

**QUEERING CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN ART, LAURA KINA
AND JAN CHRISTIAN BERNABE (EDS) (2017)**

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 296 pp.,

ISBN: 9780295742007, h/bk, \$90.00;

ISBN: 9780295741376, p/bk, \$40.00

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'Rogue ants' serve as a model to describe the contributors to *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*. Or so say the book's editors in their introduction, and I agree. The featured artists, writers and scholars ask or exhibit what it might mean or look like when queer theories that advocate for failure and nonconformity as strategies of resistance are taken up by the so-called 'model minority'. They resist and retool the pressures often placed upon Asian Americans to assimilate and chase normative models of success. Rather than ants who obey and cooperate in pursuit of stability and success, these rogue ants instead chart their own paths – as artists often do.

This collection of interviews, articles and artist statements by scholars, writers and artists – as well as what contributor Việt Lê describes as fluid artist/scholar figures (69) – grapple with the intersection of queerness, Asian American identity and culture, and contemporary art. Each of these categories are defined differently – and sometimes rejected – by various authors, though most of the 'contemporary' artists featured (save Cy Twombly) are working in this century. The text surveys many artists who identify as queer and Asian American, but also several who don't. Some artists resist neat categorization, some identify otherwise: as Caucasian and heterosexual, for instance. Modes, models and ideas are at times borrowed from queer theory and Asian American studies to examine art of recent years, instead of being considered in exclusively identitarian terms.

A compelling example of a use of discourse from queer theory and Asian American studies to examine an artist who does not identify as queer nor as Asian American can be found in Alpesh Kantilal Patel's essay 'Queer zen: Unyoking genealogy in Asian American art history'. Patel turns to the work of a white male artist out of necessity: queer Asian American voices were largely silenced during the Abstract Expressionist movement. This doesn't mean Abstract Expressionism has nothing to do with queer and Asian American populations, nor that discourses from queer theory and Asian American studies are not applicable. Kantilal asks how, why and under what historical conditions Roland Barthes drew on Zen Buddhism when he wrote about Twombly's work, to what extent such a gesture was orientalist, and grapples with the conundrum of writing about two figures who were rumoured to be gay but never themselves came out during their historical moment. Kantilal is wary of outing Twombly and Barthes but also wary of continuing to hide and silence queerness.

Queerness and Asian Americanness overlap in interesting and productive ways throughout the volume, such as in artist Việt Lê's work about Asian boy bands as a symbol of transcultural homoerotic desire or Eun Jung Park's essay on artistic work by Korean adoptees, who came to America by way of adoption, which is a queer form of a kinship. More broadly, non-binary transracial or transnational identities are considered in their intersections with queerness.

Several contributors, for instance, grapple with naming, noting that an individual might change their name when transitioning, but also when becoming an American citizen. Much as one might be assigned a gendered name at birth, one might have one's name forcibly anglicized.

Another standout is Miriam B. Lam's 'Pacific standard time: Queering temporality in Asian American visual cultures', from which I learned that past, present and future verb tenses are not required in Vietnamese grammatical forms. Lam unpacks how this affects the time-based work from the region, so as to argue against *chrononormativity*, described by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) as 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (3).

In Lam's essay, as elsewhere, the intersection of the book's subjects – Asian American-ness, queerness, and contemporary art – is thought-provoking and clear. However, at other times in the volume, the intersection feels forced and, most often, it is the pertinence of these identities to art that gets lost. For instance, Park's writing on art by Korean adoptees is an important consideration of the intersection of queerness and Asian American identity, but the argument for that intersection's pertinence to art production doesn't go beyond a mere survey of Korean adoptees who are also artists. While identity no doubt influences artistic production, it is only one factor and I am sceptical of the 'waves' of Korean adoptee art that Park describes. Artist Kenneth Tam comments on this, writing 'I wouldn't know how I would fit into any sort of larger discussion of contemporary Asian American art other than the fact that I am that artist' (96). This feeling of forcedness is, in part, the inevitable product of asking an array of individuals to tailor their work to a specific theme – here an intersection of three topics – when editing a volume.

The editors proudly tell readers that only two of its authors came through traditional Ph.D. art history training; the other voices belong to artists or writers and scholars from other disciplines (the authors deftly describe the collection not as *inter* disciplinary but *undisciplinary*). This open-minded approach makes for a nice variation in tone and aim which is, at times, refreshing. However, sometimes the baby is thrown out with its proverbial bathwater: the grand claims of the scholarly articles appear subject to the same (minimal) scrutiny and review as the recorded, colloquial conversations.

For instance, while I would rarely be inclined to nitpick citations, there is one editorial oversight that raises serious concern for queer studies: Jack Halberstam, cited throughout the volume, is variously referred to in-text as: Judith 'Jack' Halberstam' (xvi), Jack Halberstam (5), Judith Halberstam (51), 'Jack' Halberstam (70) and Jack Halberstam (82). Most frequently referenced is *The Queer Art of Failure*, which was published in 2011 under the name Judith – Halberstam later changed his name to Jack.

Ironically, I first noted this in the book's section on 'queering time'. Best practices for citing trans scholars who no longer go by the name under which they earlier published is certainly a question of queer time. I can't speak for Halberstam, but quotations around his preferred name struck me as disrespectful. Changing names along with gender is not the same as being colloquially known as Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson. We, of course, would like to match the book with the text for ease of reference, but we don't want citation to be a place for 'outing'. And yet, while acknowledging the hardships ranging from discrimination to violence that trans people face, we don't want to reinforce the idea that to be 'out' as trans is a shameful thing. Undoubtedly, individual authors have their own preferences; nonetheless scholars and manuals

of style have responsibilities to help combat oppression. This is not a problem unique to *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, but rather one that is made especially clear in the volume and that warrants broader discussion.

The simultaneous *undisciplinary* breadth, matched with the specificity of the book's subject, is experimental. The experiment fails at times, but poignantly resists reproducing just more of the same. The merit of the volume lies not in new theoretical shifts in queer theory or rethinking art history (save perhaps Alpesh Kantilal Patel's revisionist look at Barthes and Twombly), but rather in applying recent queer theory to a specific intersection and giving a platform to emerging queer Asian American artists. Readers are likely to be interested in or identify with some or all parts of the intersection – art, Asian American-ness, queerness – and, in their combination, learn much more along the way.

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