

Under My Skin places viewers face to face with complex issue of race

Posted on 30 May 2013. Tags: [2013](#), [Vol 32 No 23](#) | [June 1 - June 7](#)

By **Shin Yu Pai** Northwest Asian Weekly



From new media such as soundscapes and videos to more traditional methods like painting, sculpture, and photography, a diverse group of 26 artists are presenting their views of race and identity in the present day at the Wing Luke in a special exhibit.

The exhibit, “Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century,” on display through Nov. 17, revisits and expands on the themes and ideas first explored in The Wing’s 2004 exhibition, “Beyond Talk: Redrawing Race in Seattle.” Each artist brings a varied medium and opinion to the exhibit.

Akiko Jackson evokes racialized bodies through an installation of an 800-foot coiled braid that resembles a circular area rug. History and current events are present throughout the exhibit via the work of artists like Jasmine Iona Brown, who contributed an installation of five painted portraits of murdered children of color — including Emmitt Till, Trayvon Martin, and others — curated to suggest an altar. Tatiana Garmendia, an artist of Cuban descent, offers a series of paintings that explore fallen soldiers in the arms of burqa-clad women, mimicking the classic posture of the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ in Michelangelo’s “pieta.” Garmendia also contributes a polyvocal sound installation emanating from a towering volcano-like figure shrouded in a paper burqa that spits out statistics on violence against women.

The least successful of the works in Under My Skin include many of the projected sound pieces, which can overpower adjacent works that require deeper, more quiet contemplation. Mary Coss’ installation of hijab-adorned figures include audio recordings of the East African schoolgirls who helped her produce the wire sculptures. While the voices of children attract visitors into the sound cones, the snippets seem disjointed from the work and are difficult to discern, as multiple voices compete over one another to animate the space much like the clamor of kids on a schoolyard.

Under My Skin developed out of a series of potlucks in different parts of Seattle, where The Wing brought together people from different races and different generations to talk about what race and racism are like today, how things have changed, and what hopes people have for the future of race in America. “We collaborated with a number of local institutions and organizations in planning both the potlucks and the exhibition itself,” said Wing Luke Exhibit Developer Mikala Woodward. “The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) included staff from the Northwest African American Museum, the City’s Race and Social Justice Initiative, King County Civil Rights Commission, as well as artists and community members from across sectors. Some had been involved in the prior exhibition, others were new to The Wing.”

Like Under My Skin, The Wing’s original 2004 exhibition Beyond Talk aspired to make the issue of race and race relations more tangible, to promote greater understanding of different perspectives and experiences. Mounted at The Wing’s former gallery space on 7th Avenue in the International District, Beyond Talk featured a small group of artists from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and was the first exhibition staged by The Wing to reach out beyond the Asian Pacific American community.

The work of only two artists, Ronald Hall and Polly Purvis, was included in both shows. For Under My Skin, Hall’s contributions include a series of oil paintings

that consider the history of African American slavery. Purvis' black-and-white silver gelatin prints document Swinomish tribal powwows. The artist installs these kinesthetic images alongside a vitrine of "racist artifacts" from her personal collections.

"In our conversations and meetings along the way, we grappled with many questions and issues, including some that were familiar from the older exhibit, and some that felt new, or at least changed since 2004," Woodard said. The Wing will sponsor a number of upcoming events to complement Under My Skin. On August 17, exhibit artist Kathleen McHugh will lead a public stationary-making workshop for Family Fun Day. In October, The Wing will offer a workshop for educators focused on incorporating activities and strategies for teaching issues of race, identity, and social justice into middle or high school classrooms. *(end)*

For more information about the evolution of the show and its origins, The Wing maintains an exhibition blog at <http://beyondtalk2.wordpress.com>. For general information about the exhibit, visit www.wingluke.org/exhibitions/special.htm.

Shin Yu Pai can be reached at info@nwasianweekly.com.