AMERICAN ARTSCAPE

A MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Number 2, 2021

SHOWING STRENGTH THROUGH CREATIVITY

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This issue

The National Endowment for the Arts is committed to advancing racial equity, access, and justice, and is continuously learning from the arts community. In this issue of *American Artscape*, we hear stories from Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) artists and leaders. These first-person accounts reflect distinct communities, art forms, and professional pathways, yet all share a common thread: they tell the story of who we are as a people and a nation.

In the past year, the country has witnessed an appalling rise in anti-Asian hate. Yet even in a time of fear and uncertainty, these stories demonstrate that the arts can offer strength and solace. They provide a way to understand our unique backgrounds, traditions, and histories, showing us that our differences are worth celebrating.

As we look to a more hopeful and inclusive future, we are inspired by these artists and arts leaders.

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE

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Making Space for Asian Americans in the Arts

Lisa Gold of Asian American Arts Alliance

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE

For nearly 40 years, New York City-based Asian American Arts Alliance (A4) has been the only nonprofit organization dedicated to serving Asian American artists and arts organizations across all disciplines. Through public programs, professional development, and fellowships and awards, A4 works to increase the visibility of and financial support for its community. That might mean facilitating a performance for an Asian American choreographer at Lincoln Center or hosting a game show on a digital platform to help participants discover and celebrate the numerous Asian American artists and arts organizations whose stories are an indelible, life-changing, and little-known part of the American cultural landscape.

Lisa Gold became A4's executive director two years ago after a career that has included leadership roles at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, Washington Project for the Arts, and Socrates Sculpture Park, among others. At A4, she is a relentless and fierce advocate

▲ A digital meeting from May 2021 where the artists from both cohorts of the Asian American Arts Alliance Virtual Residency program came together to launch their virtual gallery project with virtual studio tours and discussions. Photo courtesy of Asian American Arts Alliance

▶ Lisa Gold, executive director of the Asian American Arts Alliance. Photo by Gerrie Lim, courtesy of A4

for the Asian American arts community. Her work comprises coalition-building among organizations that serve Asian Americans as well as other culturally specific groups; strengthening networks for artists through fellowships, mentorships, and conversations with cultural gatekeepers; and, perhaps most important, making sure Asian American artists and arts leaders know where they can find support, advice, and a friendly and encouraging ear to listen. Gold shared her thoughts with the NEA on the impact of A4's work.

ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ASIAN AMERICANS

I.M. Pei. Maya Lin. Patsy Mink. There are just so many incredible contributions that Asian Americans have made to every aspect of our culture, from politics to the landscape of our monuments and our cities. There are Asian American artists and arts administrators of every stripe. There's a lack of knowledge because Asian American history is not taught in schools. I didn't even learn about Japanese internment camps until well after [I was out of] school. I never learned that in elementary school or junior high. Teaching people the very, very basic history of Asian Americans in this country would help explain a lot of the current biases and discrimination against the community.

Asian Americans are like all Americans—we all have different stories and different experiences. For so long, artists, writers, and actors have been pigeonholed into these very specific definitions of what Asian Americans are. You think about music, and the only [Asian music] people think about, which isn't even Asian American, is K-Pop. Asian Americans are sometimes mentioned in classical music, but there was a really interesting story in the *New York Times* [this past July] about the perspective that Asian Americans couldn't possibly be talented classical musicians [as] they don't have the capacity to understand this music. It's enraging, and it's demeaning.

There are a lot of conversations that we're excluded from. There are dozens of stories and statistics about the lack of Asian American representation in the highest levels of leadership in corporations, and arts organizations are absolutely no different. Right here in New York City, we do not have an Asian American-led CIG, which is the Cultural Institutions Group for the major museums. Until we can see [Asian American] leaders at the top, it's going to negatively impact [our] ability to make space for artists throughout our institutions.

MAKING SPACE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN ARTISTS IN ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

[The Asian American Arts Alliance] is the only service organization in the country that is dedicated to the professional development of [Asian American] artists across all disciplines. We work with artists as well as arts organizations. Asian Americans are not a monolith, and I think that's part of the problem [with public perception]. There are more than 38 countries [with their own] ethnicities and histories. We can't possibly represent and speak for every artist from every discipline from every Asian American background. But we do try to provide a platform and a safe space for artists who choose to identify in those ways.

One of the things that we do in terms of creating space is connecting artists with what we call cultural gatekeepers—curators, publishers, producers. We run a lot of professional development workshops and peer roundtables where artists have the opportunity to network, meet, and ask questions. Right now, we are primarily working with BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, people of color] gatekeepers and specifically Asian American curators because they have an incentive to make sure that they are not the only [Asian American] face in the newsroom or in the casting suite. We found that there are a lot of people who are more than willing to give back to the community and see incredible value in that.

Last year, I started convening a monthly call of [Asian American and Pacific Islander] arts leaders to talk about issues that are important to the community, to share what's happening and try to support each other. It's a safe space where we can come together, ask questions, and advocate for what we need as a bloc to advance our organizations. It was started in response to funding cuts and not seeing the percentage of funding coming to our community that we deserve. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are 15 percent of the New York City population, and yet we receive a fraction of that in terms of municipal funding. We need to come together and fight for our fair share. We've been hopefully making some inroads in mobilizing the community to support each other, to be there for each other, This work takes a long time, so I'm in for the long haul. I don't expect change overnight.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Bringing people together not just within the community but across communities is a really important initiative for us. As a BIPOC-serving organization, we need to be there to support [each other]. We need to be able to dispel myths around bias, both within the community and across communities. We did this Reimagining Diversity series that we produced with the Eighth Floor [an independent exhibition and event space created by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation] and had leaders from National Black Theatre and the Americas Society. We had individual artists, writers, and thought leaders from different communities talking about similar issues. I think creating a space for that critical dialogue is so important in ensuring that we all understand that we're in the struggle together, that Asian Americans can't be used as a racial wedge.

BEING PART OF THE SOLUTION

A lot of the organizations in our group [are] smaller organizations. Many of them are led by immigrants or people whose first language is not English. There's a lot of frustration with the grantmaking process and securing funding. There's no secret that there is a bias in the way that these applications are set up. They're not made for small organizations, which have strapped resources both in terms of time and money and manpower just to be able to research or to even start the process of applying for grants. I think that there is a lack of understanding about a lot of the work that is made in, by, and for the community. Oftentimes, [the application] is reviewed by people who don't have that understanding. There's an implicit bias in work evaluation and, frankly, it's unfair.

On [a recent] arts leaders call, we said, "You know, the work of these community organizations is as impactful, if not more, than these larger, predominantly white institutions." The value that they bring to the community in terms of uplifting the work, of sharing those experiences, of validating the beauty and the truth and the richness of that experience, is so important. And yet they are often viewed by funders as not really relevant because they have small budgets. We have to stop equating budget size with impact.

Recently, we had a conversation with the commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City, and we all volunteered. We said, "We will be on a panel. We will serve as advisors." We want to be part of the solution. We don't want to just fling mud and complain. I mean, we want our fair share and we want to have a voice. But we understand that we also have the power to effect that kind of change, and we want to be able to exercise that power.

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ A theater roundtable event, part of the series that matches emerging artists with professionals in a specific industry to make connections and get inside information and insights about advancing their careers. Photo courtesy of Asian American Arts Alliance

The Making of *Lost Freedom: A Memory*

Actor/Author George Takei and Composer/Musician Kenji Bunch

INTERVIEWS BY ANN MEIER BAKER

As composer-in-residence at the Moab Music Festival, Japanese American composer and musician Kenji Bunch performed a piece he wrote for viola that completely captivated festival cofounder and music director Michael Barrett. The piece was named *Minidoka*, after a place in Idaho where one of the Japanese American internment camps was located in the 1940s. Barrett had recently learned that the Dalton Wells internment camp had been located about ten miles from Moab, Utah, and an idea began to form.

Barrett proposed that Bunch expand the piece to create a chamber music piece, and Bunch jumped at the chance. Barrett then reached out to actor, author, and civil rights activist George Takei who, with his family, spent four years in two Japanese American internment camps. Takei agreed to become the narrator for the piece, and Bunch and Takei immediately began collaborating on a work that shines a light on what life was like in camps such as Dalton Wells. Funded in part by the NEA, the project culminated in September 2021 with a performance of this new work for string quartet and a narrator, titled *Lost Freedom: A Memory*. Takei and Bunch talk about creating the work.

▲ **Dalton Wells Internment Camp in Utah. Photo courtesy of Utah State Historical Society**

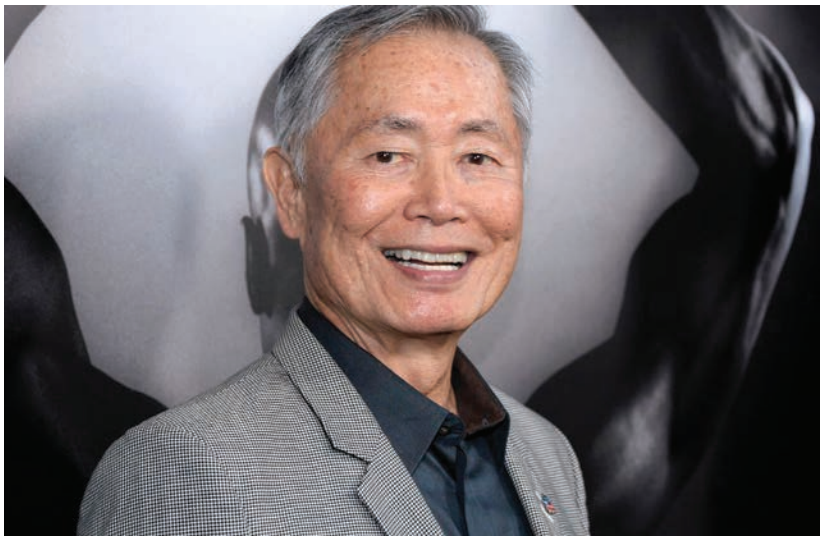
GEORGE TAKEI'S STORY

On December 7th, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and the terror of that bombing swept across the Pacific to the West Coast, and it rolled across the country to the East Coast. The next morning, President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Japan, and for us Japanese Americans, the terror intensified. We're very familiar right now with Asian Americans being assaulted and spat on. Well, that's what began happening to us. There was no charge and no trial; our crime was looking like the people that bombed Pearl Harbor.

Right after Pearl Harbor, young Japanese Americans rushed to their recruitment centers, like all young Americans, to volunteer to serve in the U.S. military. This act of patriotism was answered with a slap on the face. They were denied military service and categorized as enemy aliens. We were born and raised here, and yet that's the category they assigned to all. Approximately 120,000 of us were rounded up and imprisoned.

I had just celebrated my fifth birthday, and it was a few weeks after that when my father rushed into my bedroom that I shared with my younger brother, Henry. He dressed us hurriedly and told us to wait in the living room while our parents did some last-minute packing. And so my brother and I, with nothing to do, were standing by the front window just gazing out at the neighborhood. Suddenly we saw two soldiers marching up our driveway carrying rifles with shiny bayonets. They stomped up the porch and with their fists began banging on our front door. It felt to us like the whole house was trembling. My father came rushing out of the bedroom and answered the door, and literally at gunpoint we were ordered out of our home. That morning is one that I will never be able to forget.

We were loaded onto trucks that morning and we were driven down to Little Tokyo, the Japanese American community in downtown Los Angeles. We were let out at the Buddhist temple there, and the area was crowded with other Japanese Americans who had been picked up. There was a row of buses, and we were tagged and loaded onto those buses, and the buses took us to the Santa Anita racetrack and there we were unloaded and herded over to the stable area. Each family was assigned a horse stall, still pungent with the stink of fresh horse manure. That's where we would sleep temporarily while the camps were being built. For my parents, going from a two-bedroom home with a front yard and a backyard, to taking their children into a horse stall to sleep was devastating. My father told me about it when I was a teenager, and said it was absolutely horrific, humiliating, and degrading. The government at that time called it a Japanese neighborhood, or relocation center, but it was really a prison camp.



▲ Author/actor George Takei. Photo courtesy of George Takei

We were incarcerated from 1942 to 1946. From Santa Anita...we were taken to the swamps of Arkansas, to a camp called Rohwer, which, from my childish point [of view], was a magical place. I try to capture that in my narration for the piece that will be premiered at Moab.

I'd never been anywhere like the swamps of Arkansas. Beyond the barbed wire fence was a bayou, and trees grew out of the water. I had no idea trees could grow out of the water, and the roots snake in and out of the water. It was a fascinating thing, and for the new chamber music piece, I talk about the little black wiggly tadpoles that I could catch at the edge of the bayou and put in a jar and see. I'd look at them every morning when I got up, and one morning they seemed to have grown bumps on their sides, and the next morning the bumps looked more like legs, and

◀ Takei family in the 1940s. Photo courtesy of George Takei

the next morning the tail fell off and they escaped from my jar. They had magically turned into frogs.

A year [after Pearl Harbor, the government] realized we had a wartime manpower shortage and they needed us, but their dilemma was how to justify drafting people out of a barbed wire prison camp. They came up with what they called a "loyalty questionnaire." Question number 28 was one sentence with two conflicting ideas. It asked simply, "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States of America and forswear your loyalty to the emperor of Japan?" We didn't have a loyalty to the emperor, but the government arrogantly presumed that we had an existing inborn racial loyalty to the emperor. So if you answered that part of that one sentence "No," meaning, "I don't have a loyalty to the emperor to forswear," that "No" applied to the first part, "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States?"

If you were willing to bite the bullet and answer "Yes" to, "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States?" that "Yes" applied to the second part of the very same sentence [and] meant you were confessing that you did have a loyalty to the emperor. If you answered "No" you lost; [if] you answered "Yes" you lost. My parents answered "No" as truthfully as they could, and for that they were considered disloyal, and they had to be transferred to the Tule Lake camp [in California], which was bristling with military armament.

Forty years later, there was a campaign by Japanese Americans to get an apology and redress for that egregious violation and incarceration. Congress formed a commission, at which I testified in 1981 and 1988, and my testimony, in part, is going to be part of the text of this chamber music piece at Moab.

▼ Composer Kenji Bunch. Photo courtesy of Kenji Bunch

REFLECTIONS FROM COMPOSER KENJI BUNCH

When Michael [Barrett] mentioned he had worked before with George Takei, it was a sort of pipe dream to me. "Wouldn't that be cool to work with George Takei?" That'd be awesome, but I didn't really expect anything to come of it. Then things just seemed to line up, and now it's happening. Sometimes I have to pinch myself. I could listen to George talk for hours and be enthralled. If I can help in the telling of his story with music that I write [to] access people's empathy and sense of humanity, that's my role here—to help humanize the story.

I really focus on the fact that he was just a little kid, because…regardless of our own backgrounds, every adult was a kid, and at some point all of us have felt vulnerable, scared, and confused. George and I [have about 40 years apart in terms of age but we] share the experience of being Asian American. This is George's story clearly, but I also have a connection to that.

I think a lot about transgenerational trauma. My dad grew up in poverty, and my mom grew up [in Japan] in wartime. Those were both intensely traumatic events, and they were around at a time when trauma wasn't really recognized and dealt with in a direct way. The upheaval in the last year-and-a-half of both the intense racial justice movement with Black Americans but also the resurgence in anti-Asian hate brings up a lot of this inherited trauma. George will say [that ever] since there have been Asians in America, there has been discrimination, bias, and hate. We both feel it's really important to tell this story.

The fact that this project has been recognized as something worth supporting by an institution as important as the NEA is huge. It shows that this is a story worth hearing and that this was real. Look at what's going on in education today with this crazy panic about the way history's taught. Stories like these are essential for all of us to understand and to be able to connect to emotionally. That's my job.

Ann Meier Baker is the director of Music and Opera at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Students from the Hawaiian dance school Pua Ali'i 'Ilima perform a *hula pū'ili* (split bamboo) at the Prince Lot Hula Festival in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Reclaiming the Culture through Hula

Vicky Holt Takamine of PA'I Foundation

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS

All photos courtesy of of PA'I Foundation

Vicky Holt Takamine was born into a hula family. Her mother and grandmother were dancers, and from a young age, Takamine told her mother that she wanted to learn how to dance hula.

At 12 years old, her mother sent her to Ma'iki Aiu Lake, one of the most prominent hula teachers in Hawai'i, and at 27 years old, she graduated as a *kumu hula*, a master teacher of Hawaiian dance, through the *'ûniki* rituals of hula. Two years later, she opened up her own *hālau hula*, or school of Hawaiian dance, Pua Ali'i 'Ilima.

In 1997, after 20 years of teaching hula, Takamine learned of State Senate Bill 8, legislation that would restrict Native Hawaiians from gathering the natural and cultural resources that are vital for making adornments, conducting ceremonies, and the performance of hula. Takamine successfully mobilized other practitioners to protest the bill at the state legislature and marks this as the moment she became an activist.

In the following years, she continued to advocate for Native Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners, and in 2001, she founded the PAʻI Foundation to raise the profile of these artists through events and other cultural programming. PAʻI Foundation has received multiple grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Takamine shares why she has become an advocate for Native Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners, the significance of Hawaiʻi's natural resources to their culture, and the meaning of PAʻI.

▶ **Vicky Holt Takamine, founder of PAʻI Foundation.**

HULA AS RESISTANCE

I came from the Vietnam War era, so we were the flower children and protesting everything. We were the ones that initiated this Hawaiian renaissance in the ʻ70s. When I graduated from Auntie Maʻiki, we were one of the first graduating classes, and we all went out and started our own schools and started to revive interest in Hawaiian cultural practices and Hawaiian language, and started Hawaiian language immersion school.

The hula has been responsible for reclaiming and retaining the Native Hawaiian language that was banned. My grandmother was not allowed to speak the language in school and was reprimanded for speaking Hawaiian. She had ten children, and not one of the ten children speak the language. I'm the oldest grandchild, and I was not taught the language. At my high school, I was not allowed to take Hawaiian language. [And at the university,] I had to take Latin because it was "college material"—they said Hawaiian language was not an acceptable language.

I see hula as resistance. I see hula as a tool for organizing community around issues that are facing Native Hawaiians. We have been able to reclaim our cultural practices through the hula. We have been able to regain our language through the hula. All the songs and dances, the chants, are in the Hawaiian language, and you have to study the language in order to be able to perform the hula, to understand the hula. Hula was my entrée into Hawaiian language, into Hawaiian culture.

Through the practice of hula there are other cultural traditions like *ohe kapala* (bamboo printmaking) and *kapa* (bark cloth making). We make all of our own drums, all of our own musical instruments for hula. It was a way to reclaim those traditions that had been lost or were at the brink of being lost.

A SUDDEN IMPACT

PAʻI is the acronym of my hālau hula, the name of my Hawaiian dance school, Pua Aliʻi ʻIlima. *Pua* means flower, *aliʻi* means royalty, and *ʻilima* is a golden-yellow, orange blossom, the *kino lau*, or earthly manifestation, of the Hawaiian god Kāne. Kāne is the god of light, fresh water, and creation.

When we looked at starting the nonprofit, one of my students said, "What about PAʻI?" I was like, "Wow." PAʻI by itself means "sudden impact." PAʻI also means "to slap." We like to think that we make an impact and make a difference in our community, so we really like that name.

The mission of PAʻI Foundation is to preserve and perpetuate Native Hawaiian cultural traditions for future generations. Although I have my own hālau, it's not about me serving my school of dance. It's about serving the Native Hawaiian artists and cultural practitioners, our community, and the residents of Hawaiʻi by creating opportunities for our artists to share

their culture with the broader community, not just here but [also] abroad.

I started our own little PAʻI Arts and Cultural Center to [create a shared] space with other artists and cultural practitioners and to also offer resources, opportunities, and connections. [Through my work], I've been very fortunate to be introduced to people that I look up to, like Maria López De León, who is the president and CEO of the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, Lori Lea Pourier (Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of First Peoples Fund, and Carlton Turner, former executive director of Alternate ROOTS—other leaders who are heading arts and community organizations that serve people of color. We've had such a great time working with each other and forming a bond. I've learned so much from them, and from sharing our artists' work with a broader community.

This pandemic has required all of us to shift to an online platform, and it's brought us new audiences. It's been really interesting to offer our space for workshops with some of our community artists. We've had people from Portugal and Japan and Mexico and New York, all across the world, join us on [virtual] workshops, where we would never have been able to host them [before]. The cost of coming to Hawaiʻi for some people is really expensive, but people are eager to participate in those [virtual] workshops.

RESPECTING THE LAND AND CULTURE

Our culture is alive. Our culture is there. We still practice our traditional Hawaiian cultural practices. Artists are still creating. This is not an art form that is in the past, archived and put in a museum.

Some people still think we live in grass shacks. Sometimes the way our tourism industry portrays Hawaiians is not accurate, and I think that the tourists today are looking for authentic experiences. I think that's what we as cultural practitioners can provide for visitors to our islands.

But the other thing is that we want to make sure that [tourists] understand that [the islands are] a shared resource. We're happy to share our culture, but you have to give something back. I'm not talking about financially; I'm talking about how you take care of our islands. Just picking up the trash when you're walking on the beach, or not throwing plastic in the ocean. Caring for our natural resources so that it'll be there for the next generation is critical for us. Our islands are very fragile and we don't have a lot of resources. The more tourists that come here, the more visitors that come, it gets overrun.

Our natural resources are being very heavily impacted. The amount of suntan oil that's getting into the ocean is killing our reefs. Being a little bit more responsible in what you put

▼ **Students from Pua Aliʻi ʻIlima perform a *hula ʻulīʻulī* (Hawaiian dance using the feathered rattling gourd).**

on your body, what you dump in the ocean, what you throw in the trash or don't throw in the trash, what you throw on the ground. Being responsible, that to me is a way of giving back. We're happy for you to come and share your resources with our people, but please help us to take care of our natural and cultural resources when you're visiting.

We depend on those natural resources for inspiration and for our adornment. It's important that those resources will be there for the next generation, and a lot of our Hawaiian terminology connects us to the land. The term for land in Hawaiian is *'āina*. The root word for 'āina is *āi*, meaning "food," and 'āina means "that which feeds us." So, if we want to eat and we want to be fed then we need to take care of the 'āina. If we don't take care of the land, then the land cannot take care of us.

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ Students from the Hawaiian dance school Pua Ali'i 'Ilima perform a *hula kahiko* (ancient style Hawaiian dance) in honor of King Kamehameha I at the Prince Lot Hula Festival in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Bringing Joy and Upliftment

Rina Mehta of the Leela Dance Collective

INTERVIEW BY VICTORIA HUTTER

From her earliest days, Rina Mehta was imbued with a passion for dance. The daughter of Indian immigrants, she was raised in Los Angeles, where she began formal training in Bharatanatyam, a South Indian form of classical dance, as a child. She brought her passion with her to the University of California, Berkeley, where she would eventually receive a bachelor's degree in immunology and a master's degree in public health while continuing to devote time to dance.

While at Berkeley, she happened to attend a class in Kathak, a North Indian dance tradition, led by 2009 NEA National Heritage Fellow Pandit Chitresh Das. The impact of Das' class on Mehta was profound. She switched her artistic focus to Kathak, studying with Das in the guru-disciple tradition for more than 15 years. Eventually she performed in his company and taught at his school. At age 33, she made the life-altering decision to leave her public health career and devote herself full-time to dance, becoming a

▲ Rina Mehta and Cimeron Ahluwalia in Leela Dance Collective's performance of *Son of the Wind*. Photo by Margo Moritz

▲ Rina Mehta, co-founder of the Leela Dance Collective. Photo by Travis Broxton

solo performer and traveling and teaching around the country.

Das died in 2015 and in response, Mehta founded the Leela Dance Collective with four of Das' other disciples and students as a way to continue his legacy. An all-women ensemble, Leela is deeply committed to both creative collaboration and supporting women artists. Today, the Leela Academy and the Leela Endowment are bound with the company to uphold and advance the art form of Kathak, combining tradition, authenticity, and innovation. Mehta shared with us why she practices the art of Kathak and the importance of the Leela Dance Collective.

THE KATHAK TRADITION

In India, we have eight classical art forms, and Kathak is one of them. Because India has so many dance traditions, I always like to distinguish among classical dance, folk dance, and pop dance (commonly known as Bollywood dance).

Kathak is a percussive dance form. We make music and rhythm with our feet. Kathak is distinguished by swift pirouettes, dynamic movement, rhythmic poetry, and crisp stances. And at the heart of the form is storytelling.

Kathak actually comes from the word *katha*, which means "story." The ancient Kathakas were a lot like the bards and minstrels of Europe who traveled from village to village telling the stories of the day through dance and music.

Around the 12th and 13th centuries, the art form moved out of the villages and into the courts. It was in these courts that the art form absorbed the influence of Islamic culture and Islamic aesthetic. Kathak is the only classical art form that has both Hindu and Muslim influences.

When the British arrived, the art form suffered a very big blow. Public performances were banned, [but] many of the teachers and the lineage bearers held onto the tradition underground. Then in the mid-1900s, it emerged again as a sign of national pride. Kathak is trying to make up for the 200 years it lost under British rule.

There is still a lot of subversive imperialism when it comes to India. I would love for there to be more ways for us to authentically communicate the depth and richness of India's artistic and cultural heritage.

I feel like the history of India is mapped onto the art form and onto our bodies, because we really dance the history of [the country] in so many ways. Our bodies, our dance, and our music contain and convey India's dramatic history from ancient to medieval to modern times.

KATHAK IN THE UNITED STATES

For the most part, Indian dance is presented in community venues with minimal budgets and that limits production value, the presentation, the marketing, everything. We have invested in raising the production value of Indian classical dance and we work hard to partner with mainstream venues. So, the impact we have had and we're wanting to continue to have is to pull the art form out of those isolated and segregated spaces, bringing it into mainstream society. For the South Asian community, being in these [mainstream] venues creates a lot of pride and a lot of visibility.

More and more in diasporic communities, Indians are embracing music and dance as a way to embody culture. [But] we have a long way to go in terms of using the art forms as a way

to facilitate cross-cultural understanding in a meaningful way.

BEING A WOMEN'S GROUP

The collective's artistic directors—Seibi Lee, Rachna Nivas, and myself—are all senior disciples of Pandit Chitresh Das. In his generation, most of the masters and teachers and performers were male. By the time we came along, very few men studied the art form [because of] the modern-day stigma of men dancing. We just naturally stepped into continuing the legacy.

All of us being women has led to an organization where the work is not centered around one artistic vision, but rather many artistic voices. Many of our productions are collaborative: *SPEAK*, which is a Kathak and tap show, and *Son of the Wind*, which is our traditional dance drama.

We hold high the concept of collective creativity, and that what we can create together can take the art form forward. That's something very unique to us.

Leela's really lucky. There were a lot of women artists in generations above [who] were phenomenal but were not recognized. We're standing on the shoulders of many of those women.

THE IMPACT OF ANTI-ASIAN AMERICAN VIOLENCE

We've had a lot of internal conversations around how we continue to do our work based on how the current climate around us is shifting. We often get pressure to politicize our work.

We have tried to stay true to what our core mission is, which is to bring joy and upliftment through music and dance and where it's appropriate, we would like to use our art form to facilitate cultural exchange and understanding. We now do many more pre- and post-performance talks in addition to more general artist talks to spark dialogue. Ultimately, if we see fellow people from other cultures and other races as human beings, it opens the door.

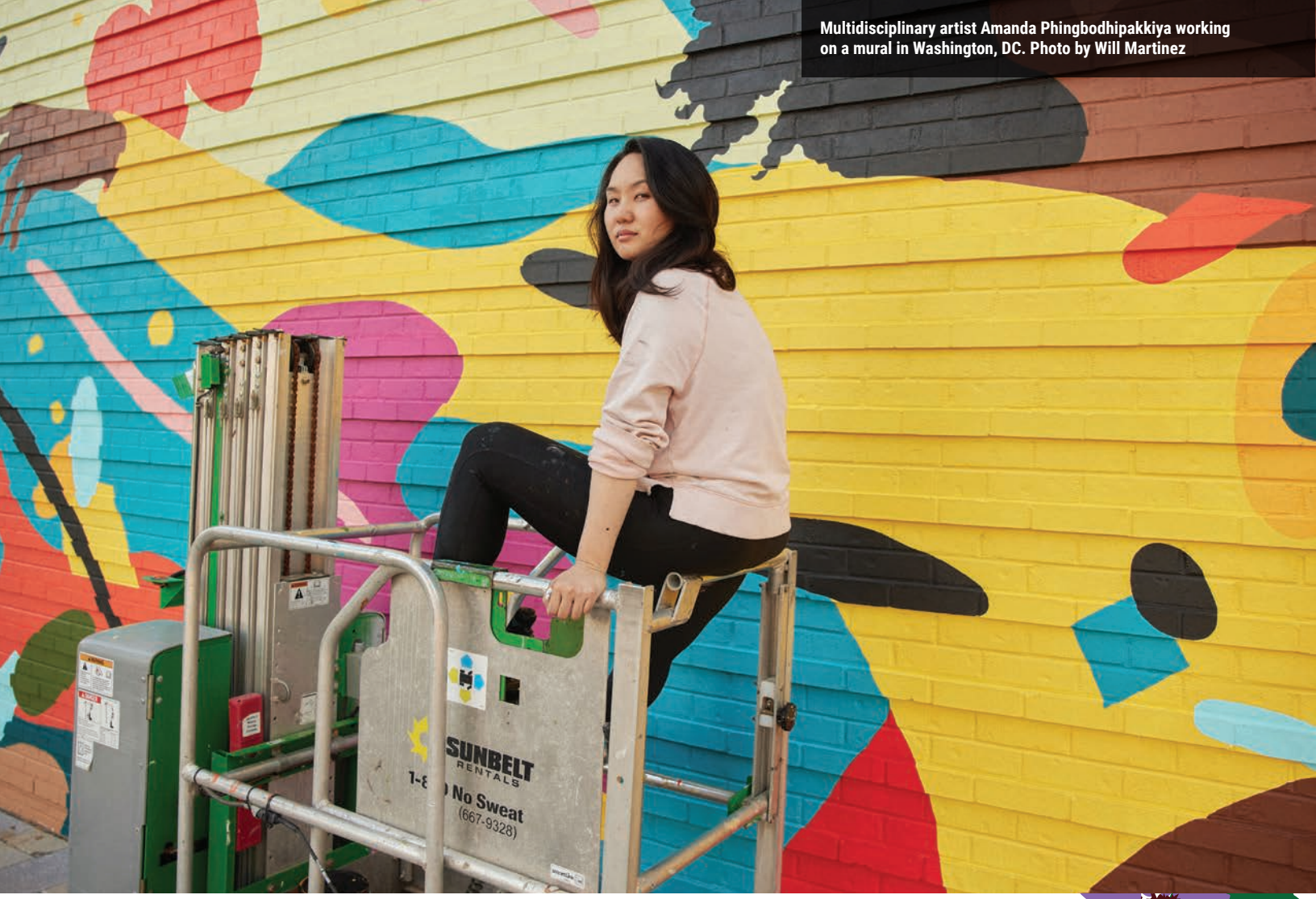
Joy is joy is joy. To be joyful is a human thing.

WHAT WE CAN ALL DO

Be honestly curious and open-minded. Be willing to learn, learn deeply, and ask deeply. Look beyond the surface.

Victoria Hutter is an assistant director of the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ **The Leela Dance Collective perform *SPEAK*, a Kathak and tap collaboration. Photo by Steven Roby**



Multidisciplinary artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya working on a mural in Washington, DC. Photo by Will Martinez

Joy Is a Beautiful Act of Resistance

Multidisciplinary Artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE

When asked about her experience of being an Asian American woman, multidisciplinary artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya brings up the character of Liat in the musical *South Pacific*: "She doesn't speak. She doesn't really do much. She's hardly a full person," mused Phingbodhipakkiya. She goes on to reflect that "when we are loud and bold and we do big things that reclaim space for our communities, it is shocking and perhaps even threatening in a way because it is so far out of the realm of what people are used to thinking of Asian American women."

Phingbodhipakkiya is no stranger to being bold. She left her work as a neuroscientist after accepting, as she put it, "I've always been an artist at heart." She uses her artwork not only in service of her own creative expression, but as a tool to elevate undertold stories, whether those of women in science or the roughly 1.2 million Asian Americans who call New York City home.

In 2020, while serving as a New York City public artist-in-residence embedded in the city's Commission on Human Rights, Phingbodhipakkiya created the I Still Believe in Our City project. Conceived as a response to the spike in anti-Asian hate the nation witnessed during the pandemic, the project installed colorful posters throughout the city of Asian Americans, along with language such as "I did not make you sick" and "I am not your scapegoat". For Phingbodhipakkiya, painting joyful canvases is not a way of avoiding grief but a way to be resilient in the face of grief. And her work itself is a way of connecting the individual to the community and of claiming her own space and voice in the art world as a way to make a space for and elevate the voices of others.

Here's Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya with her perspective on being an Asian American woman artist and all that makes possible.

ON BECOMING AN ARTIST

I think I've always been an artist at heart. When I saw how prescriptive the avenues available to me might be, I decided to essentially create a path on my own; I think this is probably a path that many artists feel that they've been down. My MFA is in design, but I think having worked across so many fields and having a plethora of influences makes me a more thoughtful and a more accessible artist.

For a lot of Asian American women, especially now after the Atlanta shooting [when eight people were killed, six of whom were Asian American women, in March 2021], there's been a sort of awakening, and it's unleashed this tidal wave of energy and advocacy and power and resilience and strength that's just really exciting to see. Of course, artists who may not have turned their work toward activism are starting to go there. I think even technology workers, knowledge workers, everyone is wanting to do something, and art has such power in that sense.

As artists, we can harness the power of our art to amplify joy and soothe grief and move people to action. I think my work is a manifestation of what I hope for my community, and *all* of our communities; that we are able to have joy, and have peace, and have moments of resistance that aren't just protest. While my practice is deeply rooted in story, it's also very much an exploration of the transformation of pain and grief and anger into new paths forward that are full of joy and light. I think joy is a beautiful act of resistance. To have it, and to hold it unabashedly, is something we all deserve.

ON THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING AN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN ARTIST

For me as an Asian American woman artist, the experience is to always be underestimated in every single conversation and sphere. The experience is also to be never enough but also

▼ Phingbodhipakkiya's poster "I am not your scapegoat" as part of the I Still Believe in Our City project in New York City, one of a hundred unique pieces. Photo by MK Luff

too much at the same time. I can't tell you how many times I have heard to my face, "I've never heard of you before" in response to [someone] seeing the scale and complexity of my work in person and not being able to process that it came out of a small Asian American woman. My work is never expected to garner the reach or the response that it has and does. At the same time, because my practice is quite prolific, I often get told in not-so-subtle terms to slow down, stop being so intense, and stop doing so much because it's making other artists look bad.

We all heal, create, and process the world in different ways. Mine is that when there is a flurry of emotion—whether it's grief, anger, pain, loss—there is an impetus there to create. I find it incredibly healing to not just create, but also create with others. I think it's so interesting that no matter what [my] action or the output is, it's not quite right [to some people.] I think a lot of artists of color can identify with this sentiment. We are supposed to be a certain thing or a certain way or fit a certain stereotype, but in fact, we're not a monolith. We come in all shapes and sizes with a variety of glorious backgrounds, and that means our art will manifest in an incredible variety of ways. This breaking out of stereotypes and defying them in very bold ways feels threatening to some folks [who] will often look for any excuse to discredit what we are trying to create or the ways in which we are trying to hold our communities with love and light.

I think lots of folks of color feel that we haven't been given the space or the freedom to tell the full range and diversity of our stories. I think this is why it's so easy to put us in stereotypes, it's so easy to scapegoat us—because our stories just aren't out there. I'm deeply interested in story because I think it promotes understanding,

▼ **Portraits in Times Square celebrating the expansive diversity and individuality of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in New York City as part of the public art series We Are More. Photo by Maria Baranova**

openness, and connection in a way that, perhaps, work that is not deep-rooted in story just can't.

THE GENESIS OF THE I STILL BELIEVE IN OUR CITY PROJECT

I think it was about February 2020, just a normal Saturday afternoon, and I was going to Chinatown to get my groceries like I do. I was shocked by how eerily quiet Chinatown was. I had this deep sense of foreboding that if talk of a virus a world away could clear out Chinatown like this, what would be coming for the Asian American community? Shortly after, at least in Asian media, we started to see hate crime after hate crime, bias incident after bias incident. My parents were yelled at in the grocery store to go back to where they came from. I got on the subway, and a man next to me looked at me, said, "Eww, gross," and then ran to the other side of the subway. I was too shocked to process, but then I started writing in my journal, thinking about, "What should I have said in the moment?" There is still that page in my journal that says, "I'm not your scapegoat. I didn't make you sick. We belong here." I started to think about what I can do as an artist to speak up for my community, to push back against this hate, to remind my community of their strength and resilience, and to galvanize defiance.

The Department of Cultural Affairs in New York [City] had put out an open call for their public artist-in-residence program, which staffs artists with city agencies. I specifically wanted to work with the Commission on Human Rights as I thought it might be a way to not just as a single, independent artist create work but to show that the city was behind Asian Americans. I had an interview with them, which I thought went well, but then I didn't hear back for a while. The day that an [Asian American] grandmother was set on fire in Brooklyn was the day that they called me.

I approached the work with extreme urgency. The first meeting I had with the commissioner I told her, "I would like to create a public art campaign that fights against the invisibility of what's been happening to our community. The city hasn't stood by and for Asian Americans in a visible way, and now is the time." She was completely onboard. My hope was to remind Asian Americans of their belonging and of their power, but also to create awareness at a time when media wasn't covering [hate crimes against Asian Americans].

▲ **Phingbodhipakkiya working on her art installation in NYC's Meatpacking District, *May We Know Our Own Strength*, that addresses sexual assault and violence against Asian Americans. Photo by MK Luff**

We launched the first installation on Election Day, and I couldn't think of a better time to launch it because this campaign was about making your voice heard. I continued to launch installations all over New York City, across the five boroughs where anti-Asian bias incidents had occurred. I also released the work into the world for folks to use at rallies, protests, in classrooms, and at community centers. By releasing the work out to the world, then you open the door to partnering with communities and allowing for the crafting of spaces for conversation/discussion around what we need to do to fight for our shared futures.

What has been most incredible [to me is] folks writing me about how the work has touched them, and helped them feel pride, and even safety, at a time when the world feels incredibly heavy. We can look at all the statistics, we can look at where the work has gone around the world, we can look at downloads [from the project website], and we can look at the number of museums that have acquired [the work], but nothing speaks more to an artist than to hear how their work has touched individuals.

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

From Law to Libretto

Cerise Lim Jacobs of White Snake Projects

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS

Librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs of White Snake Projects. Photo by James Matthew Daniel

Cerise Lim Jacobs' opera career began with a birthday gift to her husband, Charles.

For Charles' 75th birthday, an important milestone in Chinese culture, Jacobs wanted to commission a song, but as his birthday approached, the commission fell apart. Jacobs had no background in opera—she had recently retired from a two-decades-long law career—but at 5 a.m. one morning, her first libretto, *Madame White Snake*, poured out. She gifted Charles the piece, and he pushed her to fully develop it. Once completed, Jacobs convinced Opera Boston to produce it, and in 2011, *Madam White Snake's* composer, Zhou Long, went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in Music.

Despite being an opera neophyte, Jacobs didn't stop with *Madame White Snake*. After Charles's death, she fulfilled their shared vision of turning *Madame White Snake* into a three-part work, the *Ouroboros Trilogy*. Inspired by Jacobs' childhood watching Chinese street operas, they had wanted it to be performed all in one day, and in 2016 in Boston, it was.

After the completion of the *Ouroboros Trilogy*, Jacobs continued to write librettos and founded her own opera company, White Snake Projects. White Snake Projects has received multiple grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Jacobs shares how White Snake Projects uses art to defy stereotypes, challenge the status quo, and create space for underserved and underrepresented groups.

OPERA AS ACTIVISM

My work has really been defined by the fact that I am an immigrant. I came to America when I was 20 with a fully formed ethnic and cultural identity. I did not come as a child, where I could assimilate easily. I think the feeling of being an outsider, of not having the same kind of support systems as someone who has been born and grown up here, has really colored the activism that White Snake Projects does.

As an outsider, I know what it's like not to belong, and that's why we continue to try to make space for people who are not included in mainstream America. That includes Asian

▼ **A 2016 production of Jacobs' first opera libretto, *Madame White Snake*. Photo by James Matthew Daniel**

Americans, and other people of color. I grew up in Singapore. It was what they call a benign totalitarian state. The sense of free thinking and free speech was suppressed. It was only by coming to America that I began to learn for the first time in law school about the American Constitution and First Amendment rights. I think that these American values, which I've slowly started to internalize, have driven me to create a company that is committed to uplifting many marginalized voices who would otherwise not be heard.

For a lot of successful Asian American opera creators, there is always the danger of being pigeonholed as only being able to write Asian-inflected pieces. That's not true. Of course it isn't, because ultimately, we are part of American culture. There is also this perpetuation of negative stereotypes through the traditional rep. There's a lot of discussion about the negative stereotyping in *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*. That's the reason why White Snake Projects exists, because we want to show a different side—not just for Asian Americans, but for women, for any person of color.

Right now, for instance, I am going to be premiering the third in what I have called the *Pandemic Trilogy*. During the pandemic, we pivoted to online programming, and we invented an audio plugin called Tutti Remote, which manages latency so that singers can sing synchronously from remote locations. We also work in Unreal Engine [a game platform used for the development of video games]. Through Unreal, we are able to place remote singers into the same 3D environments so they appear to be in the same space when they're really all across the country.

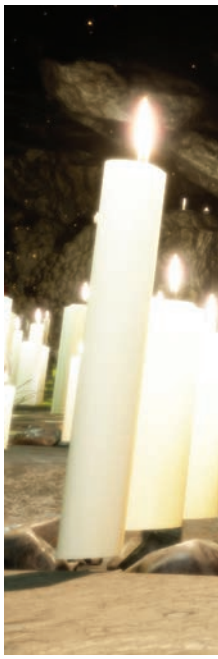
The first of the *Pandemic Trilogy*, which has been selected by the Library of Congress for inclusion in its archives, is called *Alice in the Pandemic*, and it explores economic disparity. The pandemic exposed these deep fissures as to who's privileged to shelter in place and who has to be on the frontlines because they just simply cannot afford to stop working.

In May, we premiered the second of the *Pandemic Trilogy*, *Death by Life*, which is a response to the murder of George Floyd. This piece explores one of the end points of racialized policing—long-term, mass incarceration. The texts were written by incarcerated writers and set to music by five Black composers to create an original opera.

In September, we're going to premiere the final leg of the trilogy, and it's called A *Survivor's Odyssey*. It explores what the WHO [World Health Organization] has called "the shadow pandemic," which is a surge in intimate partner violence during the pandemic. It's now become an international health crisis, though you don't hear much about it in mainstream press because it's viewed as a women's issue and therefore not that important.

Of course, opera reflects all these prejudices. One of the things that we're doing with *A Survivor's Odyssey*, which looks at intimate partner violence, rape, domestic violence through the lens of Homer's *Odyssey*, is to explore how the male gaze shapes art and culture, something that then becomes imbued into men and women. So women are now defined by that male gaze: submissive, easily victimized, not too intellectual, not entrepreneurial, not strong, etc. And men are defined by notions of masculinity which are toxic.

We run a series of forums in partnership with community groups to contextualize our operas and create an activist ecosystem in which they live. One of these forums for *A Survivor's Odyssey* examines how opera often perpetuates the worst, most extreme [version] of intimate partner violence: femicide. Think of *Pagliacci* when that clown kills his wife and everybody says, "Oh, my God. The poor man. She shouldn't have cheated on him. Aww." Think of *Othello*, often hailed as a tragic hero with a fatal flaw. Think of Lucia [in *Lucia di Lammermoor*] who is raped by her husband and then kills him. I found when I was working on *Death by Life* that there is a large correlation between women who are incarcerated and women who are [domestic abuse] survivors, because the women are oftentimes incarcerated for killing their abusers.



CENTERING ASIAN AMERICAN VOICES

Actively seeking out more talented Asian American creators is a key to centering Asian American voices. Asian Americans, often because of our cultural heritage, don't put ourselves front and center. So there has to be a process of actively seeking out and then nurturing and cultivating creators so that

they feel safe enough to express and release their full creativity. That's something that we've tried to do at White Snake Projects, and I think the greater arts community needs to engage in that. You know that old saying, "Squeaky wheels get all the oil"? We are not squeaky wheels, and we are oftentimes overlooked because a lot of people view us as white-adjacent. But when it comes time to handing out the benefits of being white, we are then immediately people of color.

One of the shows that we are developing right now is a show on Asian American heritage and identity stereotypes. We're getting together teams of Asian American writers and composers, and they're each going to compose a scene that explores one aspect of being an Asian American that is important to them, so that we can present a rounded picture of who we are to our audiences. We're not just doctors, lawyers, computer scientists, and mathematicians. We're artists. We're fun-loving. We're young, we're old.

The idea for this Asian-American-centered opera is a direct response to anti-Asian hate. Most people think that there is not much any single individual can do to change things, but if they don't try, if everybody has that attitude, nobody will do anything. We [at White Snake Projects] have a platform to be able to amplify voices for or against issues, and in the case of anti-Asian hate, it's something that strikes particularly close to home.

There was no question in my mind, that [after the March 2021 murder of six Asian American women in Atlanta] we were going to use our platform and artmaking to address this. We're not going to do it didactically, because I'm not going to get up and say, "Anti-Asian hate is wrong." No. We're going to do it through art, which means that it's going to be storytelling. It's going to be showing through beauty, through creativity, through innovation that we have these unseen strengths and that we are able to create beauty out of this ugliness.

I hope that [White Snake Projects] is an example that Asian Americans can create and innovate, because the work that White Snake Projects does is not part of the traditional repertory. We not only create original work with a social justice emphasis, but we also invent technology. During the pandemic, we created the program that enables us to produce fully realized shows live online. I think that is an exploding of the myth that we are not creative, that we are not innovative, that we are somehow all destined to be doctors, lawyers, or accountants, and that we are the model minority. In order to do the work that White Snake Projects does, we really have to be myth busters, we really have to be entrepreneurial, and we really have to be disruptive to the status quo—and that is so not part of the stereotype.

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ Jacobs' *Alice in the Pandemic*, which used new technology to allow singers at remote locations to sing synchronously together. Photo by Curvin Huber

Cambodian dancers perform at the Little Mekong Night Market.

The Cultural and Economic Impact of Little Mekong

Va-Megn Thoj of the Asian Economic Development Association

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA SUTTON

All photos courtesy of the Asian Economic Development Association

Stepping out of Saint Paul's Western Avenue light rail station can sometimes feel like you've taken a direct flight to Bangkok or Phnom Penh rather than a train ride across the city. Known as Little Mekong, this stretch of University Avenue is home to Southeast Asian restaurants, shops, and markets, and hums with cultural offerings like the Hmong Cultural Center, pop-up arts events, and XIAART, where Southeast Asian artists perform and exhibit. If

you time it right, you might also come across major events like the annual Night Market, whose art and food vendors drew thousands of people before COVID-19, or the Little Mekong Water Festival, which was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.

But it wasn't always this way. A decade ago, the area was in desperate need of revitalization, and was largely unknown beyond the Twin Cities' Southeast Asian community. But through a creative placemaking initiative conceived by the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), the area was branded, facades were improved, green space was developed, and a rich calendar of cultural programs was implemented. Like the Mekong River that flows through and nourishes the countries of Southeast Asia, the sense of identity created by Little Mekong has helped give new life to the businesses and residents who call this area home.

We recently spoke with filmmaker-turned-activist Va-Megn Thoj, who is the founder and executive director of AEDA. Born in Laos and raised in the United States, Thoj told us about the evolution of Little Mekong, and how its development has changed the Twin Cities and its Southeast Asian residents for the better.

THE BEGINNING OF LITTLE MEKONG

The Rondo neighborhood and Frogtown happened to be the neighborhoods where a lot of Southeast Asian refugees were relocated. It's lower income, the housing stock was older, and mostly rental. This particular part of the corridor was really in need of revitalization. As [refugees] moved in, they started opening small businesses to serve their community. Eventually many businesses bought the property that they rented. Since the mid-'80s, that area has been a destination for Twin Cities Southeast Asians. You can go there for restaurants, you can go shopping there, you can go to hair salons. But it was sort of unknown beyond the [Southeast Asian] community.

When AEDA first started, our programming really didn't encompass arts and culture. We envisioned the organization being more of a traditional community/economic development organization, with a focus on small business development. But back in 2010 or 2011, this huge infrastructure project was coming through Saint Paul: the development of a light-rail line. A section of that line was in the Asian business district. Because we didn't have resources, we had to come up with a way to support those businesses and to keep customers coming back during construction of this light-rail line, when the streets were torn up and access was problematic for customers.

The solution that came to mind right away was, "Let's do some art and cultural programming so that we can bring people to their businesses." We started engaging with and coordinating artists to work with the businesses along the light-rail line corridor. It really worked. Businesses were happy. Artists were bringing customers back into the businesses in the district. Eventually we felt like we needed to brand that district, and we came up with the name Little Mekong. That has gone a long way, and it has really given Saint Paul's Asian commercial corridor a distinct identity.

CULTURE AS ECONOMIC GAIN

We know that culture produces economic value, and we want to give people the opportunity to do that. I think especially for communities of color, that's a strength that we should not ignore in terms of building and creating economic value and development.

For the Twin Cities Southeast Asian community, we haven't had those opportunities, so we really want to leverage that asset. One of the reasons why AEDA first started working with arts and culture creators is that we realized the cultures of the Twin Cities Southeast Asian community aren't a tapped asset. We realized that we need to be working together—artists, businesses, and residents—to elevate culture in a way that will have a positive economic impact.

And we've seen that it *has* had that impact. All the cultural activities that we've created in Little Mekong generate over $6 million dollars in additional revenue to businesses and artists. Prior to the light rail and the branding of the district as Little Mekong, customers would be 90, 95 percent Southeast Asian. But today, I

▼ Va-Megn Thoj, founder and executive director of the Asian Economic Development Association.

would say that 70 percent of visitors to the area are Southeast Asian or Asian American, and about 30 percent others. We've brought in over 300,000 new visitors to the area, and now we're also having a physical revitalization impact on the district.

So we've increased the number of customers to the area, and we've diversified the customer base. It's become a destination that has broader recognition than it had previously. These are all measurable outcomes we can see and that are having a positive impact on people's lives.

OWNING THE NARRATIVE

I think pride in your own cultural heritage is very important, especially for the Southeast Asian community. Because of the traumatic history of having been relocated to the U.S. as refugees, a lot was lost.

So our first audience that we target is low-income Southeast Asians in the immediate neighborhoods of Frogtown and Rondo, and Southeast Asians [elsewhere] in the Twin Cities who normally don't have access to the arts. It's expensive to access art and culture, and it's really hard to access art and culture in a way that's educational and reinforcing and elevating people's cultural heritage. Everything we've done is free to the public.

In terms of the Twin Cities, we talk about what we do as bridging cultures. We felt that Minnesota's AAPI [Asian-American/Pacific-Islander] population is invisible, and we're only visible whenever there's something negative. Even though in St. Paul we make up 15 to 20 percent of residents, we're still invisible in the sense that our cultural presence and influence is not acknowledged or is ignored, especially when it comes to decision-making and policymaking.

Art and culture really increases our visibility and our impact in a very positive way by sharing our culture with everyone. We want to change the perception of the area as an unsafe, poor neighborhood with a lot of deficits. We're a cultural connector, and present the Twin Cities Southeast Asian community in an authentic way to everyone. It's become part of the identity of the district that not only do you go to Little Mekong if you want to eat Asian food, but it's where you can actually experience the culture of Minnesota's Southeast Asian community. You don't find that in many places in the Twin Cities or Minnesota, which is not a very diverse state overall.

Obviously we're leveraging art and culture for economic benefit, and that's also key. But we don't forget the fact that by our creative placemaking initiative in Little Mekong, we're also having an impact culturally in terms of bridging cultural communities, increasing awareness of Southeast Asian culture, but also just increasing and strengthening that cultural identification that many of us lost when we came to the U.S. as refugees.

EMPOWERING ARTISTS AS COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS

It's gratifying to see artists who felt they didn't have a place within the creative economy or the cultural landscape feel like they could rely on us. They could go to

▼ **Armed with umbrellas and ablaze with lights, stilt walkers make their way through the Little Mekong Night Market.**

◀ An interactive installation at the Little Mekong Night Market.

their roots and leverage that and be connected to their community as artists, and at the same time have an impact on the community in ways that they hadn't thought about.

I think that's the uniqueness of an economic development organization utilizing and engaging artists. So many artists come to AEDA and realize that it's not just about their creativity, but it's about their creativity having an economic impact, or a broader cultural impact. Many artists go through traditional training, and they focus on their art and their technique and their skills. They don't realize that they could be community developers. That's what we're seeing with the work that AEDA is doing. We are working with artists who are realizing that they are community developers in the sense that they're uplifting the community in many different ways.

That speaks to me, because as a filmmaker before I became a nonprofit director, I didn't really see myself as having this kind of impact on the community. I was thinking, "I make my films, and it's about me and my vision, and I hope that I can communicate with people." But it's more than that. Yes, your creativity is important, your vision is important, but beyond that you could have this impact on the economic opportunities of the community.

PUTTING ARTISTS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

In terms of creative placemaking, I think it's important for the people who are part of that community to actually take the lead and do this work. If organizations want to work with artists, make sure that the artists are representative of the place that they're working in, and the community that they're working in. That's often not the case, and for us that's very important. There are organizations that work in neighborhoods of color that are not led by people of color, and they find it hard to engage with the community that they're in.

At AEDA, 100 percent of our staff are Asian, and 100 percent of our board members are Asian. But I think what's important to AEDA is that the work that we do has to be led by artists of color. We give them the power to create their work, and let them determine the outcome and the impact that they want to have. That's always been our mode of operation. We want the artists to actually lead.

Rebecca Sutton is the editor of American Artscape.

▼ The East West Players production of *Mamma Mia!* Photo by Steven Lam

Check out our online-only audio interview

with Snehal Desai, artistic director of East West Players, which raises the visibility of the Asian American experience by presenting inventive world-class theatrical productions, developing artists of color, and providing impactful youth education programs. You can hear the interview at arts.gov/stories/magazine.