



Post Script is a new initiative of Artspeak, designed to encourage the development of innovative critical writing about the visual arts by Vancouver writers, to provide critical feedback to emerging and mid-career artists and to further enhance cross-fertilization of ideas between the visual art and writing community.

Information about this exhibition is available on-line at [www.artspeak.ca](http://www.artspeak.ca)

Gaye Chan  
Chimaera

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**ARTSPEAK**

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# POST SCRIP

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Joy Russell on  
Gaye Chan

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*Chimaera*

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In my childhood photo album, there is a tattered brown news clipping taped to the inside cover. It features me as George Washington, looking as earnest as a seven-year old in shorts can. I'm pointing straight ahead across a make-believe frozen river leading other girls who are pulling imaginary oars. "Charades," the caption reads, "... Helen Ziu, as Washington."

- Helen Ziu from *Asian American Dreams*

With the daguerrotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken – formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same – so that we shall only need one portrait.

- Kierkegaard from Susan Sontag's *On Photography*

The complexities of immigrant communities taking on the 'American Dream', or nightmare, has occupied our attention/s, particularly in light of the articulation of 'identity politics' and the rise of the US as potentially the greatest power-wielder on the globe. The line between the dreamer and the dreamt is a chasm, perhaps, too wide to embrace, or, a skin, too close to delineate boundaries. Honolulu-based artist Gaye Chan's exhibition *Chimaera* investigates these issues and discomforts with specific reference to Asian Americans, illuminating the dangers of assimilation in the pursuit of that dream.

Entering Artspeak, *Chimaera* hits, then envelops and borders - a rectangle of red, composed of forty



three portraits, mounted six feet high at a downward angle towards the viewer.

On the wall nearest Carrall Street, we find the first portrait: a photograph of a man, his face indistinguishable in soft black. Red and black reveal his jacket, bow tie and carnation. With his portrait - another portrait: George Washington, the first American president in 1789, his image dominating.

Moving right-ward, in chronological order to 2002, are forty two double-portraits composed of drawings of American presidents taken from official portraits, made by pin pricks penetrating into photographic portraits. The photographs are of people whose names we do not know, they are most likely Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, Portuguese and mixed race: immigrant settlers in Hawaii's plantation era. Lapels, floral prints, thick-rimmed glasses and bouffant hair, give clues to a period somewhere between the late fifties and seventies. They are children, middle-aged, teenagers, students, a 'Charley's Taxi & Tours' driver, the glamorous, professionals and working class. Shy, sincere, serious - few smile - a poignant sadness and melancholy permeates.

Viewing the portraits - depending on your height, requires an upward tilt of the head. Chan installed the portraits to parallel the positioning of official



portraits of presidents, board members and royalty, thereby raising questions around authority, honour and stature. The portraits emerge from red: cherry, blood, fire, wine, siren. Mysterious, dramatic contrasts are created in hard, soft, berry, charcoal blacks. White, orange yellows appear on faces as hot spots, flare-ups, evoking another presence; rise from a man's torso suggesting combustion. Chan uses these colours to conjure degrees of heat, the rhythms of fire - coals that burn eternally - to remind us the past is bound to the present; to oppose the 'dream' whereby every day is anew, the reconstruction of self is severance from history, and amnesia a prerequisite for success.

Pin pricks appear as scars, tattoos, blisters, tracks, punctures, stitches, miniature bullet-holes. White fleshes out in ruptures made from the back of the photographs. Here, Chan plays with temporalities, letting them cross-reference and echo. While the president's image invades from behind, invasion also occurs on the front. Faces merge, appear ghost-like, suffocating, entrapped by the presidential gaze, while others seem to willingly take on the mask for safety and refuge.

Within this tension, it is difficult to separate exactly who is who. Symbiosis is suggested in overlapped eyes, the interchange of torsos, buttons aligned perfectly, a beard made from a president's face, faint



red flower petals in a woman's hair exploding from President Carter's head. Meanings can be read: a glamorous woman's tilted, darkened face haunts Lincoln's portrait, hinting at the legacy of slavery; in dazzling red, Nixon smiles through a Chinese woman with glasses - China and America 'seeing' each other; President Bush appears cartoon-like on a portrait so dark, only glasses are barely visible, warning us to times of extreme darkness.

*Chimaera* challenges, engaging us in its complex subtleties and layers. It serves as a perfect critical inquiry into the degree to which communities of people are prepared to subsume themselves to a dream that perhaps is never really achievable, or even genuinely on offer, and ultimately, the price that is paid.

**Joy Russell**

24/05/02

**Works cited:**

Helen Ziu, *Asian American Dreams*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2000, 21 - 22.

Kierkegaard (1854) quoted by Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1973, 1974, 1977, 207.