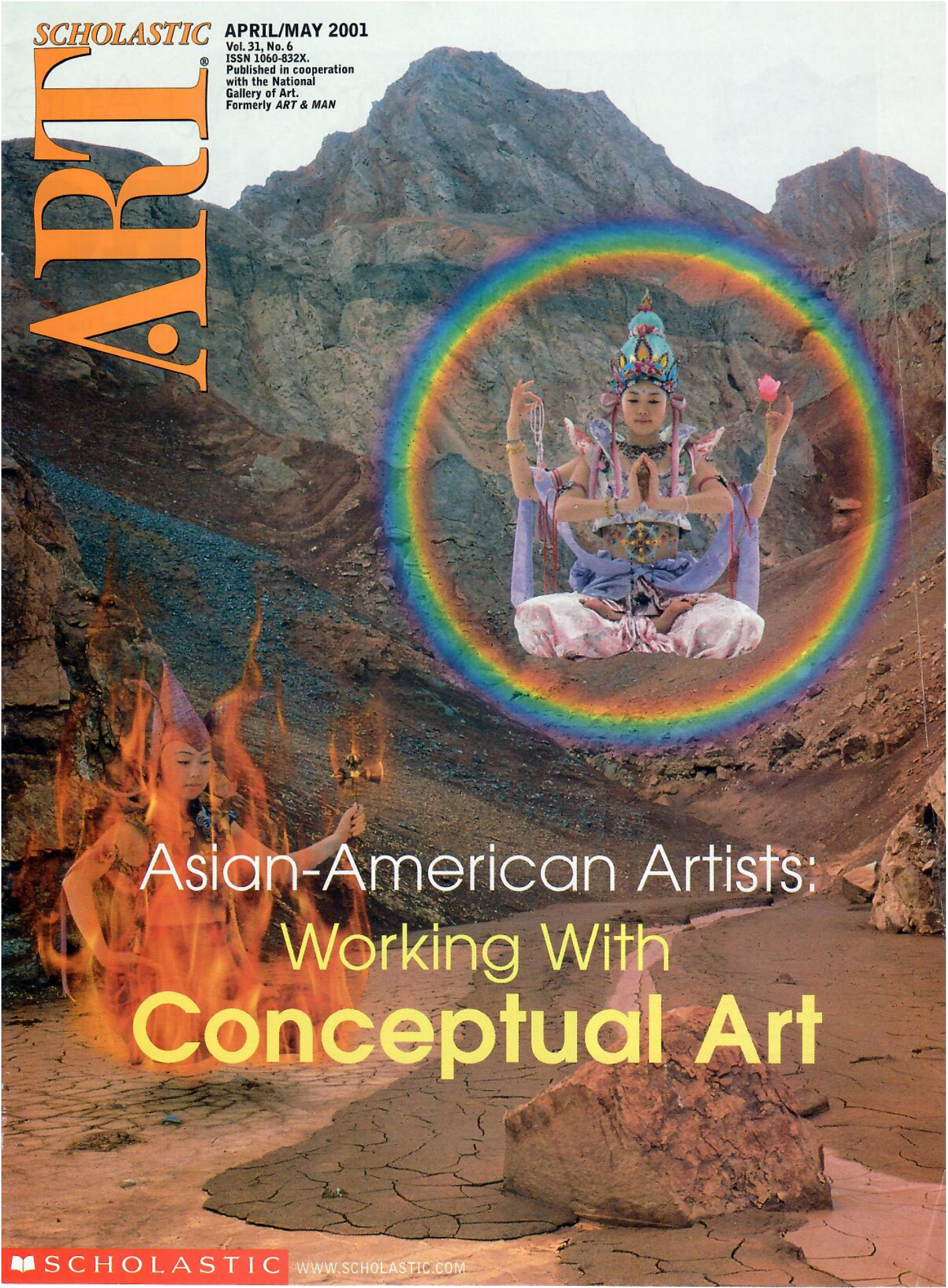


SCHOLASTIC

APRIL/MAY 2001

Vol. 31, No. 6
ISSN 1060-832X.
Published in cooperation
with the National
Gallery of Art.
Formerly ART & MAN

ART



Asian-American Artists:
Working With
Conceptual Art



COVER: Mariko Mori, b. 1967. *Burning Desire* (detail), 1998. Glass with photo interlayer 5 panels: 120 x 240 x .85 in. Courtesy, Deitch Projects, N.Y., N.Y.

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POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360) is
published six times during the school year, Sept./Oct., Nov.,
Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of
Publications: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson
City, MO 65102-3710. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City,
MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmasters: Send notice of
address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St.
P.O. Box 3710 Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

U.S. prices: \$8.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions
to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$19.95 student,
\$34.95 Teacher's Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$5.50 stu-
dent, \$6.50 Teacher's. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian
office, address below.)
Subscription communications should be addressed to SCHOLAS-
TIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 333 Randall Rd., Suite 130, St. Charles, IL
60174 or by calling 1-800-387-1437 ext 99.
Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to
Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 555 Broadway, New York,
N.Y. 10012-3999. Art@Scholastic.com. Canadian address:
Scholastic-TAB Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill,
Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfilm through Xerox University
Microfilms, Inc., 300 N., Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also avail-
able on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old
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Printed in U.S.A.

Transforming Anc Traditio

Is the work on the cover a photo, a film, a sculpture, or a dream? The answer is—all of the above. The artist, contemporary Japanese-American Mariko Mori, creates her complex, nearly life-size installations by combining video, photography, sculpture, and sometimes even fragrances. The artist always stars in her own creations. Mori's works link Eastern spirituality with modern technology, connecting the ancient Asian past with the global world of today.

In their work, many contemporary Asian-American artists make visual references to their own particular culture. To Westerners, this can be confusing. But there are a few Eastern images, styles, and traditions that are very recognizable. Some of them appear over and over in works by Asian-American artists. A form of Asian art well known in the West is the Japanese woodcut (opposite page, above) with its flat simplified shapes, long curving lines, unusual points of view, and bright colors. In his painting (opposite page, below), Japanese-American artist Masami Teraoka has adapted the traditional woodcut form to express technology's hold on

I am interested in erasing the
boundaries between past, present,
and future.— Mariko Mori



What similarities can you find between the work (above) by contemporary Japanese-American installation artist Mariko Mori and the traditional Buddhist sculpture (right)?

Mariko Mori, b. 1967. *Burning Desire*, 1998. Glass with photo interlayer 5 panels: 120 x 240 x .85 in. Courtesy, Deitch Projects, N.Y., N.Y.

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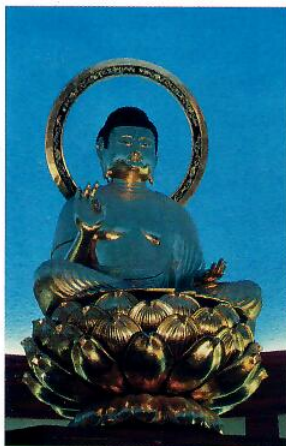


The distinctive style of traditional woodcuts like *The Great Wave* by Japanese artist Hokusai has had a great influence on Asian-American artists.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). *The Great Wave at Kanagawa*, 1829. Woodblock print. 10 1/8 x 14 15/16 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y., N.Y.

Contemporary Japanese-American artist Masami Teraoka brings traditional Japanese woodcuts into the 21st century.

Masami Teraoka, b. 1936. *Namiyo at Hanauma Bay*, 1985. Lithograph on paper. 24-7/8 x 35-7/8 in. Photo, Pamela Auchinlaus Artists.



Amida Buddha, c. 1050. Gilded wood.

modern culture. In this work, a Japanese tourist can't enjoy nature without his snorkel, goggles, and headphones.

Buddhism is a religion practiced in many Eastern countries. It was founded by Buddha, a 6th century B.C. Indian prophet and teacher who is often represented by **simplified, stylized** sculptures (near left). In *Burning Desire* (far left), Mariko Mori's five-part installation piece, the artist has drawn on many Buddhist traditions. The work represents the five Buddhist elements of nature—earth, wind, fire, water, and empty space. Surrounded by a *mandala* (a shape which symbolizes meditation), Mori presents herself as a Buddhist deity rising above the desert floor. She makes the traditional

mudras or hand gestures seen in many Asian sculptures. Mori also appears in the work four more times as Buddhist followers who are being cleansed by fire. The artist uses computer technology to combine images so that ancient myths appear to come to life.

Mori and Teraoka are two of a number of Asian-American artists who are making a tremendous impact on today's art world. Some were born in the U.S., but many came here from a variety of Asian nations—China, Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand. Today, there are almost as many national and cultural combinations as there are Asian-American artists in the U.S. In this issue, we will focus on a few of the best known.

A Clash of Cultures

In her work, Chinese-American artist Hung Liu refers to the situation of women, both in Asia and in America. It was in the mid-1850s that the first Chinese immigrants—almost all men—came to the U.S. to join the Gold Rush in California. Chinese women were not allowed to come with their husbands. Those women who somehow entered the U.S. lived in poverty and virtual slavery. As the first major immigrant group who were non-white, the Chinese threatened

early America with a richly dressed woman of the royal Chinese court. The work asks whether the two figures are so different. The woman on the right may wear a lavish *kimono*, a traditional garment worn by Japanese women. But is she any better off than the other woman? Both are servants, with little freedom to control their own lives. The artist may suggest that for Chinese-Americans, actively taking part in modern American life is more rewarding than living in a dream of the past.

“My art represents the borders I have had to cross, the barriers I have confronted in trying to define myself as Asian-American.”—Yukinori Yanagi

many American-born whites, beginning the long history of persecution of Asian-Americans in this country.

Many consider the Tang Dynasty—a period from 618-906—to have been the peak of Chinese civilization. By focusing on their past, Liu feels many Chinese-Americans lose sight of the present. In her painting *Tang Ren Jie* (above, right), Liu contrasts Chinese-American life with an idealized memory of life long ago in imperial China. She has included a bilingual sign seen in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Sacramento Street is *Tang Ren Jie* in Chinese, or Tang People’s Street. Liu compares an impoverished immigrant woman, left, in

On the other hand, when artists leave their native country to come to the United States, sometimes the resulting cultural clash can take an unexpected turn. After spending four years in the U.S., 22-year-old Takako Nagai returned to her native Japan. Soon, she realized she no longer felt at home there. She came back to the U.S. and tried to “destroy my Japanese part to

“This work simultaneously depicts the spread of tribes and the decline of empires.”— Yukinori Yanagi

Yukinori Yanagi, b. 1959. *World Flag Ant Farm* (detail), 1990. Ants, colored sand, plastic boxes, tubes. 170 boxes, each 8 x 12 in.





“In the Chinese written language, the character for woman is made up of two parts, one part meaning female, the other meaning broom.” — Hung Liu

Hung Liu, b.1948. *Tang Ren Jie*, 1988. Oil on canvas. Photo Ben Blackwell/Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco.

create something totally new.” Realizing that her heritage is a vital part of her, the artist began to express her conflict in multi media pieces such as *Self-Portrait* (right). The painting shows a kimono being destroyed by raging flames. In Japanese characters, Nagai has painted a poem over the image. She asks, “Who knows my road. Who knows how I will end up?”

Struggles between cultures are sometimes violent; they can also be silent and gradual. In his conceptual pieces, Japanese-American artist Yukinori Yanagi depicts how he feels today’s international trade and mass immigration are affecting the U.S. and other nations. *World Flag Ant Farm* (left) is made up of boxes, each containing a different flag. The boxes are actually filled with colored sand shaped into flag patterns. Plastic tubes connect the boxes to which the artist adds water, food, and thousands of ants. The ants dig a series of tunnels, moving the sand grain by grain from box to box. When the nest is finished, the flags have disappeared. The ants are then released. The artist may be suggesting that by breaking down formal, rigid national patterns a new and more vital landscape can emerge.



“After living in the American culture, my soul was no longer all Japanese.” — Takako Nagai

Takako Nagai, b. 1960. *Self-Portrait*, 1990. Oil, mixed media on canvas. 84 x 68 in., Anton Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Eternal Ou

“I can be at home everywhere, because I am at home



“Just visiting. I’m not from here.” — Tseng Kwong Chi

Tseng Kwong Chi (1950-1990). *Statue of Liberty, New York*, 1979. Silver print. 36 x 36 in.

Japanese-American Isamu Noguchi, today regarded as one of the most important sculptors of the 20th century, spent his life living and working in the United States. But when the U.S. went to war with Japan in 1941, he suddenly found himself the object of intense hostility. The artist’s conflict and his hatred of war is expressed in works like *Monument to Heroes* (far right). This work was originally designed to be a large, outdoor sculpture set on a mountaintop. The wind would rush through the openings and create a series of mournful musical tones. Made of **natural materials**, the work not a realistic representation but an abstraction. The **lines, forms, colors, and textures**

used by the artist suggest the destruction of war. The **turret-like cylinder** and **sharp points** resemble weapons. And the **bone-like shapes** suspended by **tightly strung threads** inside **crater-like spaces** express the anxiety and pain brought about by World War II.

During the 1970s, China underwent what its new leader, Mao Zedong (MAW-say-dung), called a “Cultural Revolution.” All Chinese people were supposed to be economically and socially equal. To symbolize this equality, everyone had to wear an identical plain, gray uniform. When he moved to this country, Chinese-American performance artist Tseng Kwong Chi discovered that dressing in this uniform made American strangers treat him as a VIP. So, wearing this “Mao suit,” dark mirrored sunglasses, and the ID card of a visiting Chinese Communist official, Tseng was able to attend major social events

across the country. He created a series of self-portraits in which he stands beside famous U.S. landmarks. In each photo, like this one with the Statue of Liberty (above, left), the artist stands stiffly with a detached look on his face. The **low angle** of the composition and the **small scale** of the **dark, silhouetted** statue increases the feeling of displacement and



tsiders

nowhere.”—Isamu Noguchi

alienation.

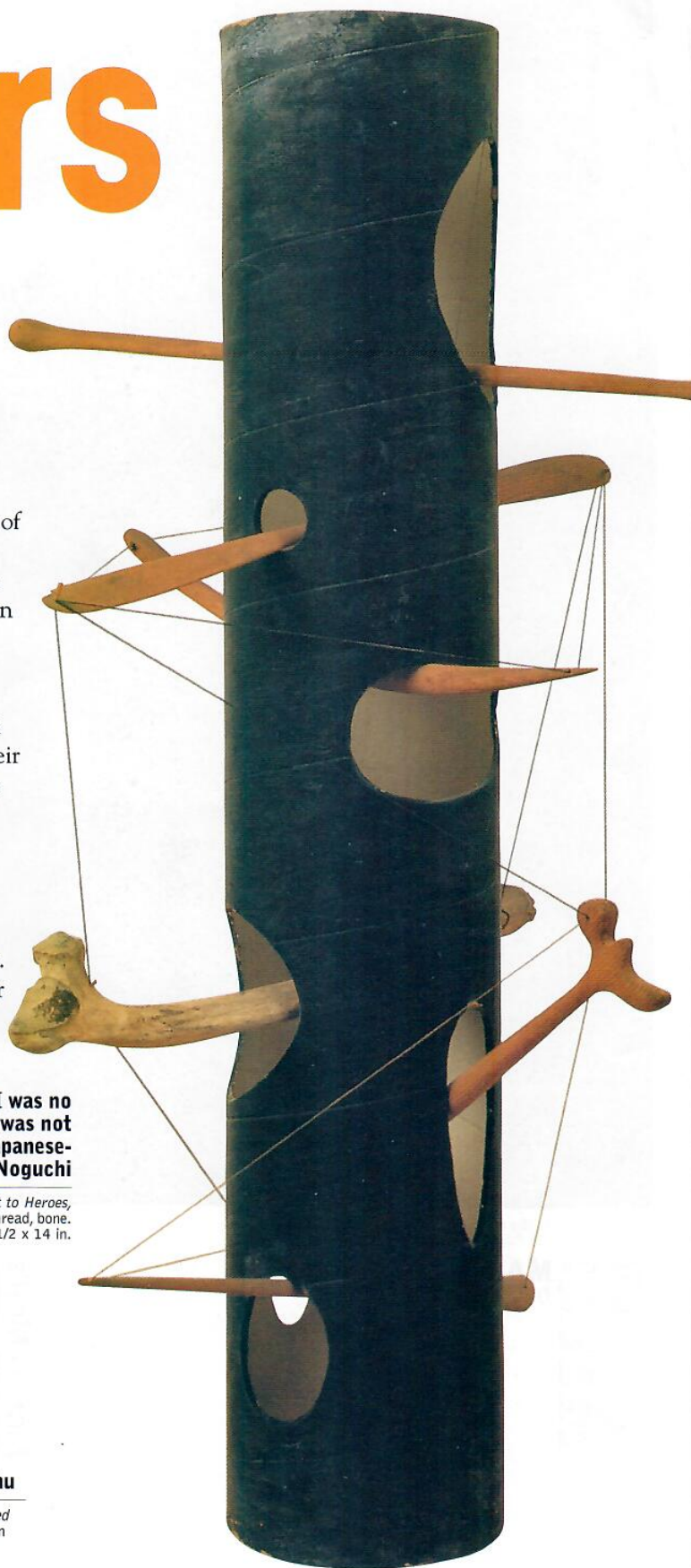
In all his mixed-media pieces New York-based, Hong Kong-born artist Ken Chu deals with feelings of racial exclusion. Recalling the history of Asians in America, the artist says, “No matter who we are, for some reason Asians have always been perceived as an outside enemy.” The artist has had personal experience with the hostility that he feels is often directed at Asian-Americans. In his mixed-media piece (below), he depicts an incident that happened as he walked down a city street. A group of men, their faces contorted with rage scream abuse as they drive past. Done as an **exaggerated, simplified, stylized** cartoon, the humorous style of this work contrasts with the darkness and violence of its message. The **menacing diagonals, sharp angles, loud, clashing colors, and grotesque blue and green faces** of the attackers all add to the feeling of threat and menace. The “I Love New York” sign on the lamppost further emphasizes the bitter irony of the situation.

“With a flash I realized I was no longer the sculptor alone. I was not just American but *Nisei*—a Japanese-American.”—Isamu Noguchi

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988). *Monument to Heroes*, 1943. Model made of wood, cardboard, thread, bone. 21 1/4 x 15 1/2 x 14 in.

“It doesn’t matter which neighborhood I’m in, I still get this violent reaction.”— Ken Chu

Ken Chu, b. 1953. *Hey Chinktown! You killed my Father!*, 1990. 66 x 70 x 8 in. Acrylic on foamcore.





ART SCHOLASTIC MASTERPIECE
OF THE MONTH #6

Mariko Mori's **Pure**

"In the next millennium, the power
should unify the world in peace and
national borders"



Mariko Mori, b. 1967. *Pure Land*, 1998. Glass with photo interlayer 5 panels: 120 x 240 x .85 inches Courtesy, Deitch Projects, N.Y., N.Y.

Land

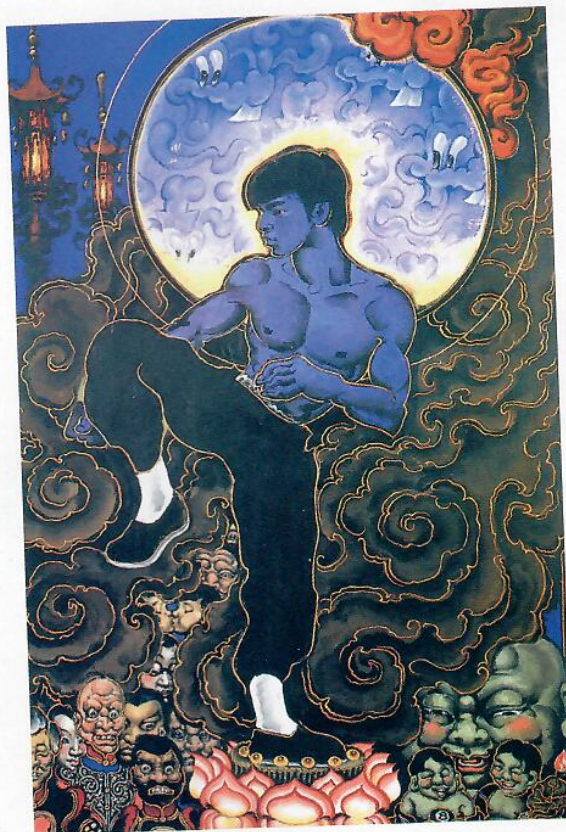
and the energy of the human spirit
of harmony without any cultural or
— Mariko Mori

East Meets

“Television is the language most widely ‘spoken’ in the world. It is the language that will unite us all.”—Nam June Paik

Many of today’s Asian-American artists are expressing both their Asian and their American backgrounds in unique and inventive ways. Chinese-American artist Martin Wong selects images that have meaning for both the Eastern and Western worlds. His realistic, stage-set-like depictions of his New York City neighborhood have a mysterious and fantastic quality. In *Bruce Lee in the Afterworld* (right), the artist presents a larger-than-life image of the late martial-arts film star. Lee’s ghostlike figure rises out of a lotus leaf, a form traditionally associated with the Buddha (see page 2). Curved shapes that resemble smoke surround the figure. His head is framed by a glowing gold circle that could be a mandala or a halo. Below him, a costumed crowd moves through Chinatown, unaware of the miraculous presence rising up in their midst.

Japanese-American performance artist Yasumasa Morimura uses humor to link East and West. Does the work (opposite page, top) look familiar? It closely resembles one of the most famous works of art in the Western world, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. But if you look at the face and hands, you’ll notice something is very different. Not only was this work not done by Leonardo,



“I often feel I’m a ‘tourist’ in the neighborhood I love and where I have lived for so long.”— Martin Wong

Martin Wong (1946-1999). *Bruce Lee in the Afterworld*, 1991.

it is actually a self-portrait of Morimura. In his series, *Self-Portrait as Art History*, the artist reproduces well-known paintings from Western art-history books. He then replaces key areas with his own image, thereby giving Asian features to basic icons of Western art. He creates these images using makeup, costumes, set design, and computer technology. In his portraits Morimura feels he is “occupying the invading images of Western media.” He implies that blending East with West will eventually create a new culture.

One area that the Eastern and Western worlds have in common is a fascination with technology. For the past 40 years, Korean-American artist Nam June Paik (pake) has explored technology’s role in art. Today he is considered the founder of an entire art form: video art. In *TV Buddha*

(right), the artist combines modern closed-circuit video technology with ancient Eastern religion. Paik places a statue of Buddha before a camera that sends its image to a TV monitor. The monitor is mounted in front of the sculpture, so the Buddha then seems to be meditating before his own image. Perhaps this work comments on the contrast between the spiritualism of traditional Zen Buddhism and what the artist sees as the self-centered nature of contemporary society, both East and West.

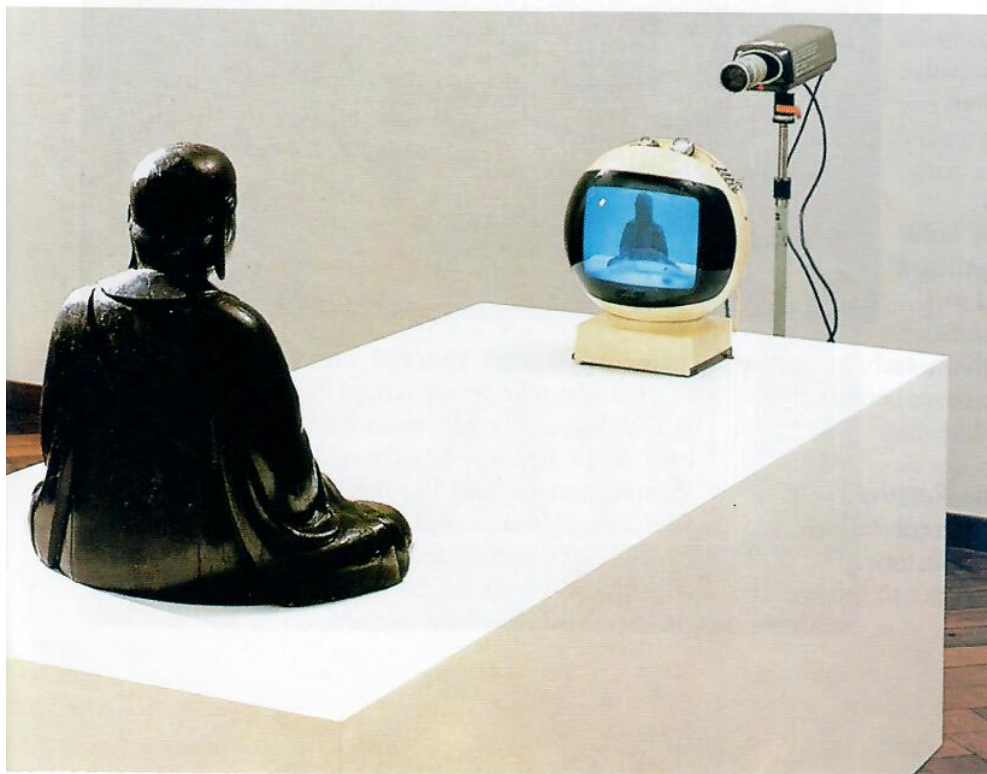
West

Today, young Asian-American artists combine every technology they feel will help them express their artistic visions. After an early career as a fashion model and designer in Japan, Mariko Mori has spent the last few years in New York City producing epic video installations. These works combine images from Japanese tradition and religion with fashion, advertising, science fiction, comic strips, and computer games. *Pure Land* (pages 8-9) refers to a state of rebirth in the Buddhist cycle of reincarnation. Seen as a dancer with flowing scarves, Mori floats toward the viewer. In an Eastern work, she would be accompanied by musicians playing traditional Japanese instruments. Here, she is surrounded by computer-generated cartoon characters. The lotus plant, a Buddhist symbol of purity and enlightenment, is suggested by the blossom floating in the center. In this work, Mori presents herself as an icon of both Eastern mysticism and Western celebrity worship.



"I don't paint on canvas. All my paintings are done on my face." — Yasumasa Morimura

Yasumasa Morimura, b. 1951. *Mona Lisa in its Origin*, 1998. Computer image. 114 x 79 in. Lühring Augustine Gallery, N.Y., N.Y.



"I always wanted to create something new, a moving painting with sound." — Nam June Paik

Nam June Paik, b. 1932. *TV Buddha*, 1974. Closed-circuit video installation with bronze sculpture and video camera. Reproduction courtesy Nam June Paik, Holly Solomon Gallery, N.Y., N.Y.

Boris Chang

Expressing Two Cultures

Asian culture has always fascinated 18-year-old Boris Chang, even though he barely remembers his only visit to Taiwan (a large Chinese island), made when he was 5 years old. Boris, currently a senior at Benjamin Cardozo High School in New York City, likes to draw on his heritage when creating works like the award-winning graphic design on the opposite page. He says, “Brush painting, the use of Chinese characters, the type of design you see in Buddhist manuscripts and scrolls, all interest me. But my own graphic designs are Western, with a little Asian influence.”

How did you first become involved with art?

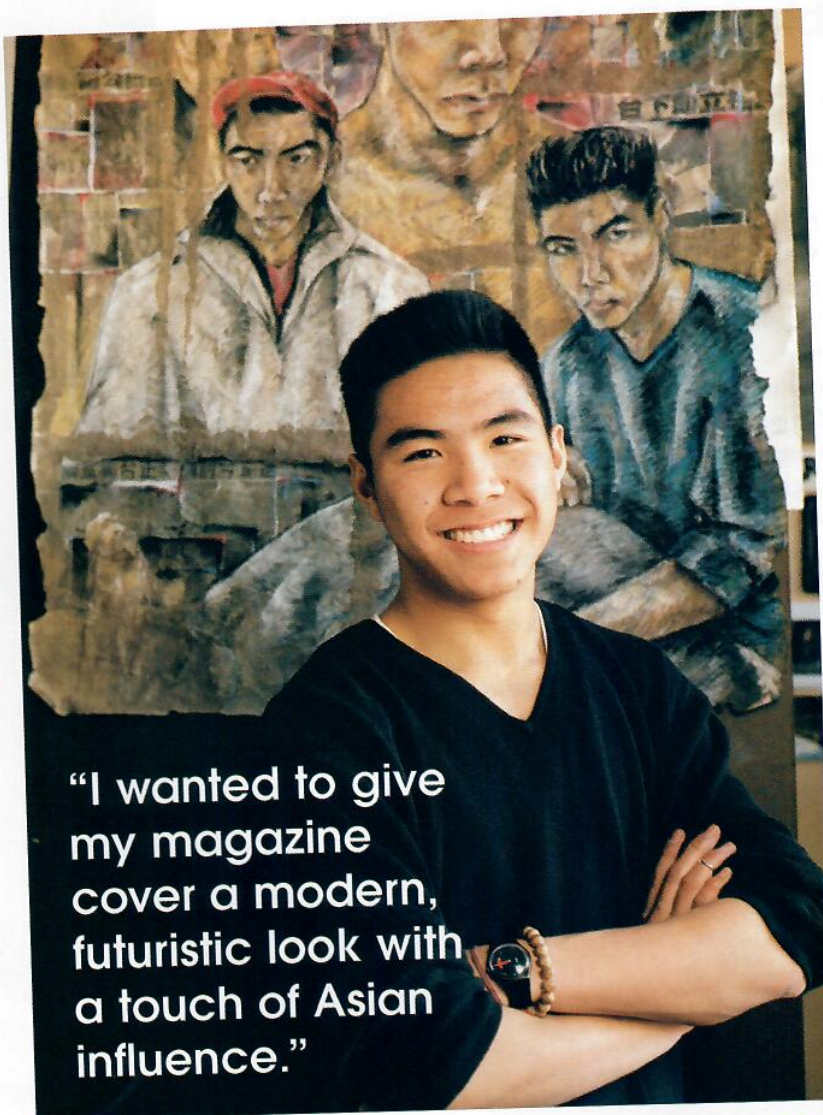
In high school my teacher encouraged me to apply to a special program at Cooper Union for motivated high school minority students. That program really pushed me toward the arts. I discovered art was what I wanted to do in life.

How did you come to do this award-winning piece?

It's a cover for a magazine that doesn't exist. I've always wanted to create a quarterly magazine for urban youth that covers art, music, fashion, technology, and nightlife. I put my image on the cover because the magazine is designed for people like me.

Why did you call the magazine *Revolve*?

Revolve means evolution. You're constantly going around in a circle, yet changing with time. The world is always changing, so people have got to get with the program.



“I wanted to give my magazine cover a modern, futuristic look with a touch of Asian influence.”

Why do you show yourself with one eye closed?

That was actually influenced by Buddhist culture. A Buddhist god usually wears drapery. One shoulder is bare, one is covered. The covered shoulder represents learning and wisdom. The bare shoulder represents wisdom gained through meditation. To me, one eye closed represents learning and wisdom. And the one open means I have the flexibility to keep on learning, that I know I have a lot to learn.

Photo credit: © Jason Tanaka Blaney

What is the letter in the lower left corner?

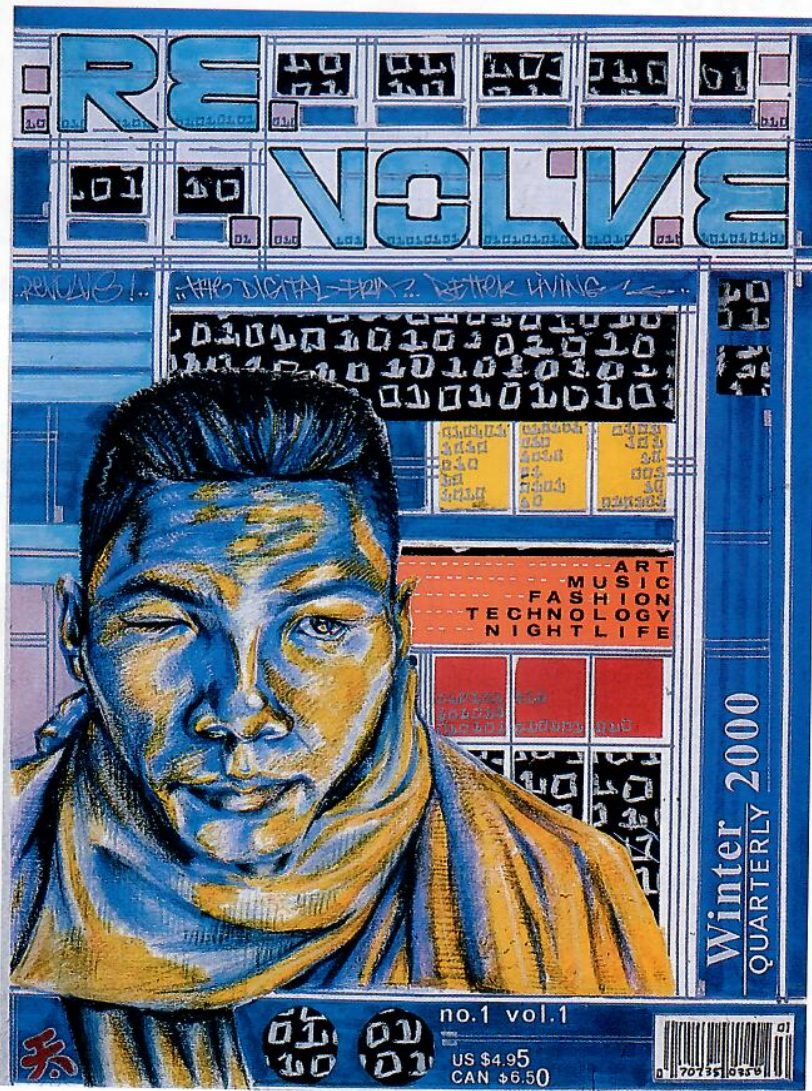
That's another personal thing. In Chinese that character means "sky and heaven." But I added a dot at the bottom to personalize it. Most Chinese artwork has a personal stamp with the artist's name or where they're from.

What kind of message did you want this cover to convey?

The cover expresses something I'm passionate about: urban lifestyle. In order to express this, I focused on composition and graphic elements. I wanted to combine fine art—the self-portrait—with contemporary graphic design. I wanted to give my magazine cover a modern, futuristic look with a touch of Asian influence.

What steps did you take to create this piece?

First, I decided on my focus—graphic design for a magazine cover that would depict urban culture.



Next, I decided on my materials—paper, colored pencil, art markers for more color, and press-on text for the table of contents and date. I also used coloraid paper—textured art paper—for the colored boxes and acetate for the computer coding. I also wanted to add graffiti to stress the urban feel I was after.

Do you think your cover was successful? Why?

On a scale from 1 to 10, I would probably give it an 8. It was successful in that a lot of my ideas were carried out. I think the cover works in grabbing the viewer's attention. The composition makes the viewer wonder what the magazine is about. You see a portrait and you see "Revolve." You see the futuristic text, and cool design, and you wonder, "Oh, what kind of a magazine is this?" I think this cover is somewhat successful in that way.

Are you planning to go on in art as a career?

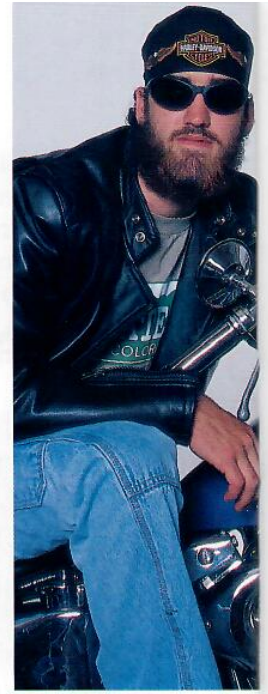
Yes, definitely. I'm pretty sure my career is going to be involved with art in some way. I'm leaning toward commercial graphic arts, the type of design you see in magazines.

What do you like best about creating art?

I like its uniqueness. Art to me is a whole subculture. It's a lifestyle in itself. It's an interaction with people. It's about creating something. It's also about having an opinion on what's around you: what you like and what you want people to see. It's a great feeling to be able to convey that to others and to be part of this subculture.

What advice do you have for aspiring artists like yourself?

Just really know what you want to do. Go through with what you feel passionate about. Love and understand your art. Try to do it well and learn as much as you can. Take risks and reveal an aspect of yourself through your art. The greatest art is art you put yourself into, through effort, time, and commitment. And that quality comes through to the viewer.



SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

Visualizing a **Concept**

What kind of concept might these people represent?

Many of the works of art you've seen in this issue are installations, conceptual works, or performance pieces. Most deal with the theme of identity. All the artists who created these works were more concerned with expressing the *concept* behind the piece than with the way it looks. Many have combined unusual mediums in very unexpected ways to help the viewer experience the ideas or emotions they want to communicate.

In this workshop, you will be creating a piece of conceptual art. In your piece, you'll combine words and photographs to try and convey some very important human qualities.

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., art instructor, Morrison (IL) Junior High School. Assisted by Nicholas R. Bonneur, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL. Photos by Larry Gregory

MATERIALS

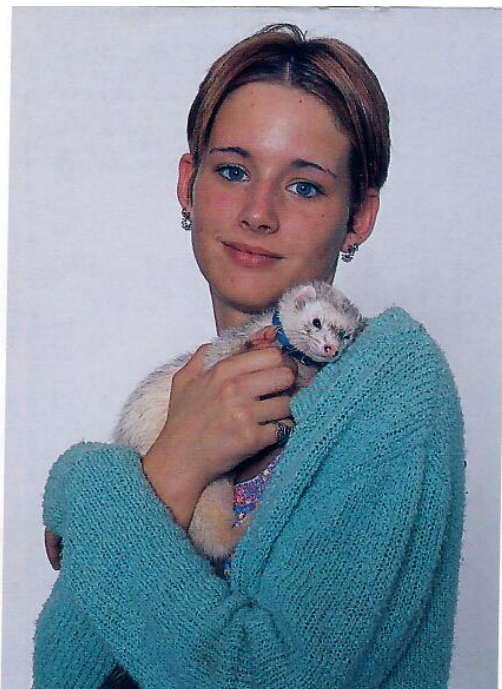
- Polaroid One Step, or 35mm camera
- Polaroid 600 Platinum Instant film or 35mm color film
- Smooth white wall, seamless background paper, or 48" white Kraft paper
- Method to present photographs: framed, matted, or double-faced taped
- Consent/Release form
(see example, far right)

Step 1. Selecting Subject

In this project, you'll make a record of community people who are important to your neighborhood. They won't be civic leaders or politicians, but interesting individuals you know, with unique hobbies, pets, collections, etc. Your concept will be expressed by combining two items—a photo of the person with an object important to him or her, and a statement written by the person about the object. A strong, interesting statement enhances the photo.

Discuss assignment in class, and with friends and family members. Make a list of possible subjects. Ask only people who





will take the project seriously; who will put effort into selecting objects and writing statements. Avoid "perfect" looking people. It is important to remember the serious purpose of this assignment; it is in no way meant to make fun of individuals or groups. Subjects should be very expressive.

Their appearance tells a story. Look for people who make life interesting.

A good relationship with the person is critical to this project's success. When you contact the first person on your list, explain assignment so he or she feels comfortable, knows what is expected. Person must select something very important to him



or her and bring it to the art department with a 50-word statement, stressing the object's significance. Objects should be large enough to see in a photo. Find out in advance what the person plans to bring. Subjects must sign a release form (below, right), bring it and the written statement, and dress as they do every day.

Step 2. Taking Photo

Class should develop a schedule with each student's name, subject, object, and time of photo. Set aside part of classroom where subjects will be photographed against neutral background (smooth white wall, 48" white Kraft paper). Have chair, stool, small table available. Make subject feel welcome, comfortable, relaxed. Try different arrangements before taking picture. Will person **stand, sit, face forward or sideways, lean on a chair?** How will object be presented?

Before subject arrives, practice using the Polaroid camera. Your composition should be **bold, balanced**, with a definite **focal point**. Subject can be **full figure**; a **detail, holding** the object; **standing/kneeling** beside it. Subject can be in the center (**symmetrical**) or in corner **balanced by negative space (asymmetrical)**.

Step 3. Installing Work

Photos/statements will be displayed in various places in the community. Location will influence format—**framed, matted, double-faced taped to wall**. Photos can be **large**, statements **small**, or the reverse. Statements can be **hand-written** or **typed**. Locations should be visible, secure, and, if possible, relate in some way to the art. Discuss potential locations, then visit. Talk with person in charge about a possible exhibit. Discuss requirements, length. Consider asking community businesses about documenting employees, displaying pieces in the business.

All subjects should sign and bring in a photo release/consent form.

Photo Consent/Release Form			
ART DEPARTMENT _____ High School			
Carefully read this photograph consent/release form. If you agree, please complete all the required information and sign in ink. Bring this form with you when you are scheduled to be photographed. For persons under the age of 18, parents or guardian's must also sign the release form.			
Today's Date _____	Today's Date _____		
Signature of Subject _____	Signature of Parent or Guardian _____		
Address _____	Signature of Parent or Guardian _____		
City _____	City _____		
State _____	Zip Code _____	State _____	Zip Code _____
Telephone Number with Area Code _____	Telephone Number with Area Code _____		

Cultural Cycles

How do each of these works combine East and West?

The Asian-American artists mentioned in this issue have created their art using many different styles and a variety of media. Here are a few details from some of the works you've seen, as well as a list of concepts, terms, techniques, and artists' names.

Next to each word or phrase below, write the letter of the visual that best applies (hint: at least three of the phrases apply to each visual).



- ___ 1. Mandala
- ___ 2. Japanese woodcut
- ___ 3. Film star
- ___ 4. Mao suit
- ___ 5. Isamu Noguchi
- ___ 6. Buddha
- ___ 7. Moriko Mori

- ___ 8. Hokusai
- ___ 9. Hung Liu
- ___ 10. Musical sculpture
- ___ 11. Kimono
- ___ 12. Tseng Kwong Chi
- ___ 13. Mandala or halo
- ___ 14. Closed circuit TV

- ___ 15. Tang Dynasty
- ___ 16. Mudras
- ___ 17. World War II
- ___ 18. Martin Wong
- ___ 19. 18th century
- ___ 20. Low point of view
- ___ 21. Nam June Paik