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Dispatch

Chicago

BY LAURA KINA

New networks of alterity and resistance



Photo documentation of Rebirth Garments's performance at "Werq: Embodying Queer Spirit," Gallery 400, Chicago, on October 24, 2015. Photo by Kiam Marcelo Junio. Courtesy Sky Cubacub.

Chicago's art scene reflects its reputation as a "City of Neighborhoods." Artists from China, Hong Kong, India, South Korea and Taiwan, drawn to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, consistently bring new international perspectives. Rapid gentrification is currently pushing out many working-class people of color from their neighborhoods and into areas where they are crossing racial lines. Beyond the major institutions in the downtown area—the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA) and the Chicago Cultural Center— lies a network of nonprofit and experimental spaces that support artists of color, including Asian and Asian American artists, whose individual identities and cultural histories are intermixing, thereby shaping new communities. These independent organizations are bolstered by the nonprofits 3Arts, Threewalls and the Chicago Artists Coalition, which each offer pivotal forms of support.

Curators, artists and community organizers lead the way in centering on nondominant narratives. The Field Museum recently brought on Debra Yepa-Pappan, a Korean and Jemez-Pueblo artist, to serve as the community engagement coordinator for the Native American Exhibit Hall renovation project. In recognition of her work at the Northwestern University Block Museum, curator Janet Dees was awarded a Warhol Foundation Curatorial Research Fellowship for her work on the history of anti-black violence in American arts.

Underrepresented communities carve out their own spaces through virtual platforms, pop-ups, artists collectives and programs hosted in established institutions. Nonbinary Filipinx, queer, disabled artist Sky Cubacub founded Rebirth Garments, which produces gender nonconforming wearables and accessories, and is a member of the intersectional fashion group Radical Visibility Collective. Their performance and installation work has been featured at the MCA and the Chicago History Museum as well as at community events such as Kultura Festival, the Filipino- American food and arts festival.

For many younger Chicagoans, artistic and activist projects are intertwined. Sarah-Ji, a queer Korean photographer, documents freedom struggles in Chicago under Love + Struggle Photos, and is a core member of For the People Artists Collective as well as a member of the anti-violence group Love & Protect. Textile artist Aram Han Sifuentes spotlighted immigrant rights in the recent show "To Ward Off Authorities and to Protect My Neighbors" at Hyde Park Art Center, which featured window curtains printed with basic constitutional rights in various languages.

Immigrant histories are the subject of many artists' current practices. Hường Ngô's 2017 exhibition "To Name It Is to See It," curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm at DePaul Art Museum, connected the intersectional feminist artist's story as a refugee from Vietnam with larger political histories. Ngô's latest exhibition at Hyde Park's 4th Ward Project Space—a storage space turned gallery by James Kao, Mika Horibuchi and Valentina Zamfirescu—links a Vietnamese fighter pilot from the Soviet Intercosmos Program to the exile population in Parisian banlieues.

In the southwestern district of Beverly, artists Larry Lee and Susannah Papish run the art space Boundary in Papish's garage. There, Alejandro Acierto's mediation on archival photographs of the American colonial government lynching of Filipinos, "The Dead Are Not Altogether Powerless," was an "elegy for the departed, for the incarcerated, for those forced out from their lands." For over 20 years, Lee has curated art shows for the Asian American Showcase at the Gene Siskel Film Center. This year's 24th showcase in April featured a group show of eight artists curated by YoungSun Choi.

On the north side, the interdisciplinary arts organization Axis Lab fights to preserve the legacy of the Southeast Asian community in the Argyle Street Corridor with programs intersecting food, design and education. In Rogers Park, from October 2015 until March 2019, artist Thomas Kong operated his convenience store stockroom as a project space called the Back Room where other artists were invited to respond to Kong’s thousands of collage and assemblage works. A former K-pop singer, SY Lim operates the o62 Gallery within the artist-owned Zhou B. Art Center, and showcased the essence of Kong’s eclectic space in the 2018 show “Thomas Kong: Passing Time at Kim’s Corner Food.”

While offering a range of diverse scenes and opportunities, Chicago’s sprawl and divisions also mean that it is easy not to know about what is happening in other parts of the city. To redress that situation, curator Tempestt Hazel co-founded the website Sixty Inches From Center. The site hosts conversations with artists in its Beyond the Page column, such as for Udit Upadhyaya, who showed at Roman Susan Gallery in 2018. There, the artist filled gallery walls with poetic reflections in her mother-tongue Hindi to contemplate solitude, grief and loss and invited artists to perform in the space to gift “the feeling of being alive in a messy world . . . and somehow less alone.”

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