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'Half Asian' exhibit provokes questions about race

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The poster definitely gets your attention. In a photograph, an Asian woman leans toward the viewer with her fingers stretching her eyes open. Or is she Asian?

"Half Asian," an exhibit at Oakland's Front Gallery, asks provocative questions about racial identity, often with a bemused attitude. It uses photographs, photo transparencies and video in its query.

In one series, "Trilogy," a biracial Asian subject poses in three settings, looking more Western, more Asian and neutral. The Western pose is against a blue background, the Asian against red and the neutral against white, together forming the red, white and blue of the American flag.

"The images have a humorous side," said Steve Aishman who created the exhibit with Ben Sloat. They are both biracial Asians; Aishman is "half" Japanese and Sloat is "half" Taiwanese. "The idea that you are more Asian, neutral or more Western is a ridiculous notion. It illustrates how we form our identity along arbitrary notions."

Aishman and Sloat met as students at Tufts University and began talking about their shared experiences with racial identity. Aishman said he is fascinated with the idea of "cultural hybridity." As more people have parents of different races, the issue is increasingly relevant.

"I'm interested when two cultures, points of view meld together and in the fertile space in between," he said. "We are talking about our personal experience (in the exhibit), but we're not only talking about that. We're exploring hybridity in general. We hope people see their own boundaries in their own lives and how to cross them or solidify them."

The title of the exhibit itself is tongue-in-cheek.

"It's intended to be controversial. You're half Asian, what's the other half? When you allow yourself to be defined as halved, or quartered, it's a little bit ridiculous to us," he said.

In another series of photographs, "Bodhisattva," noses, foreheads and mouths are digitally traced with green lines. It's a startling juxtaposition of human features and computer technology. The notes for the show also point out that the images recall the physiognomic "studies" of race from the 19th century that reduced individuals to specimens.

In the process of photographing biracial Asians, Aishman said he's found two basic groups. The members of one group report feeling they have no identity; they don't feel Western or Asian. In Asian countries, they feel Western, and in Western countries, they feel like "others."

"The second camp reports an experience more like a chameleon. They relish the fact they can choose what to feel. They can dress more Asian or more Western," Aishman said. He falls in the latter group. "It's empowering to gain control of your identity. It's been an good exercise showing your strength in controlling and manufacturing your identity."

Aishman's got a lot of interesting ideas about identity. In his view, it's a form of performance. In the "Trilogy" series, the people sitting for the portraits attempt to "perform race" to strike the various poses.

"Depending on where you are, you are contextualized in how people want to see you. When I'm in Chinatown, people might come up to me and speak Chinese. When I'm in Mexico, they speak Spanish. Because I don't fit into one category they're familiar with, they impose whatever category they see at the moment. Being half Asian is always in the viewer's eyes."

He says he chooses which identity he is leaning toward as he might chose what kind of clothes to wear.

"The way you might wake up and feel this is a jeans kind of day. I feel like today's going to be more of a Japanese day," he said.

The video project, "Offspring," offers a fascinating visual experience. Two faces of biracial Asian men, one Scandinavian/Indian the other Austrian/Chinese morph into one face and back again. The process presents ever- changing racial combinations and possibilities.

Aishman and Sloat work on separate projects but continue their collaboration. Another piece of "Offspring" is going into an exhibit in Boston.

"I always knew my feelings of being a racial chameleon. But the beauty of art and making art is that you can explore creating your own identity, solidify and codify an intangible. Actually seeing it and living it is completely different," Aishman said.

"Half Asian" is at the Front Gallery, 35 Grand Ave., Oakland through March 27. Visit their Web site at <http://www.halfasian.us>.

The next show at Front Gallery is a photo exhibit of Bob Jew, the gallery's owner. Titled "Chino Latino Meets the Angel Baby," it features photographs from his trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. Visit <http://www.frontgalleryoakland.com>.