

Asian Canadian art exhibition challenges JC viewer

By KAT MOTOTSUNE

It was with some trepidation that I approached Yellow Peril: Reconsidered, a multi-media exhibition of work by Asian Canadian artists. In attending the film and video programs, I wasn't sure if I was going to see documentaries telling non-Asians what it is like to be Asian, or experimental works telling everyone what it is like to be an artist. Whose vision of "Asian Canadian sensibilities" was I going to view, seeing as the artists represented were of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Filipino origins.

Yellow Peril: Reconsidered is the third in a series of related projects, mixing "works of a wide-eyed experimental nature with more accessible works intended for broad-band distribution." The film and videotape pieces, especially the video programs, follow this mandate only too well.

The first videotape, *Silence into Silence*, is a short drama that explores family loyalty and new world ambitions through three women from one Chinese family in Montreal. It leads into Anthony Chan's *Chinese Cafes in Rural Saskatchewan*. This documentary combines winning interviews with often superficial narrative to look at the phenomenon of interracial life on the prairies. Both of these first two videotapes are good examples of the accessible works

aimed at viewers interested in the multicultural experience.

The next videotape, Richard Fung's *Chinese Characters*, instantly launches viewers into the realm of "wide-eyed experimental" work. Investigating what it means to be a gay Asian in a world of gay white pornography, it is definitely not for those who are coy about seeing male nudity and gay sex on screen. Artistically and thematically adventurous, this piece marked an abrupt change in tone in the videotape program that could be felt as a tangible jolt in the audience. From safe depictions of the Asian Canadian experience, we were suddenly with Richard Fung "on the side of already marginalized issues."

Next up were two videos by Japanese Canadian artists. Jay Hirabayashi's *Rage* is a distillation of the performance piece by Kokoro Dance. Combining dance, *taiko*

court music, jazz, scat, and concrete poetry." As close to pure entertainment as any of the videotapes come, this piece also makes a subtle statement about the movement, through the mass media, from a single ethnic tradition to an integrated, personal, and artistic statement.

The videotape program ended with *5000 Years of Good Advice*, a short 1987 glimpse of Chinese politics and philosophy that takes on new significance after Tiananmen Square.

The film program consisted of four films, all by Asian Canadian women. I don't know if the predominance of women working in film is a trend, especially considering that works of male artists made up most of the videotape program. It is interesting to note, however, that the films are, on the whole, both more polished and more accessible than any of the videotape productions.

Daisy Lee's *The Morning Zoo* is a joyful documentary celebrating the Ontario Food Terminal produce market in Toronto. Lee introduces the market from her memories as a member of a Chinese Canadian farming family. Although the market itself contains a bright multicultural mix of people, this film deals least explicitly with the "Asian Canadian sensibility" of all the pieces shown.

Both Helen Lee's *Sally's Beauty Spot* and Brenda Joy Lem's *The Compact* deal with the clash between



Photo: Courtesy of Yellow Peril Reconsidered

Scene from Jay Hirabayashi's *Rage*.

western concepts of Asian female beauty and sexuality and the reality of being an Asian Canadian woman. Using a fictional mode, yet obviously drawing on their own experiences and reflections, both of these women find a genre of film that perhaps most effectively blends the process of education about the Asian Canadian experience with the exploration of mass media as art.

The combination of documentary and fiction finds its pinnacle in the final film of the program, Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View*. Onodera calls the film "documentary based," and uses real people and historical events although it follows a written script. The film uses three generations of women from a Japanese Canadian family as its vehicle for remembrance and tradition. By doing so, Onodera emphasises the role of women in the emotional continuity of an ethnic community and family.

Regarding my point of view as a Japanese Canadian, I was left with two impressions after viewing both the videotape and film programs.

My first impression was that the search for JC identity is taking a new turn towards identification with Asian Canadians in general. The second impression was that, within the context of Asian Canadian art, JC artists often distinguish themselves with a tighter focus and a deeper search for identity. The experience of the internment and the resonations of that experience across generations is often the vehicle for this concentration and consistent vision.

Yellow Fever: Reconsidered will be shown in Winnipeg February 13 to March 6, 1991 at Plug In Inc., Halifax March 19 to April 13 at the Eye Level Gallery, Vancouver May 10 to June 8 at the Artspeak Gallery, and Ottawa June 19 to July 24 at the Galerie Saw Video.

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drumming, *shakuhachi* music, archival photos, and voice-over, this videotape is strikingly expressive of a sansei response to the internment.

Nobuo Kubota's *Nobuo Kubota on the Western Front, Part II* was the undisputed gem of the program. This piece combines voice and facial mime into a symphonic work of art, influenced by "Japanese opera, Korean