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It's Rest vs. the West in Crane Arts' "Inscrutable"

By Roberta Fallon

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Bugging out: Lynne Yamamoto's "Insect Immigrants, after Zimmerman (1948)," on display at the Crane Gallery.

"Wax on," instructs Mr. Miyagi, "wax off." This scene from 1984's *The Karate Kid* is one of the most recognizable pop-culture examples of an old archetype that gets taken for a ride in an exhibit by the University of Delaware at Crane Arts. The Kid is frustrated, unable to understand why his teacher thinks washing and waxing a car will teach him how to fight. But though the Kid demands answers, Miyagi is deadpan, revealing

nothing—inscrutable.

Inscrutable, a two-venue show of Asian and Asian-American artists at UD Crane and the Asian Arts Initiative (this review is only of the Crane portion), examines the cultural differences and stereotypes that exist in the era of mainstream sushi. Not all the works use obviously Asian motifs, but all are about non-Western cultures rubbing up against the West.

Local and 2009 Fleisher Challenge-winner Yvonne Lung's imaginative interactive piece "When in Rome" unfortunately wasn't working when I visited, but the idea reverberated loud and clear. There's a small table with a computer, a chair and a screen for privacy. The instructions are to sit and have a Skype conversation about anything at all with a designated stranger—but you aren't allowed to speak your native language. Phonetic spellings of greetings and simple phrases like "How are you?" "My name is ..." are supplied in Chinese, German, Dutch, Filipino and Swahili. (My favorite, "Whatever," is "Ano kailanman" in Filipino, FYI.) The piece places the viewer in the uncomfortable position of struggling with basic communication. Even though it may feel a bit like a sensitivity-training exercise, the piece feels right, and right for this show.

The 13-artist exhibit is spread throughout UD Crane's first floor and basement. Downstairs, Chinese-born Jinming Dong's 16-minute animated video "I Want to Talk: Mao (1956)" is mesmerizing. The piece shows Chairman Mao in a Socialist Realist poster with a Monty Python-esque, animated mouth reciting the English translation of Mao's 1956 speech to the association of music workers. The cartoonish depiction of the Supreme Leader is funny, but Dong's message is far from clear. Is the UD MFA candidate mocking Mao or implying his message lives on in 2011? Or both? Regardless, the ambiguous nature of modern China's relationship with Mao is worth thinking about.

Another ambiguous piece is Lynne Yamamoto's "Insect Immigrants, after Zimmerman (1948)," an aggressive installation that's part beautiful, part ugly and conflicted. A grouping of cloth doilies sprawls across the wall, each embroidered in black thread with an example of an invasive insect species found in her home state of Hawaii by entomologist Elwood Zimmerman. The larger-than-life "insect immigrants" are even more grotesque for the imperfect, freehand-looking embroidery with dark, overworked patches like swarming ants or mites; the forlorn Victorian-esque doilies being invaded are equal parts pathetic and off-putting.

One of the works with the least obvious ties to Asian themes is a single color photo by Paul Pfeiffer, probably the biggest name in the show (the New York artist was featured on PBS's *Art 21* series and won the Whitney's first \$100,000 Bucksbaum award for his work in the 2000 Biennial). Pfeiffer, who grew up in the Philippines, is renowned for his use of sports videos to examine issues of race and deconstruct Western culture from the point of view of the outsider.

"Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, (2003)," is one of a series of digitally manipulated sports action shots from the NBA archives. For most of these, Pfeiffer removes ball, basket, sidelines, court and jersey markings—everything except one player in a blank jersey, contorted and straining toward the now-absent ball, and the staring crowd. Michael Jordan's balletic pose in front of the hungry-looking audience is a reminder of how we exoticize differences in sports players—yet demonize it outside the arena.

Other standouts include Rene Marquez' two-channel video about the Filipino blessing of the animals, Hiro Sakaguchi's drawing of a boat with a Hibachi-grill motor and Jennifer Jones-O'Neil's portrait photos with masked faces. *Inscrutable* is a thoughtful update on stereotypes and identity, and very worth your time.

Through Feb. 4. UD at Crane Arts, 1400 N. American St. Closing reception: Feb. 4, 5:30-7:30pm at Asian Arts Initiative, 1219 Vine St.udel.edu/art, asianartsinitiative.org

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