

# ENVISIONING DIASPORA

Asian American Visual Arts Collectives  
FROM GODZILLA, GODZOOKIE, TO THE BARNSTORMERS

Alexandra Chang

### An Asian Internationalism:

Scholar, curator, and writer Joan Kee in her catalog essay "Who's Afraid of Asian American Art?" for the 2003 exhibition "Tradeshow: New Currents in Recent Asian American Art" at c2 Gallery at the Pottery Workshop in Shanghai brings up several important and unanswerable questions about defining "Asian American art." Kee wonders at the very categorizing attributes that are assumed under its title as a descriptor of an artist or artwork. She asks the question of former Godzilla member, artist Skowmon Hastanan as to her Asian American-ness. Kee categorizes the artist's work as diasporic in nature. Indicating that Hastanan is an artist from Thailand and creating in the U.S., Kee also envisions the artist as referring to Thailand as a place from which she is "cut off from," yet also remains as "a Thai citizen living in New York since 1973." Is Hastanan an Asian American artist?<sup>7</sup> Kee posits the term between Asia and Asian America, both separate, yet both related in an unanswerable and suspended question. She ends her essay by asking that the attempt at definition be left as an open question with no response: "Asian American art oozes and coalesces tensions together and in the process, demands the formation of an open zone where artists and their work can be read with an understanding that no conclusion must ever be derived."<sup>8</sup>

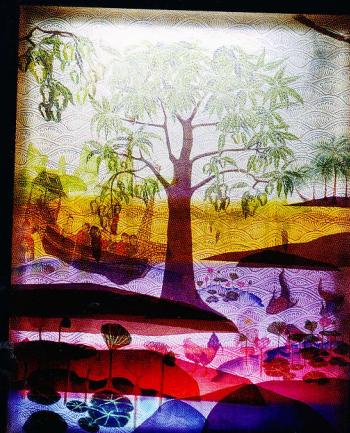
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Joan Kee, "Who's Afraid of Asian American Art?," *Trade Show: New Currents in Recent Asian American Art*, (Shanghai: c2 Gallery at the Pottery Workshop, 2003) 40–42.

8

Ibid, 42.

## SKOWMON HASTANAN



GODZILLA  
PAGE 186

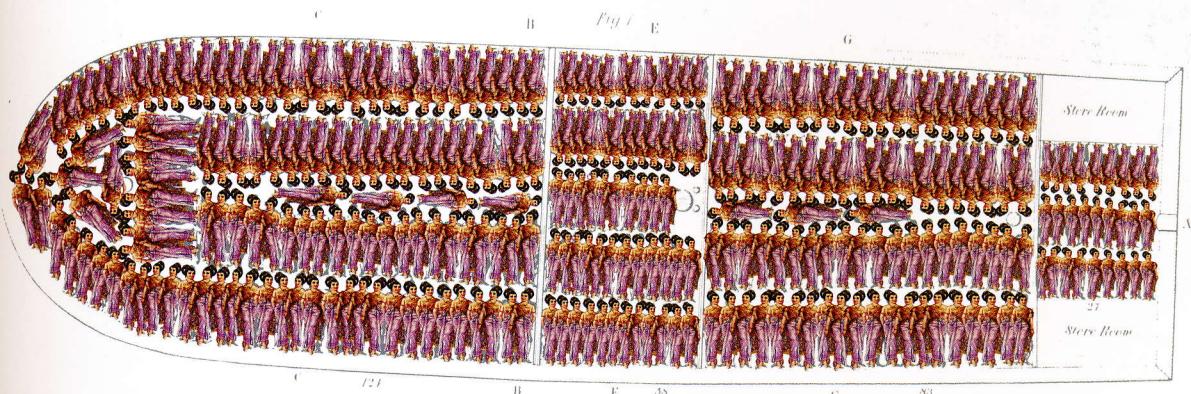
L-R  
*Asian/Roses*, graphite, acrylic, water-soluble silver ink and wax pastel, newspaper cutouts, on Arches Aquarelle paper, 22" x 30", 2007.  
Courtesy of the artist.

*Nari Pala, Women Mango Fruit Tree*, prints from watercolor pencil drawings transferred onto plexiglass sheets, fluorescent light, 18" x 15" x 4 1/4", 2006.  
Courtesy of the artist.

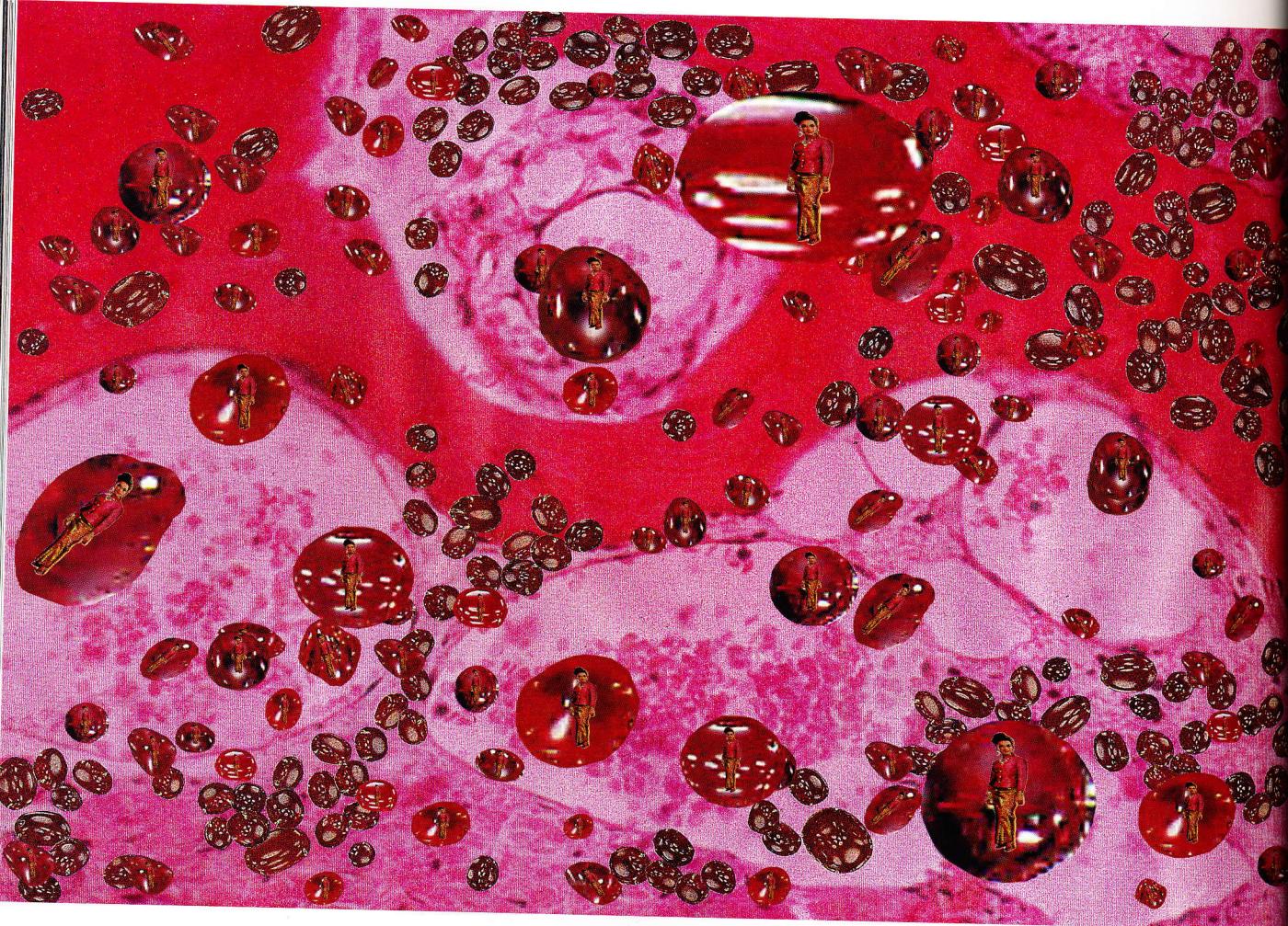
Kee's observation rests as one based on underlying content as well, asking whether to consider the transglobal subject matter within the artist's works as something that necessarily also precludes Hastanan from the category of Asian American art. Kee draws her observations from Hastanan's works from the artist's *Fever* series. In these works Hastanan references African slave trade ship images of bodies, lined and packed together as they are transported across the ocean as commodities for sale. She has substituted rows of African bodies for that of a single smiling Thai airline stewardess image that is reproduced one next to the other, packed into the vessel, commenting on the modern day sex slave trade. The image is at once colorful and alluring due to the exotic female stewardess costume, and at once a statement of protest. Hastanan both underlines the continuing global slave trade as well as involves the component of Thai culture from her biographic past as an artist practicing in the U.S. at the beginning of the 21st century. Is the content of "Asian-ness" practiced through her art on U.S. soil the qualifying factoid that prompts an attribution of "Asian American artist" dubbed upon the artist? Or does Thailand, her country of birth, implicitly imply that she is an Asian artist despite living and producing work in the U.S., questions Kee.

**From *Pageant Fever Series*, 2000.**  
*Pageant Fever* is a homage to women workers in the international tourist industry. It is a visual analogy between the historical Middle Passage ship and the seating arrangements of modern passenger airplanes. The replicated figures of women in traditional dresses are taken from Thai postage stamps. These figures represent images of hospitality and wholesomeness that are the commodities through which industries attract and sell services.  
—Skowmon Hastanan

**Skowmon Hastanan, *Ship Fever*, inkjet, 11" x 8", 2000.**  
Courtesy of the artist.



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# SKOWMON HASTANAN

## GODZILLA

Born in 1961 in Thailand and raised in Bangkok, conceptual mixed media artist Skowmon Hastanan moved to the Bronx in New York City in 1973 at the end of the Vietnam war, following her parents who had moved to the U.S. earlier as doctors in the late '60s.

"I told them I wanted to become an artist, and I think it's a luxury that they both agreed that I can be an artist," remembered Hastanan.<sup>1</sup> She was accepted at the School of Visual Arts and was greatly influenced by artists at the time, who were active feminists in the '70s.

After finishing art school at the School of Visual Arts in 1985, Hastanan participated in the Artists in the Marketplace program at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. In 1988, she also volunteered to work on a show titled "Latin American Spirits: Art and artists in the United States 1920-1970," and it was at the museum that she was first introduced to artists of color who were investigating their own family histories as the subject matter of their artwork: "...I discovered artists who weren't taught about in school, mostly African American artists, Latin American artists, Asian American artists."<sup>2</sup> And through museum director Holly Block, she was introduced to Godzilla founder Ken Chu, who would invite her to participate in the "Dismantling Invisibility: Asian & Pacific Islander Artists Respond to the AIDS Crisis" exhibition in 1991. From then on, she became one of the main organizing forces behind Godzilla.

Although she was only ten years old when she moved to the U.S., Hastanan's memories of the Vietnam War greatly impacted her artwork concerning how Thai women are seen in Western pop culture. In her 2007 artist statement for the audio tour of the exhibition "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum, she writes:

*During the Vietnam War, my parents were medical physicians assigned to work at a northeastern border hospital near Vietnam. My experience of America in Thailand came via Playboy magazine, noisy jets*

*fighters flying over my house, music, food, and VD centers next to Go-Go bars at vacation spots created to accommodate the U.S. military presence. Back then Thai women were also casualties of this military conflict, as in my mother's story of her daily work that included mending uteruses of bar girls injured from having sex with American soldiers. After the Vietnam War, the left over sex industry was disguised as a legitimate tourist industry, and in the 1990's Thailand declared itself the epicenter of the AIDS crisis.*

*During a time of global economy, we have seen the explosion of sex tourism and human trafficking. Images of mail-order-brides, escort, and massage services appear on the Internet and in classified ads. My artworks explore feminine identity through these found images.*

Using collages and cutouts from pop cultural ephemeral materials, such as Thai postage stamps and pinup posters, Hastanan appropriates different projections of femininity in her works. In her lightbox installations, such as *Rubyscape* (2004–2007), the artist encased collaged cutouts of an idealized woman in traditional dress lifted from Thai postage stamps within the precious little bubble-like worlds of ruby gemstones. These images are replicated and seen afloat within the streaming background of a medical pathologist's slide of autoimmune disease. The artist is able to both comment on the image of "wholesomeness" and commodification of Thai women in the tourist industry, and also emphasize the marketing of women in Thai society within the landscape of the global sex trade. Her piece *Les femmes en route: Magnificent Journey* (2003) similarly collages the cutout image into the center of different colored gemstones. The title of the exhibition underscores the notion of "women on the go," and the international market based on the trafficking of Thai women for labor.

Hastanan's work *The Arrival: Purple Glory* (1997) utilizes an image of a military map made in Australia

with Asia at its center. Images of orchids and cutouts figures of women emanate from the center of the map, traveling off from Asia to America, Asia to Europe, tracing the network of global trafficking of Asian women. These lightbox images are enticing and glowing, much like the gemstones, flowers, and smiling faces they reference. However, they require the viewer to rethink the prettiness of these images, informing them of the very present human trafficking and AIDS epidemic that is silently passing in the background.

1  
"Profiles on Asian American Art,"  
Skowmon Hastanan Papers and miniDV,  
Instep Productions Archive, 2003.

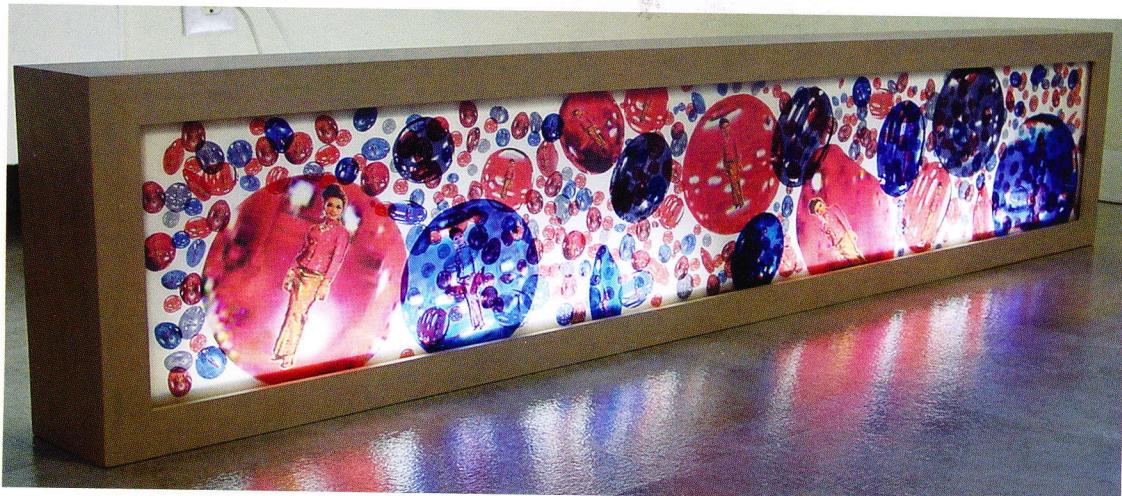
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Ibid.

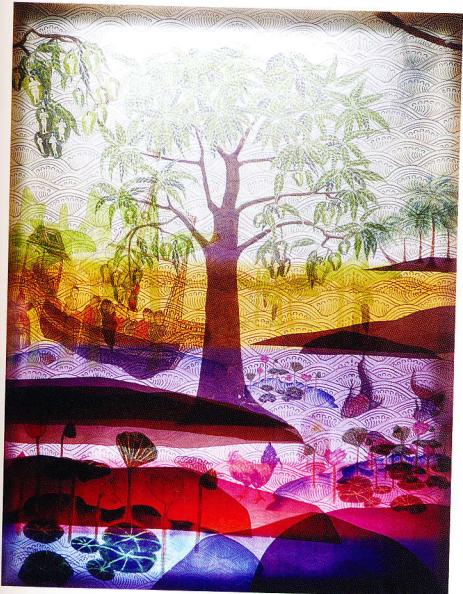


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1  
*Rubyscape*, digital print, dimensions various, 2004–2007.

Courtesy of the artist.

2  
*Les femmes en route: Red Stream*, three-hundred Strass pear-shaped crystals, inkjet prints transferred manually on crystals with red food dye and acrylic medium, and various red jade beads attached to a 10 ft.-long metal bicycle chain with nickel pins, wire, and Christmas lights, 120" x 4", 2004–2005.

Courtesy of the artist.

*Les femmes en route: Red Stream (detail)*, 120" x 4", 2004–2005.

Courtesy of the artist.

*Les femmes en route: Red Stream (detail)*, 120" x 4", 2004–2005.

Courtesy of the artist.

3  
*Les femmes en route: Magnificent Journey*, light box with inkjet cutouts adhered on layered plexiglass sheets, fluorescent light, 11 5/8" x 4 1/4" x 54 13/16", 2003.

Courtesy of the artist.

4  
*Nari Pala, Women Mango Fruit Tree*, prints from watercolor pencil drawings transferred on plexiglass sheets, fluorescent light, 18" x 15" x 4 1/4", 2006.

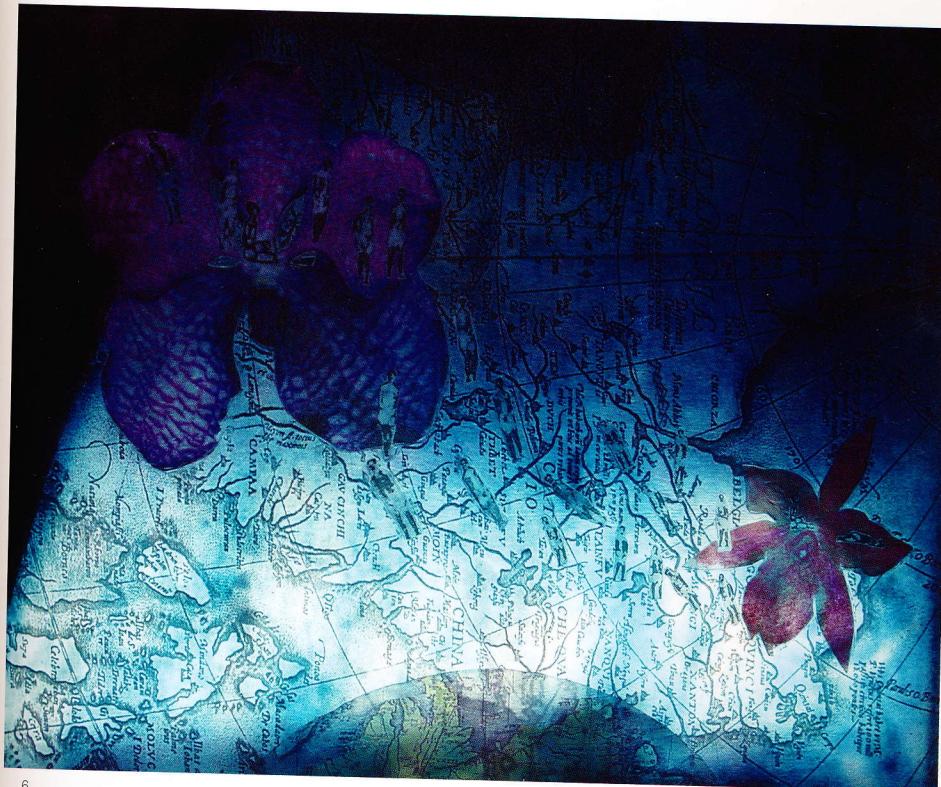
Courtesy of the artist.

5  
*Thai Chitrada Business Class, Economy Class Beauty*, from the *Pageant Fever Series*, inkjet print with nail polish paint, 4" x 4", 2000.

Courtesy of the artist.

6  
*The Arrival: Purple Glory*, print and acrylic on glass sheets, fluorescent light, 10 1/2" x 12 1/2" x 4 1/4", 1997.

Courtesy of the artist.



6