

Museum delves into Asian Adoptee experience.

Judith van Praag

Artists often have their finger to the pulse of what's happening in the world. Modern Art curators pride themselves in creating exhibitions that are avant garde, ahead of the news, probing the conscience of the audience. Some things can't be planned, but are timely in an eerie manner.

In the wake of the devastating effects of the Tsunami, when a another wave of Asian adoptions (in the United States and elsewhere) is expected, "Asian & Pacific Islander Adoptees: A Journey through Identity," opened at The Wing Luke Asian Art Museum.

Cofounder of the Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington (AAAW-1996) and former WLAM Public Relations Associate Katie Tupper e-mailed me from the East Coast that this show was a long time in the making. Through round table discussions WLAM staff and Community Action Committee members decided on the main points to be highlighted in the exhibition. In this exhibition, there's something for everybody. History, artifacts, videography, personal stories of adoptees as well as adoptive parents, art- and literary works and statistics.

The show is set up chronologically and in "horseshoe" fashion, which brings the historic information at the beginning, and the future of adoption in the end, side by side; the display areas are only partitioned by a temporary wall. As though past and future are weighted against each other by the makers of the show: "This is how it started, how it was: this is how we would like for us and you to carry on."

The makers and participants of the show aim to deliver a distinct message. As CAC member Kevin Minh Alan told me, "Adoptive parents need to be prepared to do a lot of explaining."

To make that clear, participants do their part of explaining and sharing their points of view and experiences. Peers as well as members of the younger generation of adoptees may recognize

their own feelings and thoughts, such as Brenda Traver's: "I think it is important to know there are others, people that are going through the same thing, and that you are not alone, and that you have someone to talk to."

On the evening that the exhibit opened, I noticed an adoptive mother seated on the couch in the inviting living room setting. She was viewing Ian Dapiioen's "Videography" –about a Korean Adoptee visiting her country of birth. At the same time she and I watched her small Chinese-American daughter, who pressed her body against the projection wall, studying the projected imagery on her skin, becoming part of the story of adoption –providing a live action/ multimedia performance.

Meanwhile I listened to the video's voiceover. The Korean-American adoptee said that she related more to the visiting Caucasians and Afro-Americans (the foreigners) than to the Koreans around her. Adding that she learned more about herself through other adoptees in Korea than in the United States.

There are "Life Story" albums and photo essays of adult adoptees searching for their birth parents. Multiracial family pictures abound, showing how adoptive families lead the way in making the all-American family multi cultural. Another example of how adoption has changed the traditional American family picture, is illustrated by a photo of a same-sex couple with their son.

The story of participating artist Darius Morrison's adoptive family as visualized in a paint by numbers family portrait seems modeled on the example set by Harry and Bertha Hold. The Holds, Evangelical Christians who set the standard for many, "Doing God's Work", adopted eight Korean children in 1955; a loving response to the violence and destruction of war. Morrison's artwork, a series of prints portraying the artist at different ages, shows one Asian-American adoptee's personal struggle for identity.

Adoptive parent Barbara Kuhnes contribution to the show is an acrylic on canvas painting, depicting small Chinese girls rendered in Chinese painting tradition. A touching gesture of love and respect, offering the Chinese-American adopted daughter

a chance to look at faces like her own, in her adoptive mother's family picture gallery.

Throughout the exhibit visitors are invited to enter their thoughts about adoption in notebooks provided by the museum.

In case the answer to the question "Who am I" is too loaded with emotion to be addressed on the spot, visitors who are inspired by the show, might wish to work on their answers in the privacy of their homes or studios. And perhaps they'll enter their visual or literary response, to be considered for presentation during a 2.5 hour long "Talent Showcase" which will take place in conjunction with, but at a different location than the exhibition at the Wing Luke Asian Museum, in May 2005 (check www.wingluke.org for dates).

In the notebook titled "What makes a Family?" one of the answers is, "People who are there to make you feel comfortable when the world seems to be falling apart."

The show "Asian & Pacific Islander Adoptees: a Journey Through Identity" clarifies how difficult such a seemingly clear task can be, and also how creating a supportive environment may be accomplished. Dialogue is the word.

Through September 4, 2005 at Wing Luke Asian Museum
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<http://www.wingluke.org>

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