

Asian America, Fractured Identities and Finding Belonging in Service Work

United States

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Ameya Marie Okamoto

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I seek to explore universal themes of identity, status and exploitation, as well as specific impacts of forced migration and body politics, through a project making explicit the aesthetics, human relationship and storytelling implicit in service work which bridges culture, class, and conflict. Racial and gender identity, economic and immigration status, and bias influence who *performs* service work, and who *affords*, *commands* and can *receive* it. Over the past year, I have explored nail art as an artistic medium, made accessible to primarily female-identified communities across America by primarily Vietnamese Asian immigrant women in service to cultural communities of all economic backgrounds. In this project, I seek to collect stories, capture expressive aesthetics, explore the dynamics of power and oppression, and present the collectively unifying experience of this particularly artistic body service practice, culminating in an interactive gallery installation including physical recreations of nail sets and podcast-style documentation of conversations and interviews recorded during service interactions.

During the Summer of 2022, I will travel across the country to cities with the highest number of Asian-Americans, promoting peace by working and collaborating primarily with BIPOC artists, activists, community leaders, and service workers of primarily Black and Asian descent. I will conduct field research by interviewing participants and documenting their stories, culminating in a podcast and interactive exhibition that includes replicas of the custom nail sets designed for participants throughout the project's duration. Alongside traveling, and offering nail services independently, I will also be doing residencies at local nail salons, embedded within nail technician communities, bringing visibility, empathy and understanding to the often Asian and immigrant individuals behind service work through art and interaction. I will utilize social media to document the conversations and gallery spaces for performance, promoting awareness about the complex intersections and interactions that occur during service work. I promote peace and peace-making through connection, finding common ground and empathy building. Bringing individual stories to the masses in my final podcast and exhibition allows often overlooked service workers to become visible and iconicized and through art.

This work engages with the Asian American diaspora and the post-1965 history of the end of the Asian Exclusion Act and hyper-educated Asian immigrants entering the American workforce through the service industry and the fact that the dominant owners of salons and nail technicians are Asian American, particularly Vietnamese. Interaction with this performance will be voluntary. Through performing nail art on participants, I attempt to replicate the racialized cultural exchange of service work and emphasize empathy and care with an act of service. I choose nail art as the art form here because of its wearable quality and because it requires the wearer to maintain and present the work on their body until they choose otherwise - or the artwork falls off. This could take an indefinite amount of time and requires a certain amount of trust and commitment by the wearer. There is also a precious element to creating small sculptures by hand and giving these miniatures away free of cost will be a meaningful gesture carried out at a time of mass food shortage, unemployment and social disconnection. At a time of increased racial violence, particularly against Asian women and between Black communities, I feel that the greatest opportunity for peace-making sits in the intersectional space created in the act of creating celebratory, expressive nail art, and I look forward to exploring it and its possibilities.

TIMELINE

Feb 2022 - May 2022	Nail Technician Training/License, Confirm interview schedule and collaborators
May 2022 - July 2022	Travel and Production (Cities with varied sizes of Asian American population) New York City, Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco, Honolulu, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia
August 2022 (and on)	Post production, culminating Exhibition

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. To engage with BIPOC women and femmes across America through nail art and service work and document their experiences with racialized perception and how this controls self image
2. To reveal Asian-owned nail salons as important places for interracial convergence and social connection through field research.
3. To develop a traveling exhibition and podcast that promotes peace, empathy and understanding during a time of increased racial violence, attacks on communities of color and rising tensions between Black and Asian Americans.
4. To find personal healing and create community through discourse, service work and artistry.

PERSONAL ARTIST STATEMENT

My name is Ameya Okamoto and I am a 21-year-old artist and organizer from Portland, OR. In my work, I gravitate towards confrontational themes and seek to explore how we make sense of our increasingly complex identities in a culturally blended and politically polarized world. I am interested in how color and materiality facilitate storytelling and how art helps hyphenated identities find belonging. My work exists at the intersection of art and action. Through accessible materials like wheatpaste, permanent marker, spray paint, and posters from digital artworks, I curate and lead workshops with racial justice organizations and activists, creating opportunities for group healing through the collaborative processing of violence, memorialization, and generational trauma. I engage the public through collaborative art projects, installations, and public murals, inviting viewers to participate in the performance of protest and resistance through art-making. I often use digital art because it is the language of pop culture, easily understood, and allows for the fast workflow necessary for reactive pieces in response to unpredictable traumas and untimely death. Alongside my focus in activism, I am beginning to explore universal themes of identity, status and exploitation in forced migration, service work and body politics through painting, nail art and endurance performance.

As a society, we re-experience violence and trauma through racial justice protests, exacerbated by a global pandemic and shifting governance, lethal gun violence, and continuing assaults on BIPOC and AAPI communities. All these events force me to confront my own vulnerable mortality and challenge me to seek inspiration inward.

ARTIST BIO

Ameya's art and activism has been profiled by Paper Magazine, NPR and Hyperallergic among others. In 2018, Ameya was announced a YoungArts Finalist in Visual Art and US Presidential Scholar in Art and was included in the NY Post's top 6 rising art stars at Miami Art Basel. She is a 2019 Adobe Creativity Scholar and Laidlaw Fellow, researching the role of protest art in social movements and sustainable beautification. She is the founder and creative director of IRRESISTIBLE, creating art for social change.

In 2019, Ameya was the Graphic Designer for the documentary *Nailed It*, directed by Adele Pham which takes viewers from Los Angeles to the Bronx to meet the diverse people and relationships behind this booming and enigmatic trade dominated by Vietnamese immigrants.

Name: Ameya Okamoto
Project Name: Asian America, Fractured Identities and Finding Belonging in Service Work
School: School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Note: all funds in US dollars.

Projects for Peace grant:	\$ 10,000.00
Additional Funding, if any:	\$ 2,500.00
Total funding available:	\$ 12,500.00

TOTAL FUNDS REMAINING:	
\$	-
TOTAL EXPENDITURES:	
\$	12,500.00

Student Expenses								Project Expenses							
Travel (Including Airfare)		Lodging		Communications		Food (Biweekly)	Miscellaneous	Non-Student Travel and Lodging		Direct Equipment and Supplies		Marketing and Event Support		Staffing Costs	Miscellaneous
Flight Costs	1500	Airbnb (Honolulu,	3000			50/day for 8 weeks	3000			Nail Art Supplies	1000			Participant Honora	1000
Rideshare	1000									Exhibition Materia	300			Podcast Editor	1000
Public Transportat	300													Exhibition Staff Ho	400
Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
\$ 2,800.00		\$ 3,000.00		\$ -		\$ 3,000.00	\$ -	\$ -		\$ 1,300.00		\$ -		\$ 2,400.00	\$ -
Total Student Expenses:								Total Project Expenses:							
\$ 8,800.00								\$ 3,700.00							