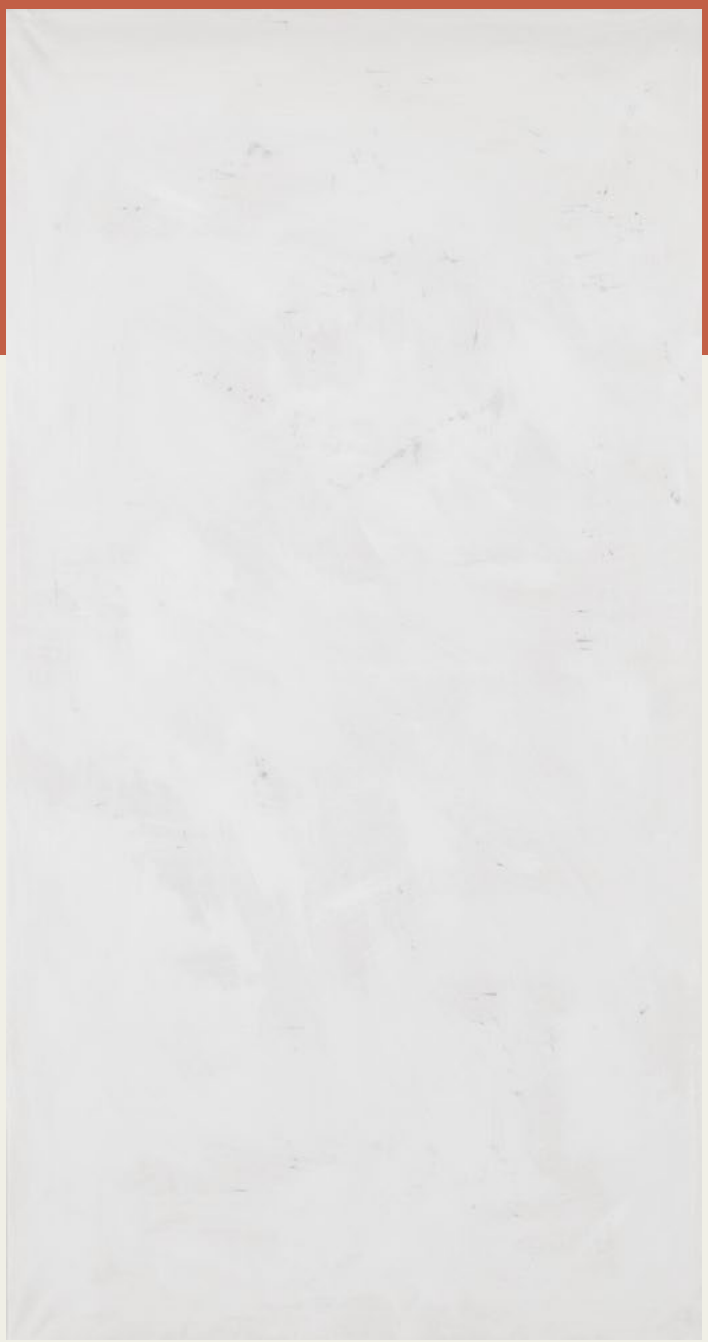
Looking Glass Alliance

Contributions by Nasreen Khan

Nasreen Khan

In response to absence of art by or representing immigrant experiences



Keep Your Head Down

2023

Nasreen Khan (Filipino/Afghan, raised in Senegal and Indonesia, b. 1993)

Acrylic paint on canvas

TRI2455/2

On loan from the artist

The large white canvas you see here represents the lack of immigrant-made art and depictions of immigrants in this museum's collection. It also symbolizes the systemic erasure of the arts and culture of North American indigenous peoples, including Mesoamerican cultures, that predated the founding of the USA as a nation state. Are national boundaries arbitrary? What thoughts do you have about borders and migration?

Art and literature are ways that we as a collective society keep track of narratives throughout history. By looking at what artists of a particular time and place were painting and writing about, we can learn about what people of that time and place saw as valuable, beautiful, or worth remembering. Sometimes what isn't included in the art of an era tells us a lot more than what does get included.

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Contribution reflecting on Khan's immigrant experiences

Anchor, Baby

2022

Nasreen Khan (Filipino/Afghan, raised in Senegal and Indonesia, b. 1993)

Frame made by **Jason Gray**

Pyrography, oil paint on wood, sealed with teak oil

TRI2455/1

On loan from the artist

Drawing on the story of the goddess Kali, a story of woundedness and great power housed in one body, this piece addresses the artist's experience as an immigrant to America and the journey of giving birth and becoming a mother while living in an inhospitable foreign country. The piece explores how motherhood is complicated by factors like racism, nationalism, and poverty. The artist explores her own emotions about raising a multiracial child—fierce maternal protectiveness merges with her anger about the colonization of her own womb and body.

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Contribution in response to absence of art by or representing immigrant experiences

Representations of American Immigrant Labor

Almost 30 percent of the American workforce is immigrant labor, often in hidden roles like domestic work, agriculture, and construction. Despite their significance to the country, these immigrants' efforts have rarely been depicted in the fine arts. This response seeks to highlight a few immigrant groups whose contributions to America have often been obscured.

Chinese Immigrant Labor in Western US Expansion

"Go West, young man" is a phrase often credited to Horace Greeley, an influential nineteenth-century American newspaper editor and publisher. It embodies an ethos of the period that was rooted in the idea of Manifest Destiny. This was the view of many prominent white Americans of the time that they had a duty to expand the borders of US influence over the continent because of their belief in their cultural and racial superiority. Some felt a religious duty to bring Christianity to the Indigenous people of the West, and many more were interested in the economic promises of fur trapping and gold mining, as well as the wide Western expanses of fertile soil and grazing land for livestock, but access to the Western frontier was difficult without the transportation infrastructure to move people from the East coast.

Chinese laborers at work on the Southern Pacific Railroad Lines of Sacramento, 1877. Photo courtesy Bettmann / Getty Images.

In the early 1860s, the Central Pacific Railroad company began building a railroad line that was to connect the continent, East Coast to West Coast. It was to be called the transcontinental railroad, and it would change the trajectory of American life forever. The railroad became a powerful and celebrated symbol of American dominance, resiliency, and prosperity. Many later American writers, like Willa Cather and Thomas Wolfe, were so influenced by the railroad that it became a central and recurring theme in their writings. American visual art, too, included many depictions of rail lines, train depots, and lonely stretches of rural land with the "civilizing" rail line snaking through the foreground. Almost no fine art depicting Chinese laborers of the period exists.

Although the railroad was symbol of nationalism and American patriotism, the physical work of this ambitious building project could not have been accomplished without a non-American labor force. Chinese immigrants were key to the completion of the transcontinental railroad. About 10,000 to 15,000 Chinese laborers worked on the western portion of the project (90 percent of the railroad labor force), often doing the most dangerous portions of work, including using explosives to cut paths through mountainous regions. They were also paid less and treated more harshly than white workers. Of the thousands of Chinese immigrants who labored to build the transcontinental railroad, there are very few photographs and even fewer fine art depictions of them. The persecution of Chinese immigrants continued after the completion of the railroad, they were forced to live in segregated "Chinatowns" and attacks in Nevada and Wyoming resulted in lynchings and arson that burned Chinese communities to the ground.

Chinese immigrants helped build the structures that made industry and expansion possible for Americans of the nineteenth century. Today, America's relationship with Chinese labor continues in a different way. Today, Chinese and wider Asian contributions to everyday American life can most notably be seen in the built environments of our domestic rather than public spaces.

Recommended Reading:

http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/website/virtual/

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/archaeologists-learning-lives-chinese-immigrants-transcontinental-railroad-180979786/

https://blog.newspapers.library.in.gov/go-west-young-man-the-mystery-behind-the-famous-phrase/

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Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and Domestic Labor

A group of women from Guadalupe in the West Indies after their arrival at Ellis Island, New York, on board the SS Korona. April 6, 1911. Photo courtesy Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

Western art has always abounded with depictions of motherhood—the Madonna and Child, or Mary Cassatt's whimsical portrayals of mothers bathing children or bonneted women holding infants. But the American narrative around motherhood and domestic space is complexified by race and class because it does not only include mothers but nannies too. Likewise, while art depicting mothers is abundant, the figure of the nanny is conspicuously absent in American portraiture.

In eighteenth-century America, the phrase "Republican Motherhood" became common. It signified the belief that (white) mothers did important patriotic work by safeguarding the morals of her husband and children. Then, in the antebellum era, the "mammy" trope was created based on enslaved Black women who did much of the maternal caretaking for children of white landowners while often forced to neglect the needs of their own children. Most Americans are familiar with the racist caricature with exaggerated happy features that belies the truth of the horror of forced domestic labor of generations of Black women (including those doing domestic labor in the decades following emancipation). Few, however, are as familiar with how 1920s Afro-Caribbean immigrant women doing domestic work for low wages contributed to the American industrial economy by freeing European immigrant women to take higher paying factory jobs.

From the beginning, the American perception of domestic work has been divided along racial lines. (White) Motherhood was revered as a pure and moral occupation that could be leveraged into slogans for social change such as the Temperance movement, but non-white maternity was villainized or recast in a capitalist light where (non-white) maternal care was necessary for building both national and (white) familial wealth. Even now in America, nannies—mostly immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, or Southeast Asia—play an important role in allowing middle-class mothers, particularly in highly urban areas like New York City, the ability to work outside the home for higher wages.

Recommended Reading:

https://sfonline.barnard.edu/work/nadasen_01.htm

https://www.dwherstories.com/timeline/afro-caribbean-domestic-workers?prev=/timeline

https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/homepage.htm

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Mexican Immigrants in US Agricultural Labor

The history of the United States is almost defined by its changing views on labor—especially agricultural labor. Early Americans like Thomas Jefferson revered the ideas of philosopher John Locke on Agrarianism, even writing "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens." Agrarianism posited each person owns their own labor, so, when that labor is applied to farmland, the laborer owns that section of soil.

After the Civil War, American painters focused on themes of rural abundance. In the twentieth century, American creatives like Dorothea Lange and John Steinbeck wrote about and photographed displaced dust bowl farmers during the Great Depression. During the Second World War, America began experiencing a labor shortage and began allowing short-term Mexican laborers (braceros), who left their own farms in Mexico to work American land with the hope of financial gain.

Senior Patrol Inspector Aubrey Groom, Tallahasse, Florida, questions a Mexican field worker at the B. and L. Farms, Princeton, Florida. February 16, 1956. Photo courtesy Bettmann / Getty Images.

Immigrant farm workers faced abuse, racism, and dangerous working conditions. In the 1960s, with the leadership of Cesar Chavez, farmworkers began campaigning for better treatment through the National Farm Workers Association. One of their most powerful protest tools was art. Unlike Chinese railroad workers or Caribbean nannies, there are many pieces of art depicting Chicano immigrants—because they created the portraiture themselves using mass production methods like screen and block printing, creating colorful, high-contrast, easily distributable pieces that could bring attention to their cause. Today, about 50 percent of US farmworkers are Mexican immigrants, often without the protection of legal status, leaving them vulnerable to the same abuses Chavez organized against.

Recommended Reading:

https://www.norfolktowneassembly.org/post/agrarianism-jefferson-and-westward-expansion

https://repository.si.edu/bitstream/handle/10088/110957/Velasquez_L_Stephen-20210608-Calendareo%20de%20comidaDraftMay6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

https://agecon.ca.uky.edu/hired-farm-labor-and-the-role-of-hispanic-workers