



## *finding family stories*

An Arts Partnership Project of the  
Japanese American National Museum



Sandra de la Loza

*Bunkers*, 2002 | Digital print, 19 x 19 inches

## Beyond the Frame: Family Portraits Redefined

As self-assigned family historians, both Michael Massenburg and Dominique Moody have taken literally the project's title—*finding family stories*—by tracing their family's migrations and chronicling their myriad stories. This exhibition features the results of their efforts to decipher what they have learned about their families and themselves by presenting the family portrait re-seen.

Using the treasured photo albums of both his father's family, the Massenburgs, and his mother's, the Hodges, Michael Massenburg has spent much of his energy on the project simply catching up, listening to the stories his elder relatives have to share. Several of these loved ones have passed away in the course of Massenburg's campaign to gather stories, a search which he refers to as his attempt "to access information."

Massenburg set to work on his new series of family portraits equipped with colorful family photo albums and remembered family stories and letters, along with his usual resource materials: dense volumes of African American history. He has grounded much of his work in the complex inheritance of African Americans throughout his artistic career. Those history books offer context, distance, and hindsight; and, when he pairs them with his family's photo albums, Massenburg affects a richly layered and profound reading of his place in the world. In this way, the intensely magnified lens encircling the subject of family quickly expands to encompass the African American community's continuing struggle for self-determination and this country's legacy of racism, with its systematic disempowerment and displacement.

Massenburg admits that with age, he has begun to embrace more fully family and community histories as his own, and as such, he was eager to research his family's history, successfully tracing it back to his ancestors enslaved in the American South. The varying textures of his painted, collaged images in his new works, *In Time*, *Malissa Letter*, and *Circle of Cousins*, reveal the commingled memories, histories, portraits, snapshots, shadows, and excerpts of family correspondences he draws upon as raw materials.

Like Massenburg, Dominique Moody has been in close touch with her family, namely her mother and seven siblings, mining her own family history for added insight and inspiration. Moody's intensive preoccupation with her family history has been a healthy

obsession infusing the artist's practice with incredible energy. In preparation for this exhibition, the artist wrote: "From the very beginning my vision was nurtured in a family abundant in creative expression. And, as a legacy, this experience has been the greatest gift I've ever received."

During the past two years, while participating in the *finding family stories* project, Moody has developed her new work while seeking the whereabouts of her father, a military man who exiled himself from the Moody family many decades ago. It is rather appropriate, then, that her four new pieces for the exhibition are reflections on her family's saga of presences, migrations, and absences shared over many family interviews, get-togethers, and accompanied investigative excursions. These individual and collective stories appear as richly collaged photographs, life-sized wood plank figures of Moody family members, and wood boxes with miniature compartments packed with pictures. In her installation, *A Family Treasure Found*, wood silhouettes and profiles which Moody traced from each relative are slotted together to form the statuesque bodies of the artist, her mother, and siblings. The figures stand proudly together, reinventing the look and concept of the family portrait with added dimension. Moreover, the artist has crafted the absent Moody patriarch's presence, forming a profoundly inclusive yet startlingly altered family portrait.

As presence points to absence, family histories can scarcely be told without the settings in which families grow and change. As historical, political, social, and cultural environs, communities are where personal and family histories play out. Yet at the same time that community has come to mean a distinct geographical place, inhabited by groups of people. It can also defy geography to identify and gather groups of people together in solidarity.



This exhibition features new works by José B. Ramírez and Sandra de la Loza that elaborate on representations of family in order to make visible the inherent connection between family and community stories, especially those of Los Angeles' working poor and struggling immigrant populations. It may seem natural that since both Ramírez and de la Loza are native Angelenos that the city and its stories would find their way into their respective work. But it is the way in which they each endow the notion of family with that of community, and vice versa, that makes their work unique and unexpected.

With an impressive artistic career in Los Angeles through his active community involvement as an inner-city elementary school teacher, painter, and muralist, José B. Ramírez has taken a closer look at the ways in which the vitality of our families and communities are collectively intertwined. The events of September 11 and the paranoid political climate that followed inspired Ramírez to emphasize his already existing commitment to teach respect for differences and social responsibility through his art. The subsequent series of new paintings entitled *Fly*, finds its inspiration from the book *The People Could Fly*, which Ramírez assigned to his third-grade class. In this African American folktale set in the American South, African slaves looked to the spirits and found the collective will and courage to gain freedom from their oppressors. Ramírez's new paintings are a reflection on the circumstances of this triumphant story, but his setting is the urban landscape of Los Angeles. Furthermore, the "spirits" that ignite our imagination and hope against sociopolitical invisibility, conquest, and fear are our families and loved ones—children, elders, and those no longer bodily present.

Ramírez's abiding mission has been to empower and mobilize Los Angeles' marginalized communities against the oppressive realities they often endure in silence and obscurity—poverty, police brutality, lack of services, as well as anti-immigration

and English-only policies. Ramírez's ongoing critical preoccupation with such serious issues has continued in concert with his equally attentive focus on the people and values that inspire compassion and fortitude. This new work represents a continuation of Ramírez's priorities as an artist: to celebrate family and community solidarity, to reinvent home and tradition, and to visualize peace and empowerment toward a positive future.

Beginning with her parents' Polaroid family snapshots from the 1950s and 60s, Sandra de la Loza examines the nature of the family portrait as a consciously staged, culminating moment of a family's desire for their togetherness to be dressed up, documented, and remembered. As a façade of outward appearances, the portrait can also conceal the character of our relationships with one another. De la Loza takes apart the portrait to see past the picture itself, by first voiding, then recomposing and substituting textured photograph or video images of organic and urban surfaces—from tall grasses and California poppies, to crackling painted stucco and graffitied liquor store windows. De la Loza's ongoing series of photographic inkjet prints enlarge the artist's family photos, so much so that the colorful textures of each image are drawn into clear focus. But by cutting out the individual figures so that only a silhouette tracing of each present person remains, de la Loza creates a glaring absence amidst familiar front lawns and living rooms. Using these indelible images in this specific yet anonymous way, de la Loza expands the scope of her address from family to community.

In de la Loza's sound installation, a crowd of second-hand speakers transmit a multitude of voices hand-picked by the artist; each one is different, yet each carries in part the Los Angeles stories of de la Loza's biological and chosen families. This sound installation is an homage to family as much as it is an intimate portrait of a sprawling

metropolis. Seen through the lens of de la Loza's "extended" family, the artist effectively inflates the resonance of family beyond biological boundaries. The voices and languages in this audio piece are those spoken on her street, in her neighborhood, and throughout the city; they are, for the artist, the voices of family and home.

Peering through the thick lens of memory-as-history, both Patrick "Pato" Hebert and Betty Lee have explored the profound effects of how identity and space slowly create one another. Their new photographic pieces look closely at historically contested sites which also serve as home.

A main impetus for much of Betty Lee's work has been her childhood experience growing up in a small, isolated Midwestern town without any other Asian Americans. Lee's new net-based project, photographs and video pieces bring to monumental fruition her series of semi-autobiographical images, entitled *Laundry Series*, which she began in 1995. Throughout this series, as with her new work, Lee illuminates the dark enveloped spaces of the back rooms in her parents' laundry business where her self-awareness as a person of color began. Despite her family's isolation and "invisibility," Lee was able to gain a keen sense of awareness about being identified as Chinese because her parents' livelihood was common to Chinese immigrant communities all across the United States. Lee explains that reflecting on her childhood necessitated a reflection on the surroundings of her home; and because her Chinese American family worked in isolation in their community, "The place where we worked [was] the place where we lived. There was no delineation between work and home."

Each of the four exhibition venues will feature imagery comprising a portrait of Lee's childhood drawn from the artist's memories of this physical and psychological space. She depicts the interior world of the small, family-operated laundry shop, the daily

rituals and recreation they performed therein, the tools of the trade, and its many machines—all of which are invisible to the rest of the world, save the clothes they laundered. In the same moment that Lee's work tells of the artist's early realization of her family's racial and economic difference, she succeeds in connecting their estrangement to the expanding Chinese American communities struggling to survive in the nation's growing metropolises.

In his series of large prismatic photograph diptychs, entitled *Hay una vieja que está enamorada*, Pato Hebert employs lenticular technology to visually represent the solemn black and white landscapes of Panama and portraits of family. By juxtaposing diverse people with historically layered landscapes, Hebert explores family, memory, history, racial identity, and nation as fundamentally related concepts.

Lenticular technology permits numerous images to be layered simultaneously in a single frame, allowing viewers to see different pictures as they dance side by side to gain slightly different vantage points before the image's ridged surface. In addition to this simultaneous layering of images, Hebert pairs the shifting landscape with personal family portraits—pictures of his family members as he interacts with them.

*Hay una vieja's* images bear multiple layers of Panama's Spanish colonial and American post-colonial history. Recently abandoned American military bases and Spanish ruins four centuries old are shown in relative states of decay. In fact, the panoramic landscape scenes juxtaposed with the candid but elegant portraits of his family operate as unofficial evidence of official histories at war; at the same time, they remain symbols of Hebert's family stories giving witness to their survival in a twice occupied land, and his own personal experience. The diptych images of *Hay una vieja* reveal that for Hebert's relatives, the experience of home in Panama is inextricably tied to the country's colonial



history, of which these ruined trappings are a constant reminder. The changing portrait of a geographical locale can illustrate how places gain historical and personal importance through the course of memory and human interaction, as well as neglect.

By looking at the physical landscape as evidence of diverse cultural and social experiences and articulations, Steven Yao-Chee Wong and Teresa Hagiya explore the ways in which communities are marked by countless entities in addition to ourselves, such as tourism, urban development, neighborhood gangs, and local, state, and national governments. A wide array of community interactions shapes public spaces, impacting collective and personal experiences of space.

Found objects, video, and a postcard display comprise Steven Wong's new work, *Chinatown Stories: Realizing the Imagined*. Together, these three distinct parts offer a richly complex portrait of Los Angeles' current Chinatown. Studying and teaching Asian American history and living in Chinatown have inspired Wong's curiosity about the creation of unequal power relationships. For a few years now, Wong has been researching and teaching the history of this particular Chinese American community which he calls home. In spite of its nearness to the heart of the city, Chinatown's story of struggle and resistance against displacement remains relatively obscure.

In an attempt to heighten the visibility of Chinatown's story in the Asian American community and beyond, Wong's work frames the tension of the neighborhood's exotic aesthetic trappings, popular myths, thriving tourist culture, and the everyday experiences of local immigrants and their descendants. In effect, *Chinatown Stories* lays bare the connection between ideas and images of Chinatown informed and disseminated via the movie industry, prevalent racist notions about Chinese people, and the Chinatown community itself. By casting into stark relief people's private

observations against the backdrop of mass-produced perceptions, Wong complicates the authenticity of Chinatown myths and realities. Ultimately, he encourages viewers to consider the resonance of their own Chinatown memories, the ways in which they, too, have participated in realizing "the imagined" Chinatown.

Teresa Hagiya draws on landscapes as portraits of intersecting experiences by looking at the synthetic signs and symbols that mark well-traveled and less-traveled landscapes, such as main thoroughfares and rural roads. The bold colors and sparkling surfaces of road safety signs abound, bearing silk-screened images of farm culture in Hagiya's new installation *Retro-Reflective*. Whether the familiar colors and materials warn, direct, or simply offer respite, these iridescent surfaces lay dark or dormant until acknowledged by darting headlights, or eyes seeking guidance or affirmation, that one's passage is sure. Here, Hagiya's spotlights dramatize that moment in which the sign-watcher becomes cognizant of the regulated signs designed and placed for their safety.

In small towns that cling closely to many interstate highways, these reflective signs do more than just dot the long narrow expanses of two-lane roads. Over time, and through repeated reference, these official markers of public space come to stand for those communities and their stories. For example, the yellow and black signs posted along San Diego interstates near the U.S.-Mexico border which alert highway motorists of immigrant families running across the freeway, are as much traffic signs as they are reminders of immigrants' constant plight to find viable places for their families to work and live. Such bold signs serve a very different purpose in small towns where the communities themselves often remain invisible; while, in contrast, the reflective signs usher people safely through and past their provincial limits. As outsiders enter such rural areas, signs help them navigate through and remind them to be cautious when farm animals are crossing, or when tractors take to the streets.

Hagiya employs the material of these signs as a way to foreground the most common and publicly tangible "signs" of a community in an attempt to look past what inevitably becomes common symbolic knowledge to passersby. Another reason the material is so symbolic is that it serves as a vehicle for officially disseminated information, thus making what has been mapped relevant or useful to the public. Hagiya plays with the unavoidable visibility of these signs and this material as a means to draw attention to the unseen and unheard. Growing up Japanese American in a small community is an experience that does not warrant public visual displays. Yet, *Retro-Reflective* represents Hagiya's desire to do just that.

*The model of this special collaboration between local artists and community cultural institutions is one that rests on the notion of building a far-reaching understanding of our collectively rich Southern California home. Working with the **finding family stories** artists over the past two years has encouraged me to boldly embrace the people I care about as my family, the people with whom I share interests as my community, and all the places where I feel a sense of belonging as my home. They have also taught me that through this rethinking, the necessity of defining one's family, community, and home can be vitally important and even liberating. With the goal to share and honor our own and each others' stories, the artists have inspired us to open up our definitions of family to include all the relationships we value. This is how we all became a family, too.*

**Sonia Mak**

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