

# Asian Artists Drawn Into 'Circle'



**"Oh Marilyn" by District artist Joey Manlapaz reflects her love of cityscapes.**



By Mary McCoy  
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All artists struggle to express their identities. But for Asian American artists, who must straddle the sometimes-conflicting values of East and West, the effort is particularly difficult.

Against this backdrop comes "Circle of Friendship," an innovative exhibit of 92 works by 16 first- and second-generation Asian American artists from the Washington area.

The show, at the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, is more ambitious than the usual art exhibit.

It is an educational project to give young people a sense of the history and culture of Asian Americans, information that often is lacking in school curriculums.

A hefty book on the show, the artists and the history of Asian arts was sent to District schools and public libraries. Several performances were part of the exhibit in its first few weeks.

"It's not just a simple art show where you come and see the art," said Hiro, a Japanese American artist and the curator of the show. She said some teachers are using the program book as a curriculum guide for their students.

The show is sponsored by Asian American Arts and Media, a District group that works to advance multicultural friendship.

No artists in the show make traditional Asian art, but many of the works reveal the deep love of nature and emphasis on discipline for which the East is known. Others draw on traditional Eastern art forms such as calligraphy and woodblock printing.

District painter In-Soon Shin, who is Korean American, draws from the rhythms of Asian brush painting and its use of ink and rice paper in her watercolors, but her inspirations come from the plains and canyons

she sees in her travels throughout the United States.

South Korean-born Soo Kim Gordon's richly hued ink paintings are rooted both in Eastern calligraphy and the landscapes of places such as the St. Lawrence River.

Philippines native Joey Manlapaz's paintings are cityscapes of the mom-and-pop stores and older buildings of the District, her adopted home town. "Responding to buildings from an era that can no longer remain with us, I appreciate and understand the inevitable change that occurs among people, culture, practices and traditions," she wrote in the exhibit program.

One of the District's best-known artists working with issues of ethnicity is Korean American Y. David Chung, who recently exhibited at the Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris in New York.

Chung is interested in how stereotyping and misunderstanding arise from lack of knowledge of other ethnic groups. His charcoal drawing titled "Bus" shows the rich ethnicity of commuters seated on a bus, yet each person seems separate, even alienated.

What does it feel like to be an Asian American? One account comes from District artist Pacita Abad. The daughter of a Philippine politician, she writes in the exhibit book of fleeing the terror of the Marcos regime only to find herself alone and low on money in San Francisco.

Abad tells stories of shattered dreams, adaptation and solidarity with other immigrants in unusual works combining painting and trapunto, a quilting technique in which embossed designs are padded with yarn or cotton.

Mindful that many people are unaware that Asian Americans have a variety of cultural backgrounds, Hiro said she chose artists who represent the diversity of the community. To emphasize the range of styles in

the show, she purposely hung contrasting works close together. The overall effect is vibrant and energetic.

Hiro, born in the District and a resident of Crystal City, is a visual and performance artist, teacher and writer. She often lectures on East-West relations and works with children from many ethnic backgrounds in projects such as an upcoming mural for the Smithsonian's Experimental Gallery.

She said many people have trouble seeing Asians as real Americans because there is little chance to learn about them.

"In the wake of racial and cultural tensions in America today, it is imperative to learn to live in a Circle of Friendship," she wrote in the exhibit book. Through knowledge of other cultures, "we hope to develop understanding and appreciation for each other," she said.

The book that accompanies the exhibit is an invaluable guide. The artists have written essays on their art and experiences. There are photos of the artists and their works.

There also are sections on subjects as diverse as the history of Chinese storytelling and the tuning and plucking of the koto, a Japanese stringed instrument. Students can become familiar with each artist's work through suggested activities, from calligraphy to role-playing the situation of the Korean grocer who can't yet understand English.

With its lively array of art and information, "Circle of Friendship" could very well serve as a model for other ethnic groups interested in sharing their cultural heritages.

*The show continues through Jan. 25 at the Sumner School, 1201 17th St. NW. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For information and to schedule visits by school groups, call 202-727-3419.*