



NEWS RELEASE

October 20, 1999

For Immediate Release

Press release on art exhibition:

Passing (Why is it people feel the need to pass for something they are not?)

November 23, 1999 - January 27, 2000

Closed for the holidays November 25 - 28, December 10 through January 3

Museum Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, 11-4; Tuesday evening 6-8; Saturday 11-2.
Open to tour groups by appointment.

Reception: Tuesday, November 30, 6-8, reception with artist presentation

Artists:

Candi Farlice, Daniel Harris, Kay Kang, Lisa Kokin, Gayle Tanaka, Cynthia Tom, Rev. Timothy T. Taylor, Flo Oy Wong

The exhibition *Passing (Why is it people feel the need to pass for something they are not?)* focuses on the activity of passing for something else, on what is gained and what is lost. Immigrants often drop part of their surname or change it completely. Others pass for other cultures or races, perhaps for advancement, perhaps for survival. Most of us pass at one time or another. Demographics change when people are "in the closet." On the personal level, not being the person you are, your life can become a "lie." From another angle, passing can be connected with becoming — for example by way of surgery, education, or accumulation of wealth. The art of passing can be a positive life skill. The *Passing* exhibition examines this activity from a variety of viewpoints, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation.

Passing grew from an idea of artist Candi Farlice. The exhibition was curated by Candi Farlice and Jan Rindfleisch working with Diana Argabrite, and developed through discussions with the artists and others.

Candi Farlice's first encounter with passing was as a child. She asked her mother, "Why does Hollis only come over at night?" Her mother answered, "Because he's passing." Farlice has constructed an installation *Enclosure* made from window shades, beeswax, cedar. One can enter into a very small space and get a sense of

culture when assimilated into a new culture. The outer cutting takes place in an instant, but the inner change (whether minor or major) takes place over an extended period of time — in a sense a person passes, because the outside does not reflect the inside. Additionally the white shirt Tanaka wears and the pose from the back allow her to pass for a more generalized human figure, because gender, age, and cultural background are not well defined. She strikes against stereotypes — pigeonholing a person quickly by a few visual clues — and the limitations which so often follow.

She uses this device again in her *White Shirt* series in which the white shirt represents the pressure to fit in and thus be invisible in a sea of white faces. “It is about trying to be like the dominant culture yet because of my Asian face, being unable to pass for white. Our eyes always give us away.” Hidden away is the experience of her family and other Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. Tanaka feels they later exchanged barbed wire for a wall of glass behind which “we built a new identity as a model minority, a hard-working group whose Americanness could not be questioned. But our appearance could not be altered. All the negative associations of the Japanese as the evil enemy of World War II, all the stereotypes connected with the exotic east...all the images of the passive, subordinate, exquisite Japanese female — all of these were carried around on our faces.”

Tanaka’s work has to do with eye and I, with looking in and looking out, with questioning: “I can be aware of the way I am perceived, and through this awareness, avoid unconscious acceptance of the culture’s view of [me].”

Kay Kang’s transition to her recent work reflects a form of passing. As a child Kang was taught Chinese calligraphy from her father and his mother, who lived in Korea. Kang’s father died when Kang was living in the U.S. as a young woman. Her mother didn’t tell her about his cancer till afterwards, and Kang felt numb. Only four years ago, twenty years after his death, did she actually go through a grieving process, building a Day of the Dead altar for him and creating artwork from his old letters to her and her answers. She utilized calligraphic forms in the paintings *Conversation with my Father* and *Conversation with my Mother*. Earlier she had not wanted to show calligraphic work, because it seemed to come from a second or third world country. She only did this for her father. But she hit a response in viewers she hadn’t felt during the many years she had painted in a more western style. She also realized this artistic direction was “the real me.” *A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words* (1993-97), 6’x10’, is a changeover piece, including the newer calligraphic elements and the older natural forms which had always fascinated her, perhaps because of their similarity to the calligraphic forms. More recently she has looked directly at her Korean culture in relation to other cultures, participating in *Storefront Live*, a project of the Korean American Museum in Los Angeles involving Latino, Black, and Korean artists. Her contribution is a *Waiting Room*, a calming, meditative installation for a Korean acupuncture clinic (“like *Conversations with my Father* only brighter”).

Cynthia Tom has written eloquently about passing, for example how it can be a positive life skill. “Used correctly and developed from a base of knowledge and self-worth, the art of ‘passing’ can be a great skill, especially in situations of potential conflict.” Her work and life stories reveal many forms of passing. *Hom Shee Mock, 1923, An Angel Island Mug Shot* is a portrait of her mother’s mother, often part of an installation *Crossing the Blood Brain Barrier*. It is related to the fear of drawing attention to yourself, perhaps a mindset from fear of government in China (for example under Mao when simply crying was seen as an act of rebellion). Her family members have not wanted to talk about the past — understandable so. Her grandmother hadn’t wanted to come to the U.S. She was sold to her grandfather here. The baby boy she carried was a paper son, brought to the U.S. to be sold. Many families hide their pasts, because of fear, shame, or other conflicting emotions.

Tom relates an occurrence familiar to many of her generation: "My father moved us out of Chinatown at a time when that wasn't done." Now Tom likes to go to Chinatown and talk with the Chinese women. Her brothers don't go. "I've passed to the other side. I have compassion for them, embrace that side of me." Recently Tom feels the women in her paintings are becoming more Asian (before the faces were European). Tom's art looks at the mix of east and west, being Chinese American. In one self portrait *Aspiration*, a modest Chinese dress form is in the background, while in the foreground Tom wears an elegant and brazen Western outfit and is smoking: "But I don't smoke. It has to do with passing in my job, being more outgoing... Learning it is OK to travel to either end of the spectrum depending on the situation." In another surreal self-portrait, *Finding Your Voice*, she is again beautifully gowned, but one sees a little artist mannequin figure within: "Being proud of who you are and where you come from. Honor that voice and know when to use it and when to keep it in a quiet place."

Installed near Tom's paintings is a work **Flo Oy Wong** created for Cynthia Tom's father, a paper person himself. It is part of Wong's *made in usa: Angel Island Shhh*, an artwork in the form of a series of U.S. flags constructed from rice sacks, exploring the identity secrets of Chinese immigrants who were interrogated at the Angel Island Immigration Station from 1910 - 1940. Each work is a tribute to someone who had to assume a false identity such as a "paper husband" or a "paper sister." Before his death, Tom's father had stated: "I'm not a legitimate American. I'm so ashamed." Wong has conducted interviews, recorded the stories, and incorporated portions in her art. Collaborating with Kearny St. Workshop in San Francisco, Wong plans to exhibit the series on Angel Island in Summer 2000.

The found-object sculpture of **Daniel Harris** reveals what can be lost by passing and the journey to recover it. Part of Harris's family came to the U.S. after the Holocaust. As so many other immigrants, they wanted to assimilate as quickly as possible. Shave the beard. Think of America first, Judaism second. Harris feels his family did not give him a sense of Jewishness. Now he has had to go back to rekindle his faith. He feels others of this "third generation" also are going back to recapture the spiritual. He has tried to talk with his grandmother about Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. But she thinks it's voodoo. Racial hatred over centuries, going back to 1600, has killed those who followed it. One black-and-red sculpture, *The Wandering Jew*, with computer parts, door handle, mask, and more, investigates the stereotype of the Jew, and the theme of the Jew as demon: "Assimilation into dominant cultures usually occurs from tragedies of this type." He talks about the demonic as trying to understand the divine. He seeks tikkun, renewal, and has created a sculpture with that title. "Tikkun is also a strand in the continuity of traditions that compels individuals ...to glimpse the authenticity of their experience as holy. Once seen or re-seen, this interior space becomes medicinal: one begins to see oneself." Harris also sees a form of passing in those who deny the pagan roots of Christianity and the Egyptian roots of Judaism. Harris wears a beard, uses Hebrew letters in all his artwork — "a spiritual language, not spoken until Israel." *The Kabbalist* is a self-portrait.

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Contact Jan Rindfleisch (408)864-8836