

hardboiled

the asian pacific american newsmagazine



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Hip Hop Spot

Orientalism at
SFMOMA

Asians in Television:
Get the Picture?

Dare to
Prop 54:
Just Say No

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If you're a woman and Asian, you've heard it before.

"Ni hao mah?"

"Konnichiwa?"

"Oooh, Asian flava."

I've heard these phrases on the streets of New York City, San Diego, and Washington DC, respectively, and similar ones in Boston, London, Barcelona, and even in my beloved San Francisco. Ask any Asian woman, and she will likely be able to identify exactly when

so many photos of the women in sexually explicit positions. Those who are not posing like Playboy bunnies are painfully self-conscious: arms awkwardly crossed across their laps or clenched to their sides, hands clasped in front. The (White American) male gaze is

CUM SEE ASIAN GIRLS AT SFMOMA

by lisa macabasco

and where she was addressed by a non-Asian male in such a manner. It's hard to forget when someone makes you stop feel like a human being.

That's why it was particularly hard for me to experience the new photography exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *The Photographs of Reagan Louie: Sex Work in Asia* (through December 7). Reagan Louie fails to humanize his subjects, female sex workers in Asia, and, in (stereo)typical passive Asian male style, only hints at his empathy instead of explicitly showing any emotion about the women he photographs.

The exhibit's curator trumps up Louie's objectivity towards the prostitutes, noting that he does not judge, idealize, or glamorize them. "What is most daring about Louie's work is his consistent refusal to take an explicit stance on the issue of prostitution," the introduction to the exhibit reads, noting the works "offer a dispassionate examination of a topic that is both controversial and conflicted." This description is apt: Louie's works are "dispassionate" in that they lack any emotion, and "examination" is a more appropriate word for his work than "art," since it is almost clinical in its absence of feeling. There is so little joy, empathy, or pathos in his works; there are few feelings at all. It's unclear how Louie himself felt about the women he photographed, leaving viewers also feeling ambivalent, which is something one should never feel about sex workers. I fail to see how staying neutral on a topic so packed with emotions is effective, especially since these women are nameless and faceless sex objects, little more than blips on the screen of American imperialist history.

It's heartbreaking that Louie's exhibit once more renders these women as nameless and faceless. In a good number of his photographs, the woman's face is hidden by her hair or because her back is towards the camera. In fact, Louie's lens (and perhaps other instruments) seems to be preoccupied with long, straight, black or dyed brown, silky Asian hair. How exotic their hair is, or at least that's what men with Asian fetish tell me.

Louie does little to challenge the objectification of Asian women, and that is the last thing these women in particular (and all Asian women in general) need. Instead of urging viewers to "see beyond reductive stereotypes," as the exhibit claims, he actually makes the situation worse by including so many works that border on pornography: many show the women naked and in explicitly sexual positions or suggestive poses. They hold their eyes downwards, in the age-old submissive Asian woman fashion. You half-expect to see a woman holding a painted fan in front of her mouth, coyly looking up at the camera, but that seems to be the only cliché missing here.

Louie writes in the exhibit: "Above all, I wanted to make clear that I was photographing them for reasons other than sexual gratification." It's extremely hard to take him seriously when hanging nearby is a portrait of "Cio-Cio," who naughtily twirls her fried bleached-blond hair while lying down and gazing at her body in a mirror next to her. Another woman lifts her skirt up while looking straight up at Louie's camera. Two blonde Japanese girls lie together on a small bed, completely naked except for knee-high socks, touching themselves seductively and contorting their bodies. Obviously, these poses are not natural reclining positions, and there seems to be no other spectator present in the room besides Louie, so it's hard not to see these pictures as more than outtakes from the Asian issue of a pornographic magazine. Many of the works remind one of the pinup calendars that Marilyn Monroe got her start in, hinting at the White standard of beauty that even women in Asia cannot escape from.

Part of why the exhibit fails is simply because Louie, a Bay Area-based second-generation Chinese American, seems to be a man who has not questioned his male privilege enough. He does acknowledge his relationship to the women he photographs: "I remained conscious of ... the power I had as a man and an outsider," he writes in the exhibit, but it's hard to believe he comprehends the gender dynamics when he includes

alive and well in Louie's works; the women know they are being photographed by a man and adjust themselves accordingly. They are subjects in multiple meanings of the word: subjects of his portraits, of patriarchy, and of male sexual desires on both sides of the Pacific.

Louie also had privilege as an American, although that is rarely explored in the exhibit. In one of the works, sullen bar maids play board games with faceless White men while the American flag hangs ominously in the background, a small reminder of the legacy of American colonialism and military presence in Asia and its immense impact on the sex trade. If Louie is a typical Asian male in the masking of his emotions about his subjects, he proves to be an archetypal American male by focusing on himself rather than the women in his narratives accompanying his work. He talks about experiences in various Asian countries with cab drivers, brothel madams, and eager models. The lives and personalities of the women he photographs are pushed to the background, as they have been and will continue to be.

Louie's works are accompanied by a set of artwork selected by the artist from the museum's permanent collection that provided him with inspiration. Since upon seeing Louie's works it's clear that his gaze is not so different from the White male gaze, it's no surprise that he pays homage to the usual White male suspects, including Picasso and Warhol's renditions of femininity. But the best work in the entire exhibit also lies here: Yasumasa Morimura's "Portrait (Futago)." A satire of Edouard Manet's famed "Olympia," the artist, a Japanese man, impersonates both the courtesan reclining on her seat and looking boldly at the camera and also the maid attending to her. The work is an acknowledgement of the objectification and exoticizing of the East (an by extension those of Asian descent) by the West. It's a social commentary on Eurocentric stereotypes and Western fantasies of Asian women. Like David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Morimura twists

expectations by placing himself in the position occupied by Manet's female courtesan and mocks Western ideas of the East by including a kimono and porcelain cat (both usually associated with Japan and Asia by Westerners). Morimura succeeds in making a statement and eliciting a response from viewers; unfortunately Louie could not twist expectations of and stereotypes about sex trade workers in a similar way.

The Photographs of Reagan Louie: Sex Work in Asia, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, through December 7, 2003. www.sfmoma.org



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