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IN THE PRESENCE OF: COLLECTIVE HISTORIES OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS ASSOCIATION, Curated by Christina Hobbs



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Karin Higa's influential essay from 2002 recounts the historical exclusion of Asian American women from the male-dominated Asian American movement and the second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s by tracing the art and lives of the following Asian American women artists: Ruth Asawa, Hisako Hibi, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Rea Tajiri, and Hung Liu. The author recognizes the specificities of the artists' personal and collective histories, generational differences, and artistic practices, and she concludes, "What is the wisdom in grouping the diverse and divergent practices of these artists?"

While recent theorizations of Asian American femininity animated through the registers of ornamentalism, inscrutability, invisibility, and silence have been organized around an understanding of gender formation as an individual process, *In the Presence Of* returns to Higa's question "What is an Asian American woman artist?" through the frameworks of kinship, mentorship, intergenerational friendship, and community-building between artists in the group.

The **Asian American Women Artists Association** (AAWAA) was founded in 1989 by the artists Flo Oy Wong and Betty Kano with the ardent support of art historian Moira Roth as an ecology of support for Asian American women that provided the space for experimentation and the reimagining of "a place of one's own." Through the production of exhibitions, slide presentations, symposia, and publications, AAWAA has sought to address Asian American women artists' historical absence within mainstream art institutions and their misrepresentation within the historical record. Over the past thirty-five years, the association has fostered the creative practices of hundreds of artists and writers in the Bay Area including Lucy Arai, Ruth Asawa, Bernice Bing, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lenore Chinn, Terry Acebo Davis, Shari Arai DeBoer, Hisako Hibi, Nancy Hom, Betty Kano, Genny Lim, Hung Liu, Barbara Jane Reyes, Pallavi Sharma, Cynthia Tom, Flo Oy Wong, and Nellie Wong. Founded in the same year that Carlos Villa held the symposia *Sources of a Distinct Majority* at the San Francisco Art

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Event Dates

January 27, 2024 to April 20, 2024

Location

Berkeley Art Center

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Institute and one year prior to the creation of Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network in New York, AAWAA's ongoing history over the past thirty-five years traces the development of Asian American art from the era of multiculturalism to the present.

Following the Women's Caucus for Art held in San Francisco in February 1989, Wong and Kano recognized the lack of Asian American participation and leadership, and with the support of Roth the artists reached out to other Asian American women in their network leading to the first meeting of AAWAA. According to Kano, an important recognition that influenced the group's formation was the realization that "in order to be successful in an art world dominated by white males, people of color needed to control the whole apparatus of art production," and therefore the association has not only produced exhibitions but also published writing on Asian American women artists and developed relationships with curators and scholars focusing on Asian American art including Karin Higa, Elaine Kim, and Margo Machida. *In the Presence Of* takes its title from the feeling expressed by members at the early AAWAA meetings that the purpose of the organization at its founding was simply to be together. The exhibition foregrounds the relationships between artists involved in AAWAA as well as forms of remembrance that offered space for healing, reflection, and historicization on the artist's terms. Through the practices of tributes, gift-giving, and coalition-building, the exhibition seeks to highlight the collective practices between artists that the association has cultivated in order to present an archive that is at once celebratory, messy, caring, disjointed, and most of all, in process, as the association continues to the present day.

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