

Celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in Watson Library

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Since November 2021, Watson Library has conducted a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities titled “Research and Outreach: Increasing Representation of Indigenous American, Hispanic American, Asian American and Pacific Islander artists in The Met’s Thomas J. Watson Library.” The project, detailed in an [earlier blog post](#) by my colleague Helice Koffler, has enabled us to assess the existing collection of books in Watson with the goal of adding relevant monographs, exhibition catalogues, journals, zines, and artists’ books. I’d like to introduce a few of these recently added titles here to celebrate Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

One of the first books I set my eyes upon after joining Watson was *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001*, edited by curator and artist Howie Chen. Published by Primary Information the month our project began, the anthology gathered documents and ephemera produced in tandem with the works of the celebrated eponymous New York–based Asian American artist collective and network. Godzilla was established in 1990, first as a small group of artists and art workers who belonged to overlapping social circles, as well as pan-Asian community organizations like the [Basement Workshop](#) and the [Asian American Arts Centre](#). Brought together through the shared struggles of gaining visibility, the group documented and supported Asian American contemporary visual artists by promoting their activities for over a decade.

Godzilla’s efforts can be found in facsimile and meticulously organized in this newly published anthology, including meeting summaries, joint letters, news from across the country, curatorial statements, and newsletters that describe a plethora of opportunities for working artists. *Godzilla* thus also provided me with substantial guidance in finding books to add to Watson’s stacks. As a laterally structured group of individuals run by a rotating committee of volunteers, its efforts highlight the power that can be harnessed when people come together in this way, as the below examples will illustrate.

Found in our stacks, in fact, was a brochure of Godzilla’s first collective group exhibition, *A New World Order III: The Curio Shop*. Held at New York’s Artists Space in the spring of 1993 and coinciding with the Whitney Biennial (a show that the group had challenged two years prior for its lack of interest in Asian and Pacific American artists), the show was a multimedia installation in the guise of a curio shop, a common feature of Chinatowns and other Asian neighborhoods throughout the West. The forty-eight participating artists presented reinterpreted curio or memorabilia, subverting common racial stereotypes and fetishes that are often marketed as cheap and easily affordable commodities to non-Asian consumers. Fittingly, the show’s checklist had been printed in the style of a takeout menu, which can be viewed in Chen’s anthology.

Newly added to the stacks is an issue of *New Observations*, an independent, nonprofit journal of contemporary arts and culture whose issues were guest-edited and devoted to a specific theme. For the summer of 1995, Godzilla took charge as its editor and introduced a diverse group of artists and writers like Allan deSouza, Bert Winther-Tamaki, Carol Sun, David Diao, Erving Del Pilar, Linh Dinh, Noe Tanigawa, Shirin Neshat, Sowon Kwon, and Todd Ayoung. Weaving together the visual and written works inspired by new forms of hybridity and transculturalism, the issue titled “On Doubling” became a courageous display of personal struggles and strategies for facing an Asian Pacific American identity caught between, in Ayoung’s words, “a cut n’ mix of desires and identifications of who we mistake ourselves to be and who others think we are.”

Uncommon Traits: Re/Locating Asia is another set of publications added to Watson’s collection. These three books were published by [CEPA Gallery](#), the nonprofit contemporary photography and visual arts center in Buffalo, New York, to accompany a three-part, multisite project presented under the same title. While not an official Godzilla project, *Uncommon Traits* did involve several of its members, including Margo Machida as one of its curatorial consultants. Taking over CEPA’s entire 1997–98 season, this project brought together photo-related works by Asian American and Asian Canadian artists, negotiating parallel but never homogenous concepts of “Asian-ness” shaped in North America.

Five years after its founding, Godzilla’s sixteen original members had grown to a network with three hundred members locally and two thousand nationwide. The increase in membership reflects not only Godzilla’s open structure—allowing anyone who attended a public meeting to be a voting member—but also the urgent need and desire of artists and art workers of Asian and Pacific heritage to collaborate and support one another. The involvement of diverse members led to collaborations between feminists, AIDS activists, and LGBTQ support groups, whose publications I look forward to further identifying in Watson’s collection. Although it is an impossible task to keep track of Godzilla’s associates given our resources, titles celebrating individual accomplishments will continue being added to our collection.

Accompanying this blog post is also the first half of the [Asian American and Pacific Islander Artist Index](#), which is similar to the [African American Artist Index](#) published last year. The list of identified artists does not pertain solely to those in Godzilla, of course, but all who were active in the United States from 1850 through today. The Index cannot and should not be acknowledged as a comprehensive record of American artists of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage; it is limited to those whose works are currently represented in Watson’s expanding collection.

Our team hopes that the Asian American and Pacific Islander Artist Index will serve future scholarship as well as public interest, especially in welcoming those who did not feel part of Watson before. The Index will be updated and accompanied by a resource guide for art historical research later in the fall as the yearlong project wraps up. Until then, I will continue to share more of our exciting finds on our Instagram page ([@metlibrary](#)) by occasionally highlighting Asian American and Pacific Islander artists, art workers, and scholars who have made my efforts at Watson Library possible.

About the contributors

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