (Malta Festival in Poland). She is in the process of creating a trilogy of works combining various traditional Japanese cultural arts forms with contemporary forms that comment on the current issues facing Japantown today. Most recently she completed the second part, *Shimenawa* which premiered at CounterPULSE Theater supported by the Creative Work Fund and James Irvine Foundation Creative Connections. In Melody’s words, “The white rope that is placed on the top of a Torii Gate, Shimenawa is a symbol to represent a sacred place and that evil cannot enter. Shimenawa is created by binding multiple threads together for strength and refers to the historic and aesthetic qualities of Japanese culture that Nikkei (People of Japanese descent) embrace in an effort to maintain and nurture community.”

Melody began her work in SF Japantown shortly after moving there when she decided to begin a taiko class for seniors at the JCCCNC. However, parents in the community quickly tapped her to fill a need for taiko classes for children at the Center. And before long the Japantown community wanted the performances by the children to contribute to the liveliness of community events. This is how Gen Taiko was born in 1995 as a multigenerational training and performance ensemble. Expanding from this foundation in Japantown, Melody has also maintained residencies at Clarendon School

(<http://portal.sfusd.edu/template/default.cfm?page=es.clarendon>), and Chinatown Beacon Center/Community Educational Services (<http://www.cessf.org>) for the past decade. In a typical week during the school year, she teaches taiko and Japanese dance to 200 students. Moreover she brings her students into her collaborative works as performers as a means to create continuity of culture from her own master teachers, her peer collaborators and her students.

Interview with Melody Takata:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHtYJtrBfc&feature=channel_page

3. Linking our community’s history with our contemporary experience - Genny Lim

Poet, playwright, and performer Genny Lim’s groundbreaking work as co-author of *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* with Him Mark Lai and Judy Yung (independently published in 1980 and published by University of Washington Press in 1991) and her subsequent play on American Playhouse *Paper Angels* are significant documents of the experience of Chinese immigration to the West Coast. Moreover, these brought broad attention to the immigration station, contributing to the movement to preserve and reuse the site as an interpretive learning facility.

More recently in 2004-2005, Genny as an artist in residence in Chinatown at Jean Parker Elementary which she attended in the 1950’s that was a part of her *True Freedom* project supported by the Creative Work Fund in collaboration with Asian Improv aRts (http://www.creativeworkfund.org/modern/bios/genny_lim.html). The project resulted in a manuscript of short stories that reflects upon Genny’s experience growing up in Chinatown.

This past year, with support from an Individual Artist Commission from Cultural Equity Grants (<http://www.sfartscommission.org/ceg/>) she completed a poetry manuscript called *Pilgrimage*. According to Genny, “*Pilgrimage* explores the notion of pilgrimage in three parts: *Outer Passage* – which examines the North Beach-Chinatown world of my immigrant working class parents; *Diaspora Blues* – exploring the wide range of places and social-political events of our times and the culminating, *Secret Passage* – which takes the reader full circle through my travels to Sarajevo, Caracas, Bhutan, Bali, Indonesia. The book ends in a dramatic dialogue, *Pilgrimage*, a meditation on existence.” Genny gave a reading of this work in Asian Improv aRts’ recent presentation at CounterPULSE Theater.

These two works, *True Freedom* and *Pilgrimage*, together with her earlier works, examine the journey of Chinese Americans through Angel Island and Chinatown from the turn of the 20th Century through the 1960’s – through the lens of her experience growing up in the 50’s and 60’s and continuing to pursue her life and work in the 21st Century context. As such, Genny’s work represents a bridge between the pre-1965 (President Johnson ended restrictive quotas for Chinese in that year) Chinese American history and today’s experience after several waves of immigration. Based on this work, a case can be made for the need to document and preserve this earlier period as a means to place Chinese American history in the overall American narrative.

Interview with Genny Lim:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jmf_GW9-FM&feature=channel_page

4. Creating cross-cultural creative community - Hafez Modirzadeh

I first met Hafez, a fellow saxophonist and composer (<http://musicdance.sfsu.edu/node/75>) in 1988 and have enjoyed a rich artistic and cultural collaboration with him through the past two decades. In many ways we have grown so much closer in this past decade since 9/11/2001. The experiences of removal and incarceration that Japanese Americans faced in World War II and that of Exclusion for Chinese Americans have underscored a need for me to work closely with Hafez (an Iranian American), his community and his peers in promoting greater solidarity between our diverse communities, affirming our common humanity, and role in the making of American society. Hafez, in his role as Director of the World Music and Dance Program in the College of Creative Arts at SF State and I, in my role as Creative Director of Asian Improv aRts, have worked together to organize many presentations over the years at SF State in promoting cross-cultural collaboration and dialogue through the performing arts. One of the culminating moments in this process was a concert curated by Hafez in 2008, entitled *Sound Come-Unity* (<http://creativearts.sfsu.edu/press/release/2008/03/17/sound-come-unity-all-star-faculty-and-alumni-concert-april-18-knuth-hall/26>), which honored dance faculty member Alicia Pierce, who was also a member of the influential Wajumbe Cultural Ensemble. The concert was also a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the San Francisco State Strike. It was one of her last public appearances (she passed away in December 2008) and the concert this past April 2009 was an intercultural celebration of her life (<http://xpress.sfsu.edu/archives/life/013199.html>).

Interview with Prof. Modirzadeh previewing *Sound Come-Unity* 2009:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbPcTA5j9HY&feature=channel_page

5. Working with immigrant artists to help revitalize living cultural traditions and to develop international connections on both a grassroots and institutional basis – Tatsu Aoki

Born in Japan in 1957 as the son of a geisha into an artisan entertainment family that traces its roots back to the Edo Period (17th Century Japan), Tatsu Aoki began studies in the traditional Japanese performing arts at age 3. Since immigrating the US in the 1970's he has since become a multi-dimensional artist as a film maker (he teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) bass player, composer, and performer of shamisen and taiko music. He is a prominent member of the Chicago music scene, is Executive Director of Asian Improv aRts Midwest and a constant collaborator of mine here in SF and in Chicago. Immigrating to the US in the 70's, he contributes a needed perspective in promoting living culture through artistic practice. In fact, he has played a defining role in shaping Asian American music and its relationship to community building in Chicago. Moreover, his ongoing work with Melody Takata has profoundly shaped her pursuit of traditional arts as they share a common generational perspective that honors both the traditionality and innovation necessary to advance Japanese American cultural arts with integrity and vitality. Additionally, Tatsu has established ongoing cultural exchange with master artists of the Kineya shamisen school (Tatsu and Melody just returned from performances in Tokyo) and developed support from Japan-based donors as well as institutions such as the Consulate General of Japan.

Interview with Tatsu Aoki

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IQTKDewalQ&feature=channel>

Japanese version

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbokMC8eQtI&feature=channel>

Conclusion

I began my artistic career in the early 80's during the emergence on a national level of a second phase of the Asian American Consciousness Movement (a movement rooted in the 1960's). Particularly significant during this phase was Asian American involvement in the 1984 and 1988 Jesse Jackson for President campaigns, an involvement which projected into the national arena issues such as the murder of Vincent Chin (a 1982 hate crime in Detroit - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_Chin) and the movement seeking redress and reparations for Japanese Americans (<http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/history/index.html>). During this period, my peers and I who were involved in this movement as artists and activists engaged in building multi-cultural alliances and sought empowerment in our communities on a broad number of issues. Little did we know that the issues and campaigns that we engaged in – immigration reform, voter registration, hate crime, racial profiling, educational rights, redevelopment (among many others) – would continue to shape the American political landscape into the 21st Century. Perhaps most important however, was the fact that our practice was informed by a historical and cultural perspective that was passed on to us from our elders such as community leaders such as Him Mark Lai, Clifford Uyeda, and others; a perspective that we now are responsible for upholding and passing on to the next generation.

In addition to engaging in this path of community work, however, I have also pursued a composition cycle exploring my own family's history in the diaspora – that stretches between

Mauritius in the Indian Ocean to Kunming in the interior of China to Shanghai and finally to the San Francisco Bay Area – work that has provided me much material and influences to my individual efforts to pursue art-making as a vehicle for family and community memory.

As such, these experiences as an artist, activist and administrator have provided the guiding principles for my artistic and community practice that I mentioned at the beginning of this report. And it is this task of transmitting our collective legacy to future generations that is providing so much of my motivation during this period. Of course, what makes this task challenging is the fact that through our experiences with Exclusion, racial violence, redevelopment/displacement, economic and political disempowerment there has been a rupture in cultural continuity and the loss of so many of the threads of our intertwined *Shimenawa*. Moreover, there is added urgency as the elders that connect us with our defining experiences pass away. Further enriching the complexity of our work is the fact that there new audiences are emerging in our communities that need connection to the history and whose contributions and experiences also need to be celebrated and shared.

This is difficult work that requires a high level of sensitivity and awareness. Herein, however, is the opportunity, as we artists employ our considerable training and experiences to help facilitate a community vision illuminated by a shared cultural legacy. And despite the challenging times that we live in, it is the possibility of an enlarged role for artists in our community's cultural life which gives me a tremendous sense of optimism and empowerment.

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