



10 Older Asian American Artists to Celebrate This AAPI Heritage Month

Mimi Wong



Portrait of David Diao by Martien Mulder. Courtesy of David Diao.



David Diao
Little Suprematist Prison #17, 1986
Office Baroque
US\$35,000

The fight for visibility—rightfully recognizing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders for their contributions to art history—goes back generations. For as long as diasporic and Indigenous artists have been making work, the Western-gazing industry hasn't always paid attention, sometimes not until after individuals have already passed.

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Tanya Leighton

The late Pacita Abad, Yong Soon Min, and Martin Wong were among those featured in “Godzilla: Echoes from the 1990s Asian American Arts Network,” presented at New York’s Eric Firestone Gallery earlier this year. Serving as an overdue celebration, the group exhibition also included living artists Rina Banerjee, Byron Kim, and Zhang Hongtu, alongside many others with active practices.

The collective originally grew out of basement workshops in downtown Manhattan, providing Asian immigrant and American-born artists and art workers with community support. “So many incredible artists in New York made their careers showing exclusively at alternative spaces, and at the gallery, we have been researching these histories as part of our commitment to reexamining the canon,” said the show’s curator, Jennifer Samet.

In 1991, Godzilla made waves for protesting the Whitney Museum of American Art for the glaring lack of Asian American artists in its Biennial. Although advocacy for representation has helped to nudge the needle forward, as Samet emphasized, “It is very clear that much work is also needed to correct decades of neglect of Asian American artists.”

On the West Coast, meanwhile, two concurrent surveys of Asian American art recently opened—“Scratching at the Moon” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and “P L A C E: Reckonings by Asian American Artists” at the Institute of Contemporary Art San José. Both showcase works by emerging and established artists, including Patty Chang and Stephanie Syjuco.

It's important to acknowledge those who are breaking barriers today, as well as those who paved the way. The custom of honoring one's elders is deeply embedded in many cultures: For this Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we spotlight a selection of artists over the age of 65 who have forged diverse and distinct paths.

David Diao

B. 1943, Chengdu, China. Lives and works in New York.

David Diao has experienced firsthand the many sides of the art world. His first job was as the “sweeper-upper” at New York’s Kootz Gallery, a major dealer of Abstract Expressionist work in the mid-20th century. A gig at the Guggenheim followed, as he mingled with prominent figures in the art scene of the 1960s. Before the decade’s end, he opened his first solo exhibition.

His early paintings are subtle and sparing, but several years later, Diao withdrew from exhibiting and didn’t reemerge until the 1980s with bright, bold canvases playing with graphics and text. The addition of silkscreened images, archival photographs, and pop cultural references into his work harken back to his childhood memories of fleeing with his grandparents from China to Hong Kong during the revolution. Although he was able to reunite with his father in the U.S. at the age of 12, he didn’t see his mother and younger siblings for another two decades. A sense of melancholic loss permeates some of these later works. As someone who understands what it means to be an outsider, Diao is an artist who resists easy categorization.