

TECHNIQUES

Contemporary Asian American Time-Based Art Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, Kat Larson, and Gina Osterloh

by Jan Christian Bernabe

In *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video*, critic and scholar Glen Mimura describes a telling moment that often occurs whenever he teaches his Asian American cinema class. “Frustrated students,” Mimura writes, will invariably ask: “What is Asian American film?”ⁱ The frustration embedded in their query suggests a strong desire for definable boundaries to resolve the inherent ambiguity surrounding “Asian American film.” How might we begin to approach a compelling definition of Asian American film, or even Asian American cultural production as a whole? Do our expectations of Asian American art, for example, resemble Mimura’s students’ desire for categorical cohesion?

Mimura, however, recognizes within his students’ frustration a productive tension that surrounds the seemingly improbable task of defining Asian American cinema. He writes: “While studying it intently, diligently, we find that an Asian American film can no longer be ‘just’ a film made by an Asian American, no longer ‘just’ a story with Asian Americans in it, ‘just’ Asian American subject matter. Somehow it has to be more.”ⁱⁱ How might we consider Asian American art, by extension, as something irreducible—that is, artwork that goes beyond the equation of “just” Asian American artists producing artwork dominated by recognizable Asian American subjects, figures, or themes? Like Asian American cinema, Asian American art “cannot be exhaustively or authoritatively defined” yet remains “open and plural.”ⁱⁱⁱ It demands the deployment of other aesthetic, conceptual, and curatorial paradigms as well as hermeneutical lenses. Art historian Margo Machida describes Asian American art as having “always been a heterogeneous and unruly conversation marked as much by multiple perspectives and cultural crossbreeding as by contention and contradiction.”^{iv} Asian American art, indeed, demands something more.

Techniques: Contemporary Asian American Time-Based Art is a group exhibition of Asian American women artists working within the broad parameters of “time-based” multimedia. Their artwork participates in what Margo Machida describes as a “poetics of positionality,” a description that aptly captures contemporary Asian American art and art praxis as “complex, multidimensional and fluid.”^v *Techniques* is not dismissive of the centrality of the Asian American identities of the artists. But rather, the exhibition attempts to convey an antireductionist meditation on the continuing importance of identity and race-specific art spaces that promote and celebrate what curator and scholar Susette Min calls “the idiosyncratic landscape of



Gina Osterloh, *Dots Front Misfire—Shooting Blanks* from *Cut Room* series (2008) 30"x38" Lambda Photograph

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, Kat Larson, and Gina Osterloh. But for each of the artists, identities matter for different reasons. Indeed, while each of the artists’ work speaks to the importance of grounding their Asian American identities to their art as a means to confront the multidimensional axes of race and racism, which epitomizes the racial, political, and cultural ethos engendered by the Asian American Movement in the late 1960s, their work also seeks to move our conversations about the Asian American experience into the twenty-first century. In short, artists and artwork push us to consider a multiplicity of formal concerns and epistemic locations embedded in their artwork. Their art also demands of its viewers to consider and, indeed, to relish in the contingencies inherent in Asian American identities. That is, Bhaumik, Larson, and Osterloh capitalize on notions of identities as being in states of flux, ever-shifting, and continuously negotiated and constructed, without losing sight of their political import. As Min points out, contemporary Asian American artists, have “a freedom to pick, choose, manipulate, and reinvent different kinds of languages and issues, both formal and political.”^{vii} This freedom—or agency—underscores the art praxis of each of the artists in the show.

As a show that focuses on “time-based” art, *Techniques* captures the ways the concepts of time have influenced their medium or media of choice. However, like the impulse to redefine the rubric of “Asian American” by each of the artists, the show also seeks to broaden our conceptions of what constitutes “time-based art,” a mode of artistic production generally attributed to film and video production. The attachment of time-based art to the artwork in the show denotes the centrality of the temporal—which, according to Machida, we are “positioned by and within”—to Asian American artistic production. The time-based nature of the artwork in the show is thus captured not only through the use of conventional time-based media in Kat Larson and Gina Osterloh’s work but also resonates with its important role in the production of Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik’s site-specific installation art.

Indeed, the plethora of digital technologies today, for example, has inspired artists like Larson and Osterloh for their aesthetic and conceptual possibilities. Larson’s keen attention on producing visual narratives of dis/location is heightened by her use of the loop function in her digital work. Time is stretched to infinity in her videos, leaving her viewers psychically bruised by their viewing experience. Time in Osterloh’s photography points to a conceptual preoccupation with the medium’s documentary and archival potential, and indeed photography’s function in objectifying and, in

Asian American art.”^{vi}

Following Machida’s observations about “identities” as those that encapsulate “the divergent ways we are positioned both by and within accounts of bygone times,” the artwork in *Techniques* captures the aesthetic and affective relationships of each of the artists to time—past, present, and future. Identities matter for the three artists in the show:

Osterloh’s words, “naming” bodies.^{viii} And as Bhaumik recreates the alcove space within the Sheehan Gallery, the labor she expends in its creation as well as her relationship to the gallery space underscores the importance of time to her project. Is it possible then to detach the concept of time from Asian American identities, indeed to Asian American art? Is all Asian American art time-based?

The word “techniques” in the show’s title points to the compositional and intellectual strategies of the artists participating in the show. Their work captures an exciting repertoire of aesthetic and conceptual techniques that speaks boldly to the dynamism found within contemporary Asian American art. Moreover, the notion of “techniques” also points to the varied strategies of spectatorship that viewers of the exhibit bring with them to the show. While many viewers might bring preconceived ideas about Asian American art and time-based media as well as race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship to the exhibition, *Techniques* attempts to question, challenge, and unsettle epistemic certainties. One of the goals of the show is to inspire a reconfiguration of spectatorial techniques. Thus, *Techniques* is meant to activate what cultural theorist Mieke Bal describes as “a dialogue between the art and the viewer as thinker in



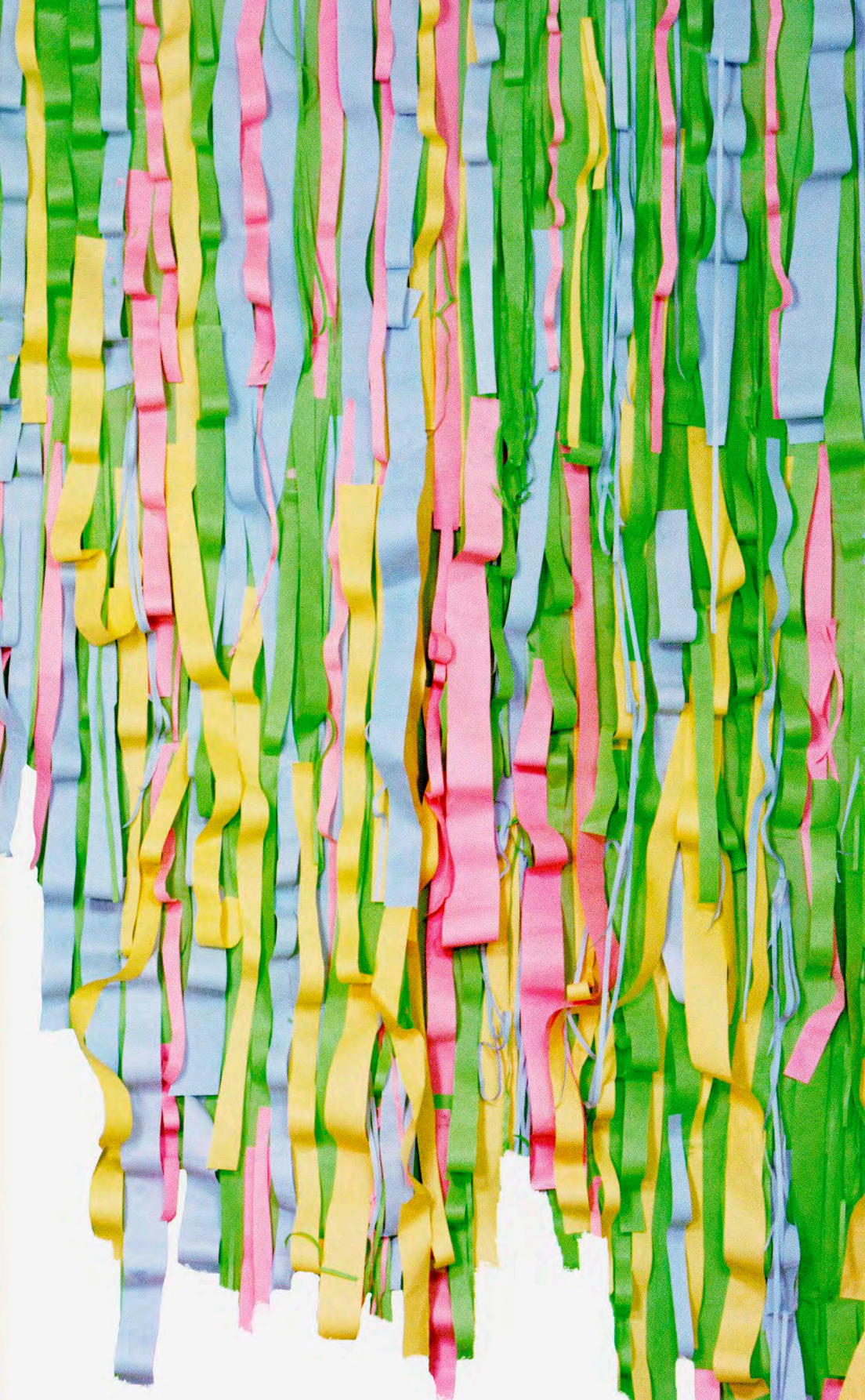
Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, *To Curry Favor* (2010). Installation view of solo show at *18 Reasons* in San Francisco. Chocolate wrappers and curry roux on dinner plates. Photography by Blair Sneddon.

which the art has its own power to speak, and speak back.”^{ix}

Seattle-based artist Kat Larson turns her attention to digital video to create her dual-channel video-installation work entitled *From Tit to Grave* (2010). On one channel plays the looped sounds and sight of a stream of milk being poured in a

seconds that are quickly replaced by a close-up view of a collection of bubbles popping on the milk’s surface. While on the other screen, the artist plays with our sense of time by drawing our attention to the quotidian act of wiping up spilt milk. But there is something amiss in the artist’s self-representation, as the act of wiping- and soaking-up spilt milk, at closer inspection, is actually an act of gracefully reapplying the liquid back onto the floor with her rag, as Larson has looped the video in reverse. What at first glance resembles an everyday scene of cleaning often attributed to the female body, Larson has transformed the room and her actions within into the uncanny. For performance studies scholar Karen Shimakawa, the Asian American body projects an uncanny strangeness, “an apparition of the other that persists problematically within Americanness.”^x Larson’s turn to the loop function is a strategy premised on estranging the work’s viewers, offering a critical attention to time as it relates to the minoritized female body and her performances within the domestic sphere. *From Tit to Grave* also brings to light Larson’s interest in picturing the concept of tension as it relates to beauty and death and caught within the domestic and freighted spaces of “home.” The gracefulness of her act of reapplying milk on the floor is perhaps a symbolic connection, indeed a reverent homage to her Filipina grandmother

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(*Nanay*), for whom Larson notes was a profound presence in her upbringing and who continues to be a strong influence in her art even though she has passed on. If milk connects child to mother, then it also becomes a powerful symbol that has bound Larson not only to her mother but also to her mother's mother, creating a Filipina genealogy that refuses to be wiped away.

Like Larson, Los Angeles-based photographer Gina Osterloh engages in visualizing tension, more specifically picturing what she identifies as "slippages" in subject formation. While on a Fulbright fellowship in the Philippines, Osterloh produced the *Cut Room* series (2008), a series of photographs of rooms constructed of strips of multicolored office-bond matte paper: pink, yellow, blue, and green (colors that were chosen out of necessity as no other shops in Manila carried any other colors). Osterloh's rooms range from an empty room to rooms inhabited by human figures made out of cut paper. The language of abstraction is central to Osterloh's aesthetic. Cultural critic Sarita See points out that abstract art by Filipino American artists has been met with accusations "of focusing on form at the expense of social reality and sociological content," especially when shown in "Asian American and other minority venues," while also being praised and celebrated by "establishment critics" for transcending the politics of race and identity in their work.^{xi} Her work thus begs the question: How do we locate abstraction in contemporary Asian American art? If Asian American scholars and critics dismiss abstract art for its lack of identifying markers of race, while "establishment critics" esteem such works precisely for their apolitical qualities, Osterloh's work defies the expectations of both spheres of criticism. As a mixed-race artist, Osterloh has experienced the burden of racially identifying and representing throughout her life, embodied on a symbolic level in her *Cut Room* series. Indeed, what she labels as "slippages," this inability to be interpellated completely by dominant symbolic orders, is captured by the paper human figures that continue to stand out against the colorful backdrop despite almost being camouflaged. Rather than a "politics of evading" identity, through abstraction, Osterloh's work literally, synecdochically, and defiantly constructs presence of identity, however subtle.^{xii}

Notions of presence also resonate in San Francisco-based artist Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik's site-specific installation piece entitled *The Curry Institute* (2010). The visual and olfactory presence of curry becomes the engine that drives Bhaumik's institute, which is physically situated in an alcove space in the Sheehan Gallery. Bhaumik, as well,



Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, *To Curry Favor* (2010). Installation view of solo show at *18 Reasons*. Curry powder applied directly to the gallery wall. Photography by Blair Sneddon.

will act as an emissary of the institute during her time at Whitman College: holding workshops on curry with students and producing a curry-inspired dinner. Bhaumik notes: "This Curry Institute is at once an art installation and a space to house the various interdisci-

plinary arms of my investigations into curry in culture, food, health, and art."^{xiii} The institute's walls will be wallpapered with designs composed of curry powder, exhibiting Bhaumik's use of curry as an artistic medium and displaying, as well, the resulting scents as an integral part of her time-based art. The lingering scents in the space will change over time, as air currents in the room and the volume of people present at any given time will invariably alter viewers' olfactory experiences. Bhaumik challenges the sense of sight as the privilege locus for appreciating visual art. "We're supposed to look at art, not taste it," Bhaumik states, "But what happens when we do?"^{xiv} Indeed, what happens when artists entice us to smell and eat their art? Curry, a general term for an admixture of spices—pepper, turmeric, cumin, coriander (among others)—and popularly associated the foodways of South Asia, becomes the necessary medium/ingredient for Bhaumik to explore "marginalized senses in marginalized bodies."^{xv} Curry, in many ways, owes its beginning to the very transnational forces that had influenced its consumption in sixteenth-century India, similar forces that are currently guiding its use in today's globalized world. Its recognizability in taste, smell, and sight is often grounded in perceptions of difference, whether somatic or otherwise. Bhaumik's use of "institute" in the title grounds her work to spaces of knowledge production, one that is fortified by a counterarchival conceptualism. That is, *The Curry Institute* brings into relief the interplay of power, discipline, identity, and difference within the very interdisciplinary and subversive medium/ingredient: curry.

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i Glen Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2009), xxi.

ii Ibid. My emphasis.

iii Ibid., xxii.

iv Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

v Ibid., 17.

vi Susette Min, "The Last Asian American Exhibition in the Whole Entire World," in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, eds. Melissa Chu et al. (New York: Asia Society, 2006), 37.

vii Ibid. 36. Original emphasis.

viii Gina Osterloh, interview by the author, November 29, 2010. Walla Walla, WA.

ix Mieke Bal, "Guest Column: Exhibition Practices," *PMLA* 125.1 (January 2010), 10.

x Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 160. Original emphasis.

xi Sarita See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): 128.

xii Ibid.

xiii Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, e-mail message to the author, October 29, 2010.

xiv Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, "The Other Sense," *Art Practical*, November 18, 2010, accessed December 3, 2010, http://www.artpractical.com/review/the_other_senses/.

xv Ibid.