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# CINING CITY

NZUJI DE MAGALHÃES  
KIP FULBECK  
NATHAN GIBBS  
LOREN HOLLAND  
BRYCE HUDSON  
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LAURA KINA  
BRADLEY McCALLUM & JACQUELINE TARRY

California State University Fullerton

# EMBRACING AMBIGUITY FACES OF THE FUTURE

# HALF YELLA

## *EMBRACING ETHNORAC AMBIGUITY*

Laura Kina

"Oh, honey, I want you to be my wife," U.S. Air Force Major Lloyd "Ace" Gruver coos as he clutches his kimono-clad Japanese lover, Hana-ogi, in the movie *Sayonara* (Marlon Brando and Miko Taka, 1957). "But what would happen to our children? What would they be?" Hana-ogi asks, recognizing the time's stark racism and prejudice. "What would they be?" Gruver replies, "They'd be half Japanese and half American. They'd be half yella and half white."

As a “half yella and half white” kid growing up in the 1970s and 1980s in a small Norwegian town in the Pacific Northwest, I experienced a mixture of normalcy and exotic novelty surrounding my multiracial heritage. I am a member of the “biracial baby boom” (aka “Generation Mix”<sup>1</sup>) that followed the 1967 *Loving vs. Virginia* Supreme Court Case, which overturned our nation’s last antimiscegenation laws. Being mixed race has become commonplace, especially in Japanese American communities, with 57% of individuals in the 0-30 age group claiming more than one race by the 2000 United States Census.<sup>2</sup> By the mid 1990s, being mixed became downright trendy. We may not all be “Cablinasian,” but there was a time not long ago when Nike encouraged us to envision a world in which we could claim, “I am Tiger Woods.”<sup>3</sup> A 2003 Sunday *New York Times* article went so far as to dub us “Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite growing social acceptance, ambiguity can be a restless and amorphous home. The children of interracial couples are still faced with the challenge of naming and claiming their identities and often feel pressured to align themselves with one ethnoracial community over another. In the run up to the 2008 Presidential election, racial issues were framed in terms of

choosing one identity, and therefore allegiance, over the other. Is President Barack Obama Black or biracial, or both?<sup>5</sup> On his 2010 Census form, President Obama chose to identify solely as “Black.” For me, the ubiquitous peppering of the questions “What are you?” and “No, where are you really from?” seasoned me to believe that I was an anomaly. The blood-quantum answer is that I am ½ Okinawan; ¼ Spanish/Basque; and ¼ white (French, English, Irish, and Dutch). I’m just shy of 5 feet tall and with my brown non-“slanty” eyes, olive skin, dark hair, and small nose, I’m racially ambiguous but usually assumed to be Latina. “You’ve got the best of both worlds,” my mother would tell me. I grew up identifying as “hapa” (a Native Hawai’ian word for “half” as in “hapa haole” or “half white”) and amusing my Scandinavian lefse-eating<sup>6</sup> friends in Poulsbo, Washington, with imitations of my Grandma Kina’s Hawai’ian Pidgin English.<sup>7</sup>

When I moved to Chicago to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1991, I didn’t find any historic or contemporary multiracial artistic role models beyond the modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi (Japanese-Irish American). Artists such as Frida Kahlo, Romare Bearden, Adrian Piper, and James Luna were in the history books, but, blinded by the logic of hypo-



I am  
100% Black  
and 100%  
Japanese

photograph

Kip Fulbeck, *Untitled* (from *The Hapa Project*), 2006

descent<sup>8</sup> and the differences between their mixes and mine, I failed to see affinities. I took a class in Asian American literature as an undergrad at SAIC and it was here, in novels such as Shawn Wong's 1995 *American Knees*, that I caught my first glimpse of a mixed-Asian narrative. Longing for fully storied lives of mixed-race Asians to unfold in the visual arts, I became a cultural worker<sup>9</sup> in Chicago's Asian American arts community, creating identity-based artwork as well as collaboratively organizing art exhibitions, literary readings, performances, film screenings, and slide slams with *DestinAsian* (1992-95), The Foundation for Asian American Independent Media (1997-2005), and the Asian American Artists Collective-Chicago (2001-2005).

Just as I was emerging into the art world, a backlash against multiculturalism was gaining full force.<sup>10</sup> I got the sense that I had arrived just a little too late. Making art about identity-based issues was considered "overplayed." The Civil Rights era had been relegated to nostalgia. Multiculturalism was now "problematic." My concerns with identity were boring, all too common, and didactic. But I continued to call the Asian American art world home, even as I waited to gain full entry into a larger art market. I kept the late art critic and *Godzilla: Asian American Art Network* member Alice

Yang's admonition close at hand: "A group exhibition that posits race as its only organizing principle always risks essentialism...in its suppression of issues such as nationality, sexuality, religion, and class that make up the complex terrain of identity."<sup>11</sup> I had converted to Judaism during these years, and this new religious identity, combined with my multiracial identity, made me realize how showing exclusively under the umbrella of "Asian America" had flattened the reading of my work. The solution was not to defect from Asian America but rather to challenge essentialism, to expand what it means to be an Asian American artist. I could be 100% Jewish, 100% Mixed, and 100% Asian American and this might or might not be apparent or addressed directly in my work. I had options.

With the 2000 Census, I was no longer railroaded into picking one race. I was free from the no man's land of the racialized "other." Along with 6.8 million other people, including 13.9% of Asian Americans,<sup>12</sup> I could finally self-identify as two or more races. I was hungry to find this community of kinfolk, so I began to paint portraits of mixed-race Asian Americans. *My Hapa Soap Opera* series (2002-2005) was inspired by a combination of the eighteenth-century Mexican *casta* painting genre and the Bollywood movie posters that line the Desi store-



oil on canvas

Laura Kina, *Hapa Soap Opera #1*, 2002



charcoal on paper

Laura Kina,  
*Shoshanna Weinberger* (from the *Loving Series*), 2006

fronts of my Chicago neighborhood *[above]*. Rather than depict ethnographic portraits of “hapas” as progeny of two differently raced parents, I created large-scale oil paintings populated entirely with mixed-race Asians. Their floating heads gaze longingly at each other and in defiant opposition to the viewer.

Then I met Kip Fulbeck.

Sitting on the other side of the camera, Kip snapped my portrait back in 2005 (along with portraits of 1,199 other people) for what has become his widely popular *Hapa Project* (*opposite page*). He asked each of us to write down our ethnicities and answer the recurring “What Are You?” question. Our witty and sometimes painful answers were printed next to our headshots. He captured a representational sampling of the complexity of mixed-race Asian identities. With the rise of online social networking and the groundswell of multiracial organizations,<sup>13</sup> what at first, for me, was an “imagined community”<sup>14</sup> soon became a very real community of fellow mixed-race artists, academics, and community organizers.

No sooner had I settled on identifying personally as “hapa” and expanding the contours of Asian America to publicly identify as “mixed heritage” than debate over the use of the word “hapa” by non-Native Hawaiians came to a head<sup>15</sup> and the term “post-black,” coined in

Thelma Golden’s 2001 *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, set off several years of “semantic acrobatic”<sup>16</sup> exercises in postraciality in general. Every ethnic group had its post-identity art exhibition. I was included in the Jewish incarnation of this moment, *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*, at the Spertus Museum in Chicago in 2007.

Back where I started, I had to ask what to call myself. I agree with David Hollinger’s *post-ethnic* preference for the ethnoracial “choice over prescription” and the concept that communities should entail “affiliation by revocable consent”<sup>17</sup> (thus, as it is socially allowable for me to change my religion and profession, I should be able to choose to what degree I wish to affiliate with my communities of descent). But all these “post” terms don’t define who I am; they just define what I’m supposedly getting over. I have no desire to “get over” race or ethnicity. As my graduate school advisor, the renowned African American painter Kerry James Marshall, likes to point out, “color-blindness is a defect. It shouldn’t be a goal.”<sup>18</sup>

These forces led me to my 2006-2007 *Loving Series* of life-sized charcoal drawings of mixed-race “biracial baby boomers” (*above*). All of the figures in the *Loving Series* are seated cross-legged, a pose that allows each in-

dividual to be centered physically and, perhaps, spiritually. Some stare directly, others lean forward as if something is about to happen. In my portrait of Jamaican/Jewish artist Shoshanna Weinberger, the subject has her eyes closed in meditation and is taking a deep breath (page 8, right). It was a time of introspection and anticipation. Through the process of drawing and subtle gestures in the sitters' poses, I wanted to capture the connections within this emerging community and also to highlight the distances between us as double-minority, biracial, mestizaje, mixed-blood, and mixed-Asian folks. The drawings are intentionally black and white, as this is how race has historically been framed in the United States. I chose charcoal because it is easily erased and usually used in preparation for something more permanent (e.g., under drawing for oil painting). The *Loving Series* mirrored how I saw the multiracial movement in 2006-2007. With the push to change the 2000 Census well behind us, the next steps for the multiracial movement were unclear. Worthy and urgent initiatives had moved forward, such as the MAVIN Foundation's MatchMaker<sup>19</sup> project dedicated to recruiting mixed-race bone marrow donors, or the Loving Day Movement,<sup>20</sup> but they failed to spark the collective imagination and unite the multiracial movement on a national level.

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama changed everything. I never imagined that I would see an African American president during my lifetime, let alone a man from Hawai'i who until recently publicly embraced his biracial background. In the court of public opinion, multiraciality was no longer demonized as "tragic" but rather held up as sign of our nation's racial progress. Seemingly overnight, there has been a sea change in mainstream racial attitudes. Multiracial organizations across the country have shared this spotlight and been asked to comment on the "post-racial dream." Current president of the MAVIN Foundation and artist, Louie Gong, stated in a 2008 interview with MSNBC, "Mixed race isn't post race. It's not less race. It's more race.... In order to dialog about mixed race, we need more understanding. It's not a dialog to forget about issues of race."<sup>21</sup> In a recent *New York Times* article, art critic Holland Cotter concurred that many Black artists are also skeptical of the term "post-race." He asks, "So what do you call their work? How about 'ambiguous'?"<sup>22</sup>

I find myself again embracing the restless amorphousness of ambiguity. Perhaps this is right where I belong as an artist. After all, it's not an artist's job to definitively answer questions so much as it is to raise them. I'm happy to be "half yella."

*Laura Kina is an artist, independent curator, and scholar living in Chicago. She is an Associate Professor of Art, Media, and Design, Vincent de Paul Distinguished Professor, and Director of Asian American Studies at DePaul University.*

1. "Generation Mix" was coined in 2005 by the MAVIN Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to lead the nation in raising awareness about the experiences of mixed-heritage people and families.

2. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 13.9 percent of Asian Americans indicated multiple-racial identification and 27.2 percent of Asian Americans reported being married to a partner of a different race; for some groups, the percentage is strikingly higher. For example, according to calculations on the 2000 Census made by Aaron T. Kitashima, *Japanese Americans of mixed heritage: the search for identity and cultural authenticity* (MA Thesis, Advisor Dr. Wei Ming Darity, Asian American Studies, San Francisco State University, 2009), "57 percent" of Japanese Americans age 0-30 are of mixed heritage.

3. On April 24, 1997, on the Oprah Winfrey show, golfer Tiger Woods identified himself as "Cablinasian," a personal term he used to reflect his Chinese, Thai, African American, Native American, and Dutch heritage. Nike would later take advantage of his multiracial appeal with their "I am Tiger Woods" ad campaign.

4. Ruth La Ferla, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," *New York Times*, Fashion & Style, 28 December 2003.

5. See Jason Carroll, "Behind the Scenes: Is Barack black or biracial?" CNN.com, 9 June 2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/06/09/bts.obama.race/index.html#stext>. This is just one of many articles appearing during the run up to the 2008 Presidential election that framed racial issue in terms of choosing one identity, and therefore allegiance, over another.

6. Lefse is a traditional Scandinavian potato-based, soft flatbread.

7. Hawaiian Pidgin English is a creole language used by many "local" Hawaiians, be they Native or colonizer/settlers. The Pidgin dialect is based on English and draws heavily from Native Hawaiian words, phrases, and sentence structure and is infused by vocabulary from immigrant groups such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Portuguese. My Grandma Kina would combine a mix of archaic Okinawan, modern Japanese, Native Hawaiian, and English words. Example, "da musubi is anolicious, na?" or "Why you run 'round with da kine boy?"

8. Hypodescent laws, instituted as early as the eighteenth century, stated that anyone with greater than 1/16 non-White ancestry would not be considered a White person (also known as the "one-drop" rule).

9. See "Cultural Worker" as defined in Cornel West, "New Cultural Politics of Difference," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russel Ferguson, Martha Gerver, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; and Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996).

10. The overwhelmingly negative critical reception of the 1993 Whitney Biennial marked a turning point in the art world against work that centers on issues of identity. See Nicole L. Woods, "Surface Pressure: Art, Identity, and the Strategy of (Mis) Recognition," published in this catalogue, for a discussion of critics' responses.

11. Alice Yang, "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered," *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, edited by Jonathan Hay and Mimi Young (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 97.

12. See note 2 above re: 2000 Census.

13. See Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007) for a detailed history on the emergence of the multiracial movement and key organizations such as the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), Biracial Family Network, Hapa Issues Forum (HIF), I-Pride, Interracial Family Circle (IFC), Multiracial Americans of Southern California (MASC), MAVIN Foundation, Project RACE, and Swirl, Inc.

14. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

15. My family hails from the sugar cane plantations on the Big Island of Hawaii. This is how I came to use the word "hapa." We are, in the land-rights politics of the islands, considered settler/colonizers. The appropriation and continued use of the Native Hawaiian word "hapa" to describe non-Native Hawaiians of partial Asian and Pacific Islander heritage is therefore offensive to some. It is perceived as yet one more step in colonizing Hawaii. See Wei Ming Darity, "Rethinking Hapa," *Hyphen*, 18 May 2008: (<http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/content/view/full/94/1>). Darity's essay discusses this controversy in more depth.

16. During the May 23, 2009 *Double Exposure* symposium held at DePaul University in conjunction with the exhibition *Double Exposure: African Americans Before and Behind the Camera*, art historian Kimberly Pinder described how exhausting it has become to answer the "post-black" question. For her it has been an exercise in "semantic acrobatics"; perhaps the more interesting part of the debate has been what "post-black" has uncovered in terms of generational divisions between African American artists.

17. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995): 13.

18. See Kerry James Marshall, *Color Blind* (Koplin Del Rio Gallery, Culver City, CA, 2004).

19. See the MAVIN Foundation MatchMaker Program. <http://www.mavinfoundation.org/projects/matchmaker.html>

20. See Ken Tanabe, *Loving Day*. <http://www.lovingday.org/>

21. Mike Stucky, "Multiracial Americans surge in number, voice: Obama candidacy focuses new attention on their quest for understanding," *MSNBC.com*, 28 May 2008; See <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24542138/>

22. Holland Cotter, "The Topic Is Race: The Art Is Fearless," *New York Times*, Arts & Leisure, 30 March, 2008.



charcoal on paper

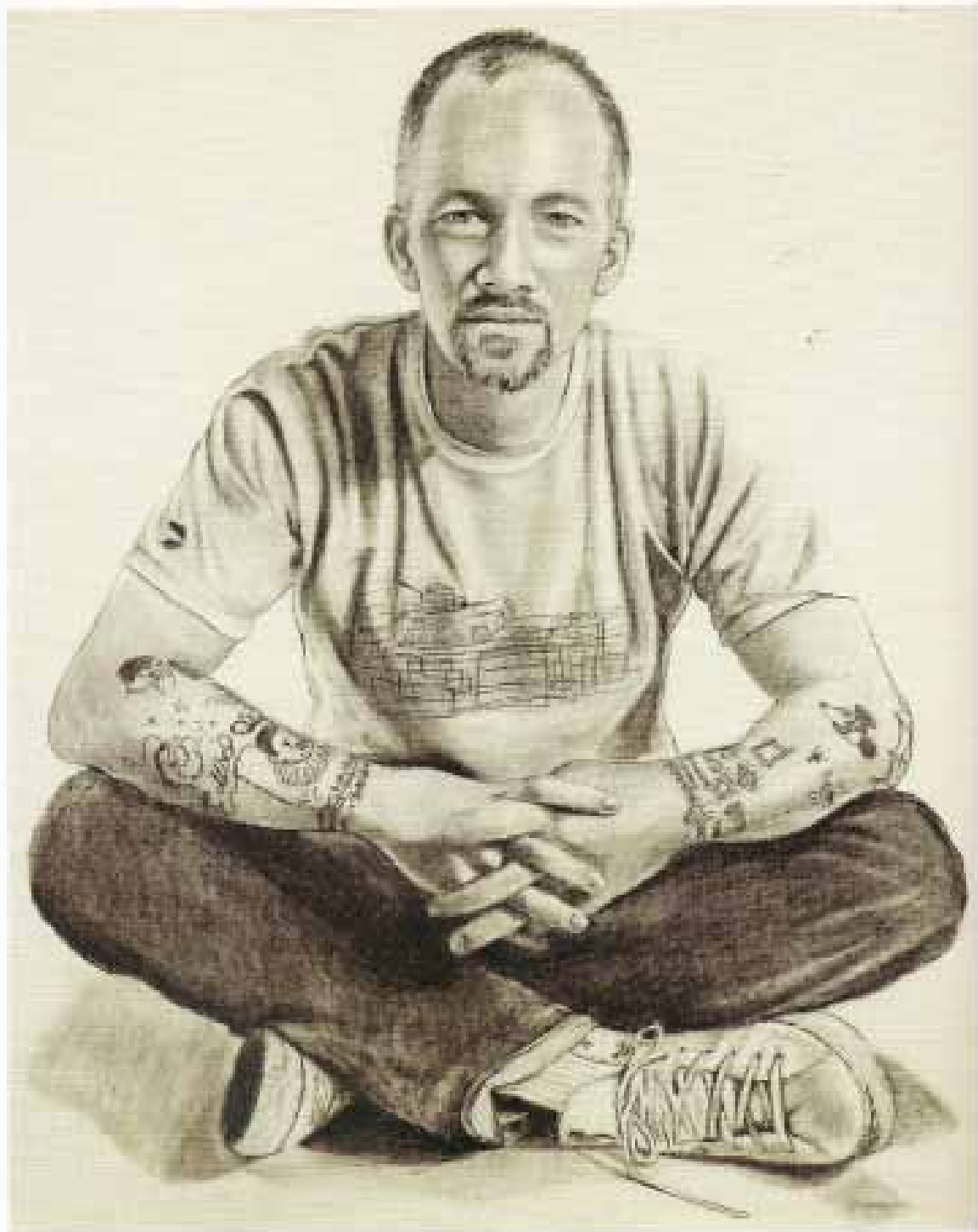
*Shoshanna Weinberger (from the Loving Series), 2006*

# LAURA KINA

Laura Kina is an internationally recognized artist, independent curator, and scholar. Her work focuses on the fluidity of cultural difference and the slipperiness of identity. Asian American history and mixed-race representations are common subjects of her art. Kina draws inspiration from popular culture, history, and textile design, as well as historic and personal photographs.

Born in Riverside, California, and raised in Poulsbo, Washington, Kina lives and works in Chicago. She is an Associate Professor of Art, Media and Design, Vincent de Paul Distinguished Professor, and Director of Asian American Studies at DePaul University. She is a 2009-2010 DePaul University Humanities Fellow. Kina earned her MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Kina is represented in Miami, Florida, by Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts.

Kina's *Loving Series* (Grand Projects New Haven, CT, 2006) uses the vehicle of portraiture to examine mixed-race issues. Inspired by the landmark 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*, which overturned this nation's last antimiscegenation law, these life-size charcoal portraits of Kina's friends simultaneously embrace and confront the viewer.



Scott La Forge II from the Loving Series, 2006



charcoal on paper

*Etana Rubin* (from the *Loving Series*, 2005)