

Two Shows at CounterPulse Offer Nuanced Portrait of Asian-American Identity

By Nicole Gluckstern, December 12, 2018

It's the sound of water that you notice first, walking into the mainstage space at CounterPulse. The gurgle of a flowing river, the persistent chatter of birds, the crunch of gravel. A voiceover describes the setting as it is now—"brown and overgrown...no place for bougie hipsters"—and as it was when Santa Cruz' last Chinatown lined the San Lorenzo river: a litany of hands, bodies, and children playing in the river.

With that introduction, a woman (Cynthia Ling Lee) in denim overalls and plaid shirt from an earlier century begins to play too, leaping across and splashing in the imaginary water, her body ably capturing the unselfconsciousness of a small child.



Cynthia Ling Lee and Clarissa Dyas at play in 'Lost Chinatowns' at CounterPulse. (Robbie Sweeny)

But as with childhood, such idyll cannot last forever. With the introduction of a second dancer, the equally expressive Clarissa Dyas, the piece shifts tonally. As they skip across the stage they sing “Ten Little Chinamen,” mirroring each other, lightly mocking each other, feigning an innocence over the outrageous lyrics we can’t believe. An ominous rumble from Anna Friz’ soundscape weights the atmosphere as two more performers (Lynn Huang and Zoe Huey) enter the stage and help to bring Lee down in a cruel game.



Zoe Huey, Cynthia Ling Lee, Lynn Huang, and Clarissa Dyas in 'Lost Chinatowns' at CounterPulse. (Robbie Sweeny)

By turns playful, melancholy, and unflinching, *Lost Chinatowns*—one of two pieces in CounterPulse’s Performing Diaspora series—explores a forgotten history of the Chinese inhabitants of Santa Cruz, hidden in plain sight along the banks of the San Lorenzo river.

A professor of dance at UC Santa Cruz, Lee first became aware of the erasure of Santa Cruz’s Chinese community when she tried to buy food for cooking and couldn’t find the ingredients she needed. Home to four successive Chinatowns between 1860 and 1955, Santa Cruz has preserved little trace of its former inhabitants, to the point that not even an Asian grocery store survives. Lee’s initial frustration became an artistic inquiry, which led her to explore the San Lorenzo River, the virulent anti-immigrant language of the courts and politicians over the centuries, the poetry of the migrants, and the photographic essays of George Lee. Directed by herself and Shyamala Moorty, *Lost Chinatowns* offers a space for reflection and reckoning, revealing the ways the past continues to inform the modern day.



Zoe Huey, Cynthia Ling Lee, Clarissa Dyas, and Lynn Huang using dishes as percussion instruments in 'Lost Chinatowns.' (Robbie Sweeney)

Here are some fast facts about Bruce Lee. One of his legs was shorter than the other. He once won a cha-cha dancing competition. He had his underarm sweat glands surgically removed. His childhood nickname was “never-sit-still.”

In Melissa Lewis' *I Dreamed Bruce Lee was My Father*, the mythology of one of the United States' first Asian-American superstars is deconstructed and examined. In Lewis' multimedia collaboration, three performers (Lewis, Kim Ip, and Nina Wu) pay homage to the man without making him a martyr. By turns humorous (as when they swoon theatrically together as they intone their muses' name) and heartfelt (as when Lewis dons sparring guards and demands loudly to fight, isolated by a pool of light), *I Dreamed Bruce Lee was My Father* imbues hero worship with humanity—and humanity with heroism.



Melissa Lewis is ready to fight in 'I Dreamed Bruce Lee was My Father.' (Robbie Sweeney)

An online interview with Lewis, herself of mixed-race heritage, reveals that she really did have a dream in which she and Bruce Lee puttered around the house in a series of mundane activities, just as if they were a father and daughter going about their day. From this first glimpse of Lee’s human side and her feeling of connection to it, a performance piece evolved. Incorporating martial arts technique, Chinese opera makeup, drag, a raucous karaoke segment, movie clips, video games, an elaborate memorial shrine, and a lyrical ode to a buffed-out cardboard-cutout Bruce Lee, the piece virtually explodes with ideas.



Melissa Lewis, Nina Wu, and Kim Ip in 'I Dreamed Bruce Lee was My Father' at CounterPulse. (Robbie Sweeney)

Some of those ideas don’t entirely cohere. At one point Wu tells Lee that she is in awe of him “but not without criticism,” never elucidating those critiques. During the karaoke number, the racism underpinning the song “Kung-Fu Fighting” is taken to task briefly—but it doesn’t lead to a greater revelation of the persistence of outmoded stereotypes. We get the soundbite, but not the deep dive.

Taken together, though, the two pieces complement each other admirably. Although developed separately, they work in tandem to cover over 150 years of Asian-American identity in one short hour: from the anonymous migrant poets of the 1800s, to the mixed martial arts aficionados of today.



Nina Wu, Melissa Lewis, and Kim Ip in 'I Dreamed Bruce Lee was My Father' at CounterPulse. (Robbie Sweeny)

CounterPulse has long been a home for passionate and politicized explorations of societal frameworks, and their Performing Diaspora residency encourages artists working in traditional mediums to explore their artistic heritage for a modern audience. Grappling with big picture questions of identity, erasure, and evolution, Performing Diaspora is for everyone who dares to ask those questions for which no single answer exists.