



## CYJO + “KYOPO” = MARVEL

Come one, come all! Get ready for the upcoming Asian Pacific American invasion at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery.

“Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter” opens this Thursday, August 12 and runs through October 14, 2012.

Presented in conjunction with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program, “Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter” is the Smithsonian’s first major showcase of contemporary Asian American portraiture.

This brand new exhibit features the work of seven diverse artists with roots in the Americas and Asia, often with peripatetic tendencies: third-generation Japanese American Roger Shimomura; Japanese Mexican hapa Shizu Saldamando; Japanese-born, U.S.-domiciled Satomi Shirai; Korean-native, U.S.-trained Hye Yeon Nam; Chinese-born, U.S./China commuting Zhang Chun Hong; Vietnamese American immigrant Tam Tran; and Korean American, currently China-domiciled CYJO.

Of the lucky seven, I caught up with CYJO in transit from there (Beijing) to here (DC) to talk about the impending opening. FINALLY, it’s really happening!

CYJO and I first crossed paths years ago at the Smithsonian APA Program office when then-director Dr. Franklin Odo called me in to meet one of my own. “She’s Korean. She’s from DC. And she’s really talented,” he insisted. When I

raised my eyebrows warily, he promised that CYJO had one of the most intriguing projects he had ever seen. This time, he really knew what he was talking about!

*Kyopo*, the Korean word, refers to people of Korean descent who do not live in Korea – some seven million dispersed throughout the world, 2.3 million who live in the U.S.

“KYOPO,” the exhibit, is a marvel. The collection is comprised of 240 wildly individual portraits, yet each presented against a common background – a stark white wall with a pale wood floor beneath. CYJO’s message is clear: while the subjects share the same Korean ethnicity, each individual clearly represents, champions, shouts out a unique, intimate experience.

“Portraiture Now” showcases a selection of 60 individual portraits from “KYOPO” chosen from the full roster of 240, plus one collective portrait of all the “KYOPO” participants together. Once you’ve been amazed (and you will be, guaranteed!) by the quarter-sampling, you can access the entire collection in a gorgeous, breathtaking coffee table book published this month by Umbrage Editions. The book offers the added bonus of interviews with almost all the subjects, with an introduction by Julian Stallabrass and foreword by Marie Myung-Ok Lee.



In all its stunning beauty, *KYOPO* on the page is definitely a photographic treasure to have and to hold ...

**So first things first ... HOW did “KYOPO” start?**

The idea surfaced from a curiosity and a need: a curiosity to understand how those who shared the same ancestral culture contextualized themselves in their societies; and a need since I didn’t see many photography books that focused on Korean culture and contemporary issues.

**How did the project actually come together? I still remember you scribbling in a small little black book – the infamous black book! – when we first met all those years ago!**

I literally woke up on a Sunday morning envisioning the skeleton of the project and knew that I wanted to create a book filled with spreads on which one photo absorbed the real estate of the left page, and complementary text was placed on the facing right page.

I sketched different layouts and portrait compositions in my black, moleskin book. I chose a full body shot for this project because it can hold a lot of information including muscle alignment and stance. I was fascinated to recognize a discernible difference in stance and body language between an adopted *kyopo* raised in France, a *kyopo* raised in the Canary Islands, and a *kyopo* raised in the US.

Developing a large group of portraits made me think about how these individual pieces might come together as a collective composite, and the different meanings and intentions that can form from placing individuals into a

collective group. Many historical examples still exist, including the expression of 1000 Buddhas in metal and stone, found in temples across Asia – such examples make me think about a forced collective representation of a group as opposed to individual expressions, and how individual understanding can be overshadowed by a collective message.

mass.com designed the book and fine-tuned the layout to be as attractive as it has become, maintaining an even balance between photos and text.



The subjects were selected through chance meetings and recommendations from other participants. My first subject was Sebastian Seung, a professor who runs his lab at MIT, a leader in the new field

of connectomics, the wiring of the brain. In 2004, we met while standing in line at an exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, and he became the inaugural *kyopo*. The end product was not planned; the project’s most important goal was to provide a random and sincere sampling of *kyopo*.

**How did creating KYOPO change your own life?**

I feel more aware and appreciative of having absorbed the amalgam of experiences and perspectives that individuals shared in relation to their identity and ancestral culture. Creating the project has opened up a box of pertinent issues – generational, political, and social – that



I had not considered as closely before. I'm thrilled that these stories can now be shared with the general public, and I hope viewers are able to personally experience this discovery as well.

Producing this project has brought forth good friends and supporters. I'm grateful for all the fantastic "KYOPO" consultants, supporters, and participants who were instrumental in giving the project life. This is their project just as much as it is mine. "Nothing is done alone" is a statement I strongly believe in.

**How do you define your own *kyopo* identity?**

**Did your own views change over the duration of creating this project?**

I don't define my *kyopo* identity, but bits and pieces of it are found in select participants' answers. My views expanded more than they changed after creating this project. Many cultural and identity related topics were explored while making this project: multicultural relationships, adoption, Asian presence in politics and civic action, Asians in entertainment and the arts, religion, family pressures, internal pressures, community, success, failure, etc. I came to understand these issues in further detail from the participants who shared their many different journeys.

**Did your recent move from the U.S. to another Asian country that's not Korea change your self-perception as a Korean American?**

Living in China has reinforced the international characteristics I already felt I had. It has also been a great opportunity to remind many in China of the multicultural experience that can

shape identity and define the individual. I am able to remind the international community and the local Chinese that the American identity is also multicultural.

Moreover, to look like and be treated as the majority in a country that is not mine ancestrally, has been a unique experience. People don't initially ask what country I'm from as people do when I'm in the West. Many Chinese initially think I'm Chinese until they hear my horrible Mandarin. And then some only see me as Korean and tell me how much they love this Korean actress or that Korean singer.

**Who were some of your most surprising subjects? What made them stand out?**

Chang Rae Lee, Daniel Dae Kim, and Juju Chang's warmth and modesty were nice to experience.



Bobby Lee, a comedian, was one of the most surprising. I had no idea I'd be doing an additional personality shot of him, squatting, pointing in the air with only his socks on. He was incredibly funny to be with.

Steve Byrne, a comedian, came into the shoot wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. Right when I was about to take his shot, he said, "Wait. I need a moment ..." He positioned himself in front of the lens, turned his torso to his left, whipped off his shirt, looked back and said, "I'm ready." And that became his portrait.



Dong Hyuk Shin, a North Korean refugee who is now a citizen of South Korea, had a distinct and glowing presence. You could see and feel that he went through some challenging experiences. His will to survive and his passion to spread awareness were true testimony to his strength and courage as an individual.

**Who were some of your favorites and why?**

Grace Lee Volckhausen and Aiyoun Choi – these wonderful women have been paving the way and making a difference in their communities from very early on at a time when ethnicity was not celebrated as much as it is now in America.



Esther Paik Goodhart – I had never met such a mover and shaker until I met Esther. She’s a great comic, a supporter of all things Asian and Jewish, TV producer, radio show host, and Hebrew schoolteacher at multiple temples. What does she

not do? She was the first Korean Jewish person I had the pleasure to meet.

Patricia Han, Cera Choi – they have both made major decisions that positively impacted many people’s lives. Patricia Han lost her husband in the 9/11 attacks and chose to take that tragedy as a reminder of what she had and what she could share with others. She opened an orphanage in Bangladesh to help children become strong, productive individuals in their societies.

Cera Choi has had a challenging time caring for her son who has Prader-Willi Syndrome, a severe condition that requires 24/7 care. And despite the challenges she faced as a single mother of four children, she helped to change policies in her state to make it easier for families who have relatives with special needs.

Linda Choe Vestergaard – adopted with her identical triplet sisters by one of the last remaining Danish farmers and not having direct access to Korean culture growing up, Linda’s first exposure to her ethnic background was in her late 20s when she was doing an architectural internship in NYC. Her relationship to the Korean culture grew, so much so that she and her sisters eventually met their birthparents, together with their adoptive Danish parents. She said the experience was one of the most meaningful moments in her life. And her participation in this project further fueled her curiosity about her ancestral culture.

**Did you find any similarities among your subjects, other than their shared Korean ancestry? And what were some of the most pronounced differences?**

I definitely noticed generational similarities in participants born in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, many grew up with parental pressure to choose a certain profession (doctor, lawyer, engineer) and live a life their parents wanted them to live. One of the participants succumbed to that pressure and went to medical school, but eventually changed her career path to become an architect. Another, went to an Ivy League college, married a Korean woman, and



had a child, only to discover that he wasn't living the life he fully wanted to live.

Many growing up during this time believed that living a successful life as an American involved "exfoliating" your ancestral culture, as Bernie Cho, one of the participants, so eloquently stated.



I also noticed definitive differences. One Korean American, Cabin Gold Kim, had a unique upbringing. His parents wanted him to have the most "American" experience, and they named him appropriately so. He

loved his mom's grilled cheese sandwiches growing up and felt comfortable around all people of all ethnicities – except for his own. While others didn't seem to have any expectations of him, he felt the pressure to achieve or conform from certain Korean groups he encountered.

Kae Whang, a contestant on [the reality show] *The Biggest Loser*, told me how she felt pangs of isolation growing up as an Asian American because she didn't know many others who shared the same experiences she did. This contrasted to Suchin Pak's experience, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area with a significant Asian population and then moved to international NYC.

Cultural differences – as well as religious and political differences – also varied between those who grew up in various parts of the world

– in Japan, the Canary Islands, Germany, France, the UK, etc.

**When you relocated to Beijing two years ago, you had to give up your physical "KYOPO" background – those white walls, the wood floors ... any regrets?**

I have absolutely no regrets.

**Do you ever look at the project now and think who else you might have included?**

Not at all. This project was done over a period of time, and I had no intention of shaping a particular message. Rather, I wanted to see what individuals, what messages would surface during this particular timeframe.

**Now that "KYOPO" is finally headed to the National Portrait Gallery at the venerable Smithsonian Institution, what are some of your thoughts about the imminent opening?**

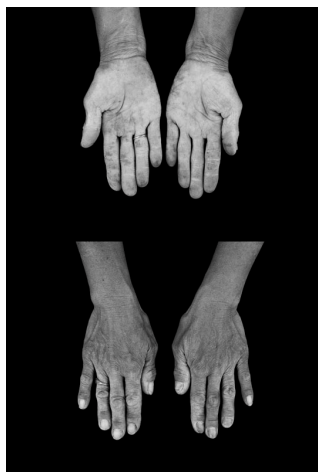
I'm looking forward to seeing how the visitors – American and international – receive the project. The *kyopo* made their homes all over the world ... and yet their Korean ancestry both differentiates and binds them together. The issue of moving from one country to another to better your standard of living and grab new opportunities has always been a historical social phenomenon. We live in an even more mobile culture today, where movement is going in every direction, including substantial reverse immigration to China!

**And since you have now introduced this baby to the waiting public, what's next for you?**

I would love to have the project travel from the



Smithsonian to other venues in the U.S. and abroad. So I plan to work on securing more venues and sponsors in the future.



I'm also working on bringing another project, "Substructure," to various cities – San Francisco, NYC, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. "Substructure" is a photographic, textual, and video project done in

collaboration with an NGO, Compassion for Migrant Children (CMC).

The project profiles 50 Chinese migrants living in Beijing who moved from various provinces outside the capital. Although they are Chinese citizens, they face the same problems many immigrants experience, such as lack of healthcare, limited or no access to education, poor living conditions, etc.

These individuals are a neglected part of what makes up the backbone of a functioning, developing society. I felt their voices needed to be heard, their stories needed to be shared, and more attention needed to be brought to the global issue of intra-country migration. "Substructure" launched at T. Art Center in Beijing's largest art district, 798, and is traveling to the London School of Economics this September.

I'm also completing another project about China that started in 2009 for which I'm profiling over 80 people. I'd like to create this

into a book, as well, and have it exhibited in the future.

**And when all these international projects are done, do you think you might think about coming 'home'?**

I am always home.

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