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## Exhibit Looks at Multiracial Experience

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OAKLAND — “Half Asian,” an exhibition of photography by Ben Sloat and Steve Aishman, is on display at Front Gallery, 35 Grand Ave., through March.

Part 1 of the exhibit is running through March 1, and Part 2 will be held March 2-27.

Aishman and Sloat met in Boston during graduate studies in Tufts University’s School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) program. They began the “Half Asian” project in 2001, interested in expressing the unique condition of being multiracial Asian.

Sloat, who is half-Taiwanese, and Aishman, who is half-Japanese, had shared experiences of being mistaken for a number of different races; for being assumed to “not” be Asian while in Asia, despite speaking the native language; and for being interested in creating a visual community of half-Asians where a physical community is not possible.

“Being half-Asian in the U.S. is an interesting reflection of the social and political history of the country,” said the artists. “Because of exclusion laws, the population of Asians in the U.S. was relatively minor until 1965, when laws were loosened to allow for widespread Asian immigration. Consequently, mixed-raced Asians in America tend to a young but exponentially growing population.

“This project aims to engage conditions of being half-Asian in a visually provocative and conceptually innovative manner that extends beyond identity politics towards greater modes of visual perception.”

The first series in the project, “Trilogy,” involves over 100 half-Asian sitters, each looking more “Asian,” “neutral” and “Western,” with backgrounds that correspond to the specific photographic portrait convention. Seen together, the backgrounds use a color scheme that reflects “how American this phenomenon is,” stated the artists.

The “Trilogy” series is a collaboration with the models as well. They “perform race” in a certain sense as a reflection of their own experiences, allowing the viewer to decide how successful this act is. Responses to this series confront the nature of the



Images from the “Trilogy” series from the exhibition “Half Asian.”



“Carla and Her Mother” from the exhibit’s “Porcelain” series.

viewer's own perception, asking the question, "What does 'Asian' look like to you?"

Work from "Trilogy" has been shown in galleries and museums on both coasts and has been reviewed in the Boston Globe, Boston Herald, and New York Times.

During the opening for "Half Asian," a live photo studio was on hand to document half-Asian people for "Trilogy," turning the photo shoot from a documentary event into a performative one as well. Images from the shoot will be displayed in the second half of the exhibit, beginning March 2.

The video project "Offspring" involves the morphing of the "neutral" photographs of two friends from "Trilogy," one Scandinavian/Indian and the other Austrian/Chinese. Coming from different ethnic makeups, they morph into each other seamlessly, creating new racial hybrids in the meantime.

This constant flux of facial composition challenges the viewer to determine where exactly the hybrid "individual" is, while in the midst of an ongoing variety of racial possibilities.

"Bodhisattva" is a series of faces with the imposition of green lines upon them. Made by the computer program to facilitate the smooth morphs from "Offspring," facial characteristics such as the forehead, nose and mouth are digitally traced and emphasized.

Speaking of the imposition of technology upon the body, this digital trace or cartographic "mapping" of the face also creates a startling association to physiognomic "scientific" studies of race from the 19th century, reducing individuals to ethnic specimens.

In response to the need to record individual narratives of half-Asians in the U.S., for the experience of racial hybrids varies greatly from urban to rural, from strong familial identities to looser ones, "Porcelain" is a series of photographs documenting aspects of these experiences.

Location and setting become of great importance, as are relationships to friends, family, and other elements of one's surrounding. Printed onto transparency, the images are illuminated by means of lightbox, granting a new luminance to each portrait, to each story.

"Kiss Me Karaoke" is a series of videos of half-Asians singing karaoke. In each video, their voice is overdubbed with that of the actual singer, reflecting that universal cultural manifestation and creating a condition of distortion of the reality of the performance. Despite this, the personal experience of karaoke is seen from the exhilaration of performing within the rock star persona to the deflation of the return to one's own identity.

"Trinitite" is an interactive sculpture with glowing tatami mats, paper backdrops, a disco ball and a karaoke machine, inviting participation in singing karaoke as a performance. The name comes from the radioactive substance created as a result of an atomic blast, referencing the events of World War II and afterwards, of the violent imposition of one culture upon another, creating new cultural hybrids.

Aishman is a graduate of Princeton University. He has taught at Harvard University, Massachusetts College of Art, and SMFA. He is currently the chair of the photography department at the Atlanta campus of the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Sloat is a graduate of UC Berkeley. He has taught at SMFA, Tufts University, and Massachusetts College of Art, and currently teaches at the Art Institute of Boston.

Work from “Half Asian” has been exhibited nationally and presented in lectures at University of Massachusetts at Boston, UC Santa Cruz, Harvard University, Coker College, the Society for Photographic Education National Conference, and the Association for Asian American Studies Conference.

The gallery is open Tuesday and Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday from 1 to 6 p.m., Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m., and the first Fridays of the month from 1 to 10 p.m.

A reception for the opening of the exhibit’s Part II will be held on March 2 from 7 to 10 p.m.

For further information, call (510) 444-1900 or e-mail info [at] [frontgalleryoakland.com](mailto:frontgalleryoakland.com).

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