

**NEW EXHIBITION EXPLORES ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY THROUGH
HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND CURRENT REALITIES
AT BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART**

Brunswick, ME—September 27, 2023—Opening this December, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) will present its groundbreaking new exhibition *Without Apology: Asian American Selves, Memories, Futures*. The exhibition weaves together 30 artworks from the 20th and 21st centuries, created by more than twenty artists who self-identify as Asian American—including Tomie Arie, Mel Chin, Anmy Lê, Hung Liu, and Shahzia Sikander—to explore the ways these artists express aspects of their identity through their work. Across several generations of artists, these works explore identity with pride, or through struggle, or by confronting the challenges of bridging the artists’ self-perceptions as Americans with how others sometimes perceive them. Organized and presented as one component of a larger Bowdoin College-wide initiative on Asian American history, culture, and identity, the exhibition’s development has been a collaborative project between the Museum’s team and five faculty members, bringing subject-matter expertise together with curatorial experience to identify core themes, select artworks, design the exhibition layout, and develop the in-gallery text panels and labels. *Without Apology* opens December 14, 2023, and will run through June 2, 2024.

“This exhibition shines a spotlight on the vibrant and diverse spectrum of Asian American artistic expressions spanning a century of U.S. history,” said Anne Collins Goodyear, co-director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. “However, we also need to acknowledge that anti-Asian discrimination and violence has become more acute since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This exhibition demonstrates how artists tackled both personal and political themes of identity for more than a century, and collectively helps to give voice to these complex issues.”

Added Frank Goodyear, co-director of the Museum, “As a museum on a college campus, participating in school-wide initiatives such as this one is an important way for us to support wider academic and curricular programs while creating exhibitions that will be of interest for both on- and off-campus audiences. I want to thank the College faculty and the Museum’s curatorial team involved in this project for such a successful demonstration of how collaboration across disciplines can result in the exploration of new ideas and themes.”

The exhibition includes works in a wide range of media and genres, from artists who share a common goal of reframing racial narratives of the past, examining the repercussions of historical legacies on present identities, and envisioning alternative paths for the future. Organized into three sections—“Memories,” “Reclamation,” and “Selves”—*Without Apology* will illuminate the nuanced position of Asians in the United States, shedding light on both the challenges of marginalization and historical erasure, and on their diverse responses as they strive to reimagine the future.

In the first section, “**Memories**,” works by artists such as Tomie Arai, Mel Chin, Tuan Nguyen, Chiura Obata, and Kazumi Tanaka document and respond to historical currents that continue to reverberate through Asian American experiences today. Of these, Chiura Obata’s ink and paper graphite drawings stand out, as much for the beauty of their lines as for the specific memories they evoke: his time in the

American concentration camps for Japanese American citizens during World War II. His “Arrivals welcomed at Topaz [War Relocation Center], Oct 1st, 10:10 a.m., 1942,” (1942) captures a memory of this experience, showing people milling around as someone holds a sign reading “Welcome This Is Your New Home.” Reflecting Obata’s training in Japanese ink and brush painting, the mountainous background readily evokes scenes from traditional Japanese landscape works—a reality vividly undercut by the evident experience of the figures in the foreground, faced with having been relocated to a camp in Utah.

The “**Reclamation**” section underscores the myriad ways Asian American artists have sought to reconstruct the past and forge new narratives in the present, and features works by Yasuhiro Ishimoto, An-my Lê, Hung Liu, Alfonso Ossorio, Shahzia Sikander, and Reuben Tam. As an example of the “reclamation” concept, Stephanie H. Shih has taken foods that are stereotypically associated with Asian Americans and turned them into proud emblems of a remarkable culinary tradition. Shih’s painted ceramic works of branded products like “Gold Plum Chinkiang Vinegar” (2022) and “Yang Jiang Preserved Beans” (2022), as well as basic foods such as “Bok Choy” (2022) and “Red Snapper” (2023), reclaim that heritage, while also evoking and playfully aligning with concepts popularized by the Pop Art movement.

Self-portraits by artists such as Patrick Nagatani, Laurel Nakadate, Roger Shimomura, and Stephanie Syjuco are at the heart of the “**Selves**” section, providing insight into how Asian Americans assert their identities in bold, playful, and often unexpected ways. Connecting directly to an underlying impetus for the exhibition, Susan Chen’s 2021 painting “I Am Not the Kung Flu” is a self-portrait of the artist wearing a surgical mask—and surrounded by the tools for self-protection that an Asian American might need, from a whistle, to pepper spray, to a taser. Another work in this section is Jason Raish’s 2023 digital illustration “Asian American Identity,” which depicts a young, Asian American child eating lunch alone in a school cafeteria—with the viewer’s eye drawn to the child’s bento box and chopsticks, while the children at the table behind eat from the school’s cafeteria trays. Bathed in a spotlight, the child’s sense of aloneness is intense and visceral, the way a childhood memory can be.

Collectively, across all three sections, these artists unveil the legacy of inherited experiences—ranging from imperialism and displacement to economic and political discrimination, fractured cultural lineages, as well as the landscapes of their personal aspirations and communal dreams. By highlighting the enduring impact of America’s racial history, *Without Apology* underscores the persistent gap between legal and cultural citizenship experienced by many Asian Americans today. Yet as the exhibition also demonstrates, this is not a narrative of negativity—but rather, a celebration of the creative vitality and resilience of Asian America as a community that perpetually envisions novel dimensions of belonging.

Without Apology is curated by: Connie Chiang, Professor of History and Environmental Studies; Shruti Devgan, Assistant Professor of Sociology; Belinda Kong, Professor of Asian Studies and English; Sabina Lin, BCMA Curatorial Assistant and Manager of Student Programs; Casey Mesick Braun, BCMA Curator; Nancy Riley, A. Myrick Freeman Professor of Social Sciences; and Shu-chin Tsui, Bowdoin Professor of Asian Studies and Cinema Studies.

“*Without Apology* transcends traditional narratives and allows us to explore the complex layers of Asian American identity, which both exist on their own and are inextricably bound together American identity as a whole,” said Casey Mesick Braun, curator at BCMA. “These works are a testament to the power of art in fostering understanding and empathy, even amidst challenging times. It has been a great pleasure to collaborate with my faculty colleagues Connie Chiang, Shruti Devgan, Belinda Kong, Nancy Riley, and Shu-chin Tsui, along with my Museum colleague Sabrina Lin, to develop this exhibition and bring it to fruition.”

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art is the cornerstone of the arts and culture at Bowdoin. One of the earliest collegiate art collections in the nation, it came into being through the 1811 bequest of James Bowdoin III of 70 European paintings and a portfolio of 141 old master drawings. The collection has been expanded through the generosity of the Bowdoin family, alumni and friends, and now numbers more than 20,000 objects, including paintings, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts and artifacts from prehistory to the present from civilizations around the world. www.bowdoin.edu

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