

Strokes of Empathy: Shani Shih's Art of Empowerment

By: Ilaria Luna



“Infinity.” Hands. Entangled. Outstretched. Fingers—strong, slender, gnarled, extended inward and outward, with no clear beginning or end—intertwine, perhaps in a protective embrace, perhaps in a suffocating grasp; all encircling a young female face with closed, elongated eyelids crowned with thin eyebrows and sleek black hair. Is she dreaming or lifeless? Peaceful or defeated?

“I am grateful to be able to express myself. To try to represent my internal world, our personal and shared experience, to capture physical and spiritual movement through expanses of space and time, together and alone (...). How blessed I am to be alive and share my journey.”

The journey of multidisciplinary visual artist, teacher, and activist Shani Shih begins well before her birth. It is the Eastward journey that, in time of war, took her grandfathers from mainland China to Taiwan, and its subsequent Westward leg that, one generation later, brought her parents to the US. Shani's childhood is dotted with Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn, and Dragon Boat festivals. It is flavored with

bamboo-wrapped *zongzi* and tasty mooncakes. It is enlivened by letters and phone calls from her extended family back East. It is imbued with her ancestors' strong ethical code of hospitality, respect, altruism.

And yet, the hyphen in "Asian-American" cannot harmoniously join the two self-contained worlds that shape Shani's upbringing. Her immigrant, low-income household is a cultural bubble where she feels increasingly trapped and disconnected from her affluent New Jersey surroundings. What Shani begins to perceive of the Chinese and Taiwanese "motherlands" that her parents taught her to love is the depth of their divide. She realizes that, while folks of Chinese heritage could identify as "Malaysian" or "Singaporean" without any challenge, her claim to Taiwanese descent would often elicit aggressive responses.

Where is "home", then, for young Shani? It cannot be China or Taiwan, places she only visited twice, as a baby and a young girl, with no live roots or memories she can attach to, nor a language that she can realistically master to feel and think the Chinese way, despite attending Chinese school. Yet home is not her American birthplace in New Jersey, either--a space of inner tensions and impossible negotiations between incompatible mindsets, values, practices. The only cultural marker that can define her seems to be the lack of what she would need to be accepted and belong.

How can she fill that void?

It is art that comes to her rescue--the needle that bursts her suffocating bubble, the "home" she was looking for, not made of walls or confining categories, but rather of empathy, celebration of uniqueness and diversity. Art allows Shani to see herself in a new way. It offers her an outlet to express her anger at the silence and self-segregation of her community, and to turn her passion about social issues into action. It starts with the discovery of the hip-hop and graffiti community. For the first time she feels connected to others who are shaped by multiple heritages and desires to put her artistic talent in the service of society.

“Before you can support and guide others along their artistic path, you need to have an understanding of yourself as an artist,”--she states during our interview. While she recognizes that the journey of self-understanding never ends, Shani acquires the awareness and motivation to teach underprivileged students at Thomson Elementary in DC Chinatown through AALEAD, the only organization supporting low-income and underserved Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth in the Greater Washington area with educational empowerment, identity development, and leadership opportunities.



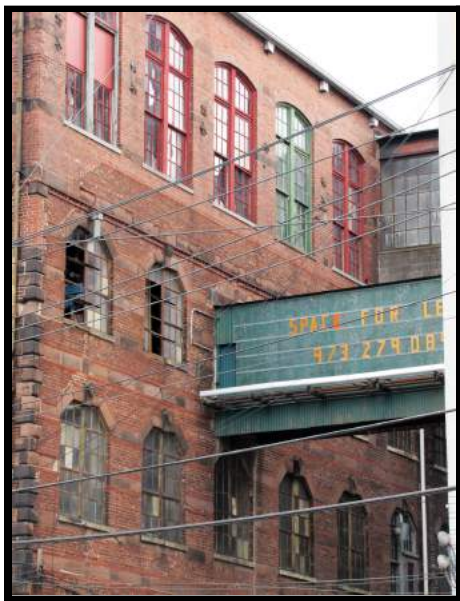
I gaze at Shani’s multimedia painting *Your light*, where a young Asian girl delicately holds a glowing white globe in her little hands, while the canvas around her is filled with multicolor shapes, maybe embodying thoughts emanating from her mind.

This powerful image acquires a great symbolic value for me when I associate it to Shani’s own self-discovery. The light Shani finds within herself illuminates her path

and is the spark that inspires her to create “Chinatown Art Studio,” a free community program for AAPI children centered around art instruction in various media, guided exploration of traditional and contemporary art cultures, and connections with local communities through art. Sponsored by the Chinese-American Citizens Alliance and the 1882 Foundation, which fosters public awareness of the history and significance of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, “Chinatown Art Studio” allows Shani to enhance social inclusivity and call attention to Asian-Americans’ struggles from a more impactful perspective.

“Chinatown is a people, not just a place,” Shani passionately asserts in response to my questions about this iconic DC location. Her Chinatown is not only the glamorous façades and glimmering signs of its upscale stores and restaurants, or the Zodiac animals on the pavement. There is a network of people who live there and love the place, working class Chinese immigrants with a diversity of experience and identities, with poignant personal and family stories to tell, but who are voiceless and invisible.

“If people know where to look, that history is there.” Shani looked in the right place, found it, and, with her art and community activism, she strives to assign voices and faces to it. Through exhibits with the Smithsonian, newspaper articles, and public artwork, she has shared the unwritten history of that hidden Chinatown. It’s the story of those who do not have options--of Asian small business owners who struggle to survive; of underprivileged, often undocumented, Chinese workers; of low-income Chinese-American families like Shani’s—often the families of her own students at Chinatown Art Studio; of elderly people who live in rooming houses and senior facilities, and risk eviction.



For an artist like Shani, constantly dislocated and in search of a home for her tormented bi-cultural soul, preservation of affordable housing and protection of tenant’s rights against gentrification are inspiring causes. *“Many of my students and their families live in precarious housing situations. I have witnessed what they are undergoing. The distress of displacement is palpable in all of them.”*—Shani’s eyes sparkle and her hands trace arabesques as she speaks, as though she were painting her strong emotions in the air—*“This is where my empathy and desire to help others and work against systemic violence and inequality came from. They drew me to advocacy work and to tenant organizing.”*

Many of her photographs capture empty, dilapidated urban buildings. Her mural “Welcome to Displacement Capital” reveals the constant danger of forced removal lurking behind DC hospitality, reminding us that “Housing is A Human Right.”



“I see suffering on a daily basis. The physical, emotional, and mental health burden of poverty and systemic racism is crushing—on families, seniors, immigrants, poor communities of color. It is a blessing to be able to help people, even though the weight of that responsibility is quite taxing.”

Knowing by experience how class difference affects cultural and racial identity, with her art collective and personal work Shani supports causes that other marginalized groups and people of color share with the Asian-American communities. And street art is her aesthetic medium of choice. It allows her to experience the world and to spearhead social justice and empowerment projects. *“There is a fire, an indescribable energy at*

the core of this art form, which drives artists to risk freedom and safety to leave a mark, to claim space, to speak out. It revolves around community, peace, love, unity.”



On the windows of an Asian take-out restaurant, Shani accompanies her “ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE” and “BLACK LIVES MATTER” slogans with their Chinese equivalents. The two hands, respectively of purple and pink tonalities, convey the universal idea of two distinct complexions that, despite their differences, share the same anti-racist commitment. Their linked, clenched fists express a joint impulse to fight with solidarity.

“Washington DC and Chinatown are where I have come into myself and the life I’m pursuing. As I’ve continued walking on my path, I have increasingly felt that my home is within me, not just a place or people.”

Shani has ultimately realized that she does not have to define herself only by cultural or ethno-national identity. She *“learned that, despite our popular discourse, identity is not stagnant--culture and identity are extremely fluid, throughout centuries and generations. What it means to be “Chinese-American” or “Taiwanese-American” is never a given fact—it is always evolving, and [Shani’s] story is a part of that evolution.”*

Shani Shih’s art and activism journey continues. It teaches new generations of Asian-Americans that it doesn’t matter whether you are more Chinese or Taiwanese; it is not necessary to determine the percentage of yourself that is or feels American. You need to honor your heritage, in the singular or in the plural, but it is possible to love cultures even without inheriting them from previous generations. Our home may be somewhere, nowhere, everywhere. We are all hybrid and intertwined, enriched by differences. And we are all made of stories, the ones we tell and the ones we receive from others. From them, we learn what it means to be human.

[1494 words]

Photo credits: Shani Shih

“INFINITY” | 14 x 11” | Pen & Ink on Paper

Your Light | 12x12” | Acrylic and spray paint on panel

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE, Washington DC
(2020)

Untitled photos:

<http://www.shanishih.com/new-page>

Welcome to Displacement Capital, for Make
Room USA

redemption | 11x14” | acrylic, watercolor, and pen
on paper

