Exhibition catalogue essay and artwork - "Half Yella: Embracing Ethno-racial Ambiguity"

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HALF YELLA

EMBRACING ETHNORACIAL AMBIGUITY

Laura Kina

"Oh, honey, I want you to be my wife," U.S. Air Force Major Lloyd "Ace" Gruner coos as he clutches his kimono-clad Japanese lover, Hana-ogi, in the movie Sayonara (Marlon Brando and Mikio Taka, 1957). "But what would happen to our children? What would they be?" Hana-ogi asks, recognizing the time's stark racism and prejudice. "What would they be?" Gruner replies, "They'd be half Japanese and half American. They'd be half yella and half white."
As a “half yella and half white” kid growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in a small Norwegian town in the Pacific Northwest, I experienced a mixture of normalcy and exotic novelty surrounding my multiracial heritage. I am a member of the “biracial baby boom” [aka “Generation Mix”] that followed the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court Case, which overturned our nation’s last antimiscegenation laws. Being mixed race has become commonplace, especially in Japanese American communities, with 57% of individuals in the 0-30 age group claiming more than one race by the 2000 United States Census. By the mid 1990s, being mixed became downright trendy. We may not all be “Cabilnasian,” but there was a time not long ago when Nike encouraged us to envision a world in which we could claim, “I am Tiger Woods.” A 2003 Sunday New York Times article went so far as to dub us “Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous.”

Despite growing social acceptance, ambiguity can be a restless and amorphous home. The children of interracial couples are still faced with the challenge of naming and claiming their identities and often feel pressured to align themselves with one ethnorracial community over another. In the run up to the 2008 Presidential election, racial issues were framed in terms of choosing one identity, and therefore allegiance, over the other. Is President Barack Obama Black or biracial, or both? On his 2010 Census form, President Obama chose to identify solely as “Black.” For me, the ubiquitous peppering of the questions “What are you?” and “No, where are you really from?” seasoned me to believe that I was an anomaly. The blood-quantum answer is that I am 1/2 Okinawan; 1/4 Spanish/Basque; and 1/4 white [French, English, Irish, and Dutch]. I’m just shy of 5 feet tall and with my brown non-“slanty” eyes, olive skin, dark hair, and small nose, I’m racially ambiguous but usually assumed to be Latina. “You’ve got the best of both worlds,” my mother would tell me. I grew up identifying as “hapa” [a Native Hawaiian word for “half” as in “hapa haole” or “half white”) and amusing my Scandinavian lefse-eating friends in Poulsbo, Washington, with imitations of my Grandma Kina’s Hawaiian Pidgin English.

When I moved to Chicago to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1991, I didn’t find any historic or contemporary multiracial artistic role models beyond the modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi (Japanese-Irish American). Artists such as Frida Kahlo, Romare Bearden, Adrian Piper, and James Luna were in the history books, but, blinded by the logic of hyпо-
Yang's admonition close at hand: "A group exhibition that posits race as its only organizing principle always risks essentialism...in its suppression of issues such as nationality, sexuality, religion, and class that make up the complex terrain of identity." I had converted to Judaism during these years, and this new religious identity, combined with my multiracial identity, made me realize how showing exclusively under the umbrella of "Asian America" had flattened the reading of my work. The solution was not to defect from Asian America but rather to challenge essentialism, to expand what it means to be an Asian American artist. I could be 100% Jewish, 100% Mixed, and 100% Asian American and this might or might not be apparent or addressed directly in my work. I had options.

With the 2000 Census, I was no longer railroaded into picking one race. I was free from the no man's land of the racialized "other." Along with 6.8 million other people, including 13.9% of Asian Americans, I could finally self-identify as two or more races. I was hungry to find this community of kinfolk, so I began to paint portraits of mixed-race Asian Americans. My Hapa Soap Opera series (2002-2005) was inspired by a combination of the eighteenth-century Mexican casta painting genre and the Bollywood movie posters that line the Desi store-
fronts of my Chicago neighborhood [above]. Rather than depict ethnographic portraits of “hapas” as progeny of two differently raced parents, I created large-scale oil paintings populated entirely with mixed-race Asians. Their floating heads gaze longingly at each other and in defiant opposition to the viewer.

Then I met Kip Fulbeck.

Sitting on the other side of the camera, Kip snapped my portrait back in 2005 [along with portraits of 1,199 other people] for what has become his widely popular Hapa Project [opposite page]. He asked each of us to write down our ethnicities and answer the recurring “What Are You?” question. Our witty and sometimes painful answers were printed next to our headshots. He captured a representational sampling of the complexity of mixed-race Asian identities. With the rise of online social networking and the groundswell of multiracial organizations, what at first, for me, was an “imagined community” soon became a very real community of fellow mixed-race artists, academics, and community organizers.

No sooner had I settled on identifying personally as “hapa” and expanding the contours of Asian America to publicly identify as “mixed heritage” than debate over the use of the word “hapa” by non-Native Hawaiians came to a head and the term “post-black,” coined in Thelma Golden’s 2001 Freestyle exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, set off several years of “semantic acrobatic” exercises in postraciality in general. Every ethnic group had its post-identity art exhibition. I was included in the Jewish incarnation of this moment, The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation, at the Spertus Museum in Chicago in 2007.

Back where I started, I had to ask what to call myself. I agree with David Hollinger’s post-ethnic preference for the ethnoracial “choice over prescription” and the concept that communities should entail “affiliation by revocable consent” [thus, as it is socially allowable for me to change my religion and profession, I should be able to choose to what degree I wish to affiliate with my communities of descent]. But all these “post” terms don’t define who I am; they just define what I’m supposedly getting over. I have no desire to “get over” race or ethnicity. As my graduate school advisor, the renowned African American painter Kerry James Marshall, likes to point out, “color-blindness is a defect. It shouldn’t be a goal.”

These forces led me to my 2006-2007 Loving Series of life-sized charcoal drawings of mixed-race “biracial baby boomers” [above]. All of the figures in the Loving Series are seated cross-legged, a pose that allows each in-
dividual to be centered physically and, perhaps, spiritually. Some stare directly, others lean forward as if something is about to happen. In my portrait of Jamaican/Jewish artist Shoshanna Weinberger, the subject has her eyes closed in meditation and is taking a deep breath (page 8, right). It was a time of introspection and anticipation. Through the process of drawing and subtle gestures in the sitters’ poses, I wanted to capture the connections within this emerging community and also to highlight the distances between us as double-minority, biracial, mestizaje, mixed-blood, and mixed-Asian folks. The drawings are intentionally black and white, as this is how race has historically been framed in the United States. I chose charcoal because it is easily erased and usually used in preparation for something more permanent (e.g., underdrawing for oil painting). The Loving Series mirrored how I saw the multiracial movement in 2006–2007. With the push to change the 2000 Census well behind us, the next steps for the multiracial movement were unclear. Worthy and urgent initiatives had moved forward, such as the MAVIN Foundation’s MatchMaker project dedicated to recruiting mixed-race bone marrow donors, or the Loving Day Movement, but they failed to spark the collective imagination and unite the multiracial movement on a national level.

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama changed everything. I never imagined that I would see an African American president during my lifetime, let alone a man from Hawai’i who until recently publicly embraced his biracial background. In the court of public opinion, multiraciality was no longer demonized as “tragic” but rather held up as a form of our nation’s racial progress. Seemingly overnight, there has been a sea change in mainstream racial attitudes. Multiracial organizations across the country have shared this spotlight and been asked to comment on the “post-racial dream.” Current president of the MAVIN Foundation and artist, Louie Gong, stated in a 2008 interview with MSNBC, “Mixed race isn’t post race. It’s not less race. It’s more race.... In order to dialog about mixed race, we need more understanding. It’s not a dialog to forget about issues of race.” In a recent New York Times article, art critic Holland Cotter concurred that many Black artists are also skeptical of the term “post-race.” He asks, "So what do you call their work? How about ‘ambiguous’?"
1. "Generation Mix" was coined in 2001 by the MAWI Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to lead the nation in raising awareness about the experiences of mixed-race people and families.

2. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 15.9 percent of Americans indicated multiple-race identification. A new survey shows that Japanese Americans are emerging as an important population in the United States. The survey was conducted by the MAWI Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to raise awareness about the experiences of mixed-race people and families.

3. On 26 March 2007, on the Oprah Winfrey show, golfer Tiger Woods identified himself as "African American," a term he used to deflect his critics. His African American heritage makes it easier for him to be perceived as a sympathetic figure.


6. Lebua is a traditional cinnamon-root-flavored, soft drink.

7. Hawaiian Pidgin English is a creole language used by many "local" Hawaiians, or Native Hawaiian settlers. It is spoken by many mainlanders and has been influenced by pidgin English.

8. Hypodermic laws, instituted as early as the eighteenth century, stated that anyone with greater than 10% non-White ancestry would not be considered a White person (also known as the "one-drop" rule).


13. See Kimberly McClain Dalziel, Making Multiracial: Race, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009) for a detailed history on the emergence of the multicultural movement and key organizations such as the Multiracial Americans (MARA), Multiracial Family Network, Hapa Issues Forum (HIF), and the Multiracial Americans of Southern California (MASC). MAWI Foundation, Project RADE, and Sci, Inc.


15. My family has been in the sugar cane plantations on the Big Island of Hawai’i. This is how I came to live the word “Hapa.” We are, in the literal politics of the islands, considered settler/collaborators. The appropriation and colonization of the Native Hawaiian land is an ongoing and continuous process. It is perceived as yet another form of colonizing Hawai’i. See Wei Ming Daries, "Re-Making Hapa," Hyphen, Summer 2006, available at http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/content/view/94/10/.

16. During the May 23, 2009, Duet Exposure symposium held at DePaul University in conjunction with the exhibition Duet Exposure: African Americans (Black and White) Behind the Camera, art historian Kimberly Pinder described her experience as an "ex-Hapa" woman. For her, it had been an exercise in "gendered race." It was perhaps the most interesting part of the debate. She has been what "post-blackness" has uncovered in terms of generational divisions between African American artists.


Laura Kina is an internationally recognized artist, independent curator, and scholar. Her work focuses on the fluidity of cultural difference and the slippery-ness of identity. Asian American history and mixed-race representations are common subjects of her art. Kina draws inspiration from popular culture, history, and textile design, as well as historic and personal photographs.

Born in Riverside, California, and raised in Poulsbo, Washington, Kina lives and works in Chicago. She is an Associate Professor of Art, Media and Design, Vincent de Paul Distinguished Professor, and Director of Asian American Studies at DePaul University. She is a 2009-2010 DePaul University Humanities Fellow. Kina earned her MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Kina is represented in Miami, Florida, by Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts.

Kina's Loving Series (Grand Projects New Haven, CT, 2006) uses the vehicle of portraiture to examine mixed-race issues. Inspired by the landmark 1957 Supreme Court case Loving v. Virginia, which overturned this nation's last antimiscegenation law, these life-size charcoal portraits of Kina's friends simultaneously embrace and confront the viewer.