

di Liscia, Valentina. "At Queens's Noguchi Museum, Banners by Asian Artists Address Racism", *Hyperallergic*, 18 November 2021.

HYPERALLERGIC

Chemin Hsiao, winner of the museum's Open Call for Artist Banners, and runners-up Woomin Kim and Mo Kong discuss their designs with Hyperallergic.



Runner-up Woomin Kim's banner design, "Shijang Project" (2021) (courtesy of the Noguchi Museum)

Modernist sculptor and architect Isamu Noguchi's legacy in the history of art is unshakeable. However, as a Japanese American who lived during World War II and its aftermath, a time of rising anti-Japanese sentiment in the US and distrust of Americans in Japan, he often felt unrooted in his identity. It is said that he found refuge in the natural world, a lifelong love affair that lent his artworks their sensual, biomorphic quality.

As reports of bias incidents and hate crimes against people of Asian descent surged in the US and elsewhere in the last year, fueled by racism and xenophobia exacerbated by pandemic misinformation, the artist's namesake museum in New York City sought to send a message of solidarity. This summer, the Noguchi Museum in Queens launched an open call to transform its outdoor banners into symbols of anti-racism that would welcome the building's diverse passersby, even if they did not walk through its doors.

The criteria: applicants had to be emerging Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) artists, and they must work or reside in Queens – a heavily immigrant-populated borough whose undeniable wealth of creative prowess is sometimes overshadowed by neighboring Brooklyn and Manhattan.

"Early on when we were discussing the parameters for the project, we thought about opening it up to all of New York, but we decided we wanted to hear from our local Queens-based AAPI artists specifically," Katie Kornis, the museum's administrative associate, told Hyperallergic. "We knew that would narrow down the pool, but it was important, because I feel like often the Queens artists community is kind of unsung."

The winning banners, designed by Taiwanese artist Chemin Hsiao, were unveiled this week to coincide with the 117th anniversary of Noguchi's birth on November 17. Runners-up Woomin Kim and Mo Kong were also celebrated in a ceremony on Tuesday, their artworks reproduced in the museum's lobby.

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Hsiao describes his proposal, "Dandelions Know" (2021), as a "visual essay," with each sequential banner conveying a narrative of support and hope rendered in meditative watercolors. The imagery of spiders in the first two banners evokes the seemingly inescapable web that racism can spin, but by the third, a masked figure is "cutting the loop" of hate. The remaining designs, printed on the reverse, depict dandelions, origami cranes, and gestures of embrace.

After reading the story of Vicha Ratanapakdee, an 84-year-old Thai man who was pushed to death in San Francisco this summer, Hsiao felt helpless. The incident was part of an alarming and lethal wave of assaults that alerted the nation to rising anti-Asian violence.

"It's so hard to tackle this issue, because our work can't help those people who have already suffered, whose family is gone," Hsiao said in an interview between the artists and *Hyperallergic* at the museum. "The only way to approach this was to ask myself, as an Asian living here, how I was feeling."

"In an article, [Ratanapakdee's] son-in-law was talking about wishing that he could forgive that person who pushed his father," Hsiao continued. "In one of the banners, there's a man looking at the spiders. Instead of punishing, I wish we could look at the fear that caused this. And maybe think about what we can do about it."

"We together as Asians, we can be dandelions," Hsiao said. "So when you fall we try to catch you."

Hsiao was also inspired by the personal experience of Noguchi as a *Nisei*, a second-generation Japanese American. During World War II, the sculptor voluntarily entered the Poston War Relocation Camp in the Arizona desert. As a resident of New York, Noguchi was exempt from a cruel executive order that forced more than 100,000 people of Japanese descent into internment, but he chose to stay in Poston in the hopes of improving living conditions at the camp. During this period, he observed the ways in which others like him navigated their culture and background.

"At the camp, he found that all the Nisei there were experiencing what he called a 'peculiar tragedy': they did not feel American enough for America, and not Japanese enough for Japan," Hsiao told *Hyperallergic*. "He said the Nisei were 'a middle people without middle ground.'"

Noguchi's insight resonates poignantly in the context of Queens, the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world, where immigrants make up nearly half of the population and over 100 languages are spoken.

"I think a lot of immigrants share this experience," said Kong, one of two runners-up, who was born and raised in Shanxi, China. "There is even a fluidity between being Asian and Asian American – I'm never going to be Asian American, because I'm not, I'm from a different country. I'm always going to be in the middle." Kong's banner design, "Still Life of an Asian Household's Fridge" (2021), features photographs of sculptural installations they made inside their refrigerator using ingredients found in Asian grocery stores, many of which lost customers and were forced to close during the pandemic. A can of SPAM and ginger root are interspersed with objects that speak to Kong's immigrant identity, melding humor with serious reflection.

"Food is a muscle memory that brings you back to the first time you had it. And I think in general, Asian cultures talk about food a lot," the artist told *Hyperallergic*. "What we eat can tell people where we come from and their background stories as an immigrant."

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"I think in the past two years, I've really been thinking about art institutions," added Kong, who worked with K-12 students from Queens public schools to create their own "fridge installations." With their banner proposal, they said, "I just want to tell people who are walking through, who are not from the art community, that they can have access to this, even if they're immigrants, even if they're kids."

Food and other cultural markers also anchor Woomin Kim's banner design, "Shijang Project" (2021), a series of kaleidoscopic, collage-like quilts modeled after her memories of Korean shijang street markets.

"I've always recognized how this kind of very important daily life experience for Asians is often very inaccurately described in Western contexts, like Hollywood movies," she told *Hyperallergic*. "It's usually overly romanticized or told from a very xenophobic perspective." During the pandemic, she became more attuned to "how Western narratives caused violent consequences towards Asian communities."

"This is the place that I used to go all the time growing up. And whenever I visit Korea, it's one of the first place I go," Kim added. "In my quilts, I describe the different kinds of merchants, stores, and material assemblage that you can see in these kinds of open-air markets. It's such a vibrant place, with a fish market next to a fabric market and all different kinds of energy." She wanted to show this landscape from her perspective: a pulsing environment of exchange, richness, and celebration.

Submissions to the banner open call were evaluated by members of two local partner organizations, Queens Council on the Arts and the Asian American Arts Alliance; the Noguchi Museum's organizing committee; and, notably, its own employees. In a statement, the institution described a "cross-departmental, intergenerational group of staff volunteers" who had a say in selecting the winners.

This week, the museum also announced an expansion of its Isamu Noguchi Archive, an already impressive trove of the artist's manuscripts, correspondences, photographs, exhibition ephemera, architectural drawings, and more. Newly digitized film of Noguchi working and lecturing as well as never-before-seen audiovisual materials have now been added to the public digital collection.

The museum is considering making the initiative an annual competition. "I'm hoping that it will open people up to investigate because previously it was just our logo banners out there," Korns told *Hyperallergic*. "I think the public art aspect of the banners is something that Noguchi would have really embraced. Because he wanted his work to be out in the world."

Hsiao's banners will remain on view outside the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens, through spring 2022.