

# eric firestone gallery

## HYPERALLERGIC

Art

### The Maverick Legacy of Godzilla Asian American Artists Network

An exhibition at Eric Firestone Gallery spanning the late 1980s to present day delves into their multidisciplinary output.

Elaine Velie



Helen Oji, "Give and Take" (1994), oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

In the summer of 1990, three young Asian American artists and historians gathered for the first time in a Brooklyn studio. In subsequent rendezvous with a growing number of members, Tony Wong would often arrive with a complex main dish — salted fish was a particularly memorable entrée, Helen Oji told *Hyperallergic* — and other members would contribute sides. Each creator would bring images of their work to be projected from a slidedeck.

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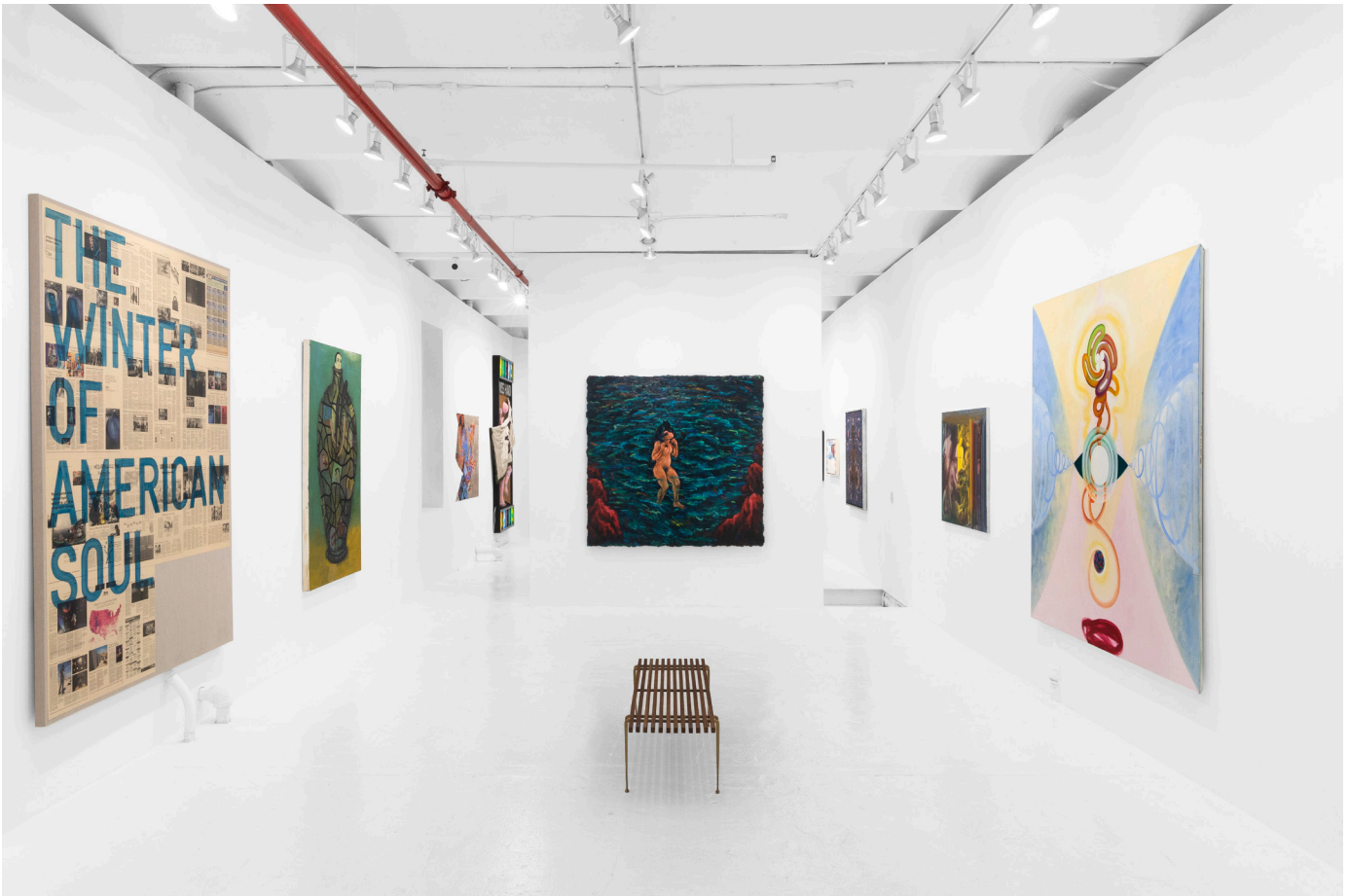
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These informal get-togethers represented the infancy of a new collective. Faced with a startling lack of gallery and museum representation and inspired by [similar networks](#) such as the [Asian American Arts Centre](#) and [Basement Workshop](#), co-founders Bing Lee, Ken Chu, and Margo Machida adopted the name “Godzilla” for their new group after the Japanese cinematic monster who rises from the detritus of nuclear war to wreak havoc on the established world order. Throughout its 11-year run, the group maintained an intentionally loose organizational structure and open membership policy, eventually reaching more than 2,000 members.



Installation view of Godzilla, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

More than 30 years after that first meeting, an ambitious and meticulously researched [exhibition](#) at Manhattan’s [Eric Firestone Gallery](#), on view through March 14, explores the Godzilla Asian American Artist Network that converged in the ’90s and affected lasting change in the art world thereafter.



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“[The show] really brought together the force of the members of Godzilla,” early member Charles Yuen told *Hyperallergic*. “In a much more cohesive, coherent way than I remember from the time — which I suppose should be expected because retrospect gives you a little distance on things, a little more perspective.”



Charles Yuen, “Jug Boy,” 1994, oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 48 in.

Spread across Eric Firestone Gallery’s two spaces at 4 and 40 Great Jones Street in Soho, *Godzilla* spotlights the historic collective’s diverse artist base and history through works that range widely in medium and subject matter. In 1991, the newly formed collective penned a letter to director David Ross at the Whitney Museum of American Art protesting the upcoming biennial’s virtual lack of Asian American artists. The letter enacted near immediate change: The museum’s subsequent biennial centered on identity and showcased works from Byron Kim’s series *Synecdoche* (1991–present). A painting from that same series hangs on the fourth floor at 4 Great Jones.

Helen Oji’s “Give and Take” (1994) is displayed nearby. The artist described her vibrant oil painting — depicting a boiling teapot and a smaller vessel that pours out a spool of thread — as a nod to her Japanese heritage and a reflection on connection, communication, and friendship, all of which can be shared over a cup of piping hot tea. Indeed, *Godzilla* centered the Asian American artist experience as a whole, never splitting membership by national heritage but consistently exploring distinct identities and their interconnection. “I think it grew so fast because we were hungry to understand,” Lee told *Hyperallergic*. “We tried to share something common in our cultures, in our religions, and through the difference we tried to *understand* the difference, too. Through the network we could understand each other more.”

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Curator Jennifer Samet, who penned the *Hyperallergic* series [Beer With A Painter](#) before starting her role as Eric Firestone Gallery's director of research, said she began conducting studio visits this summer after stumbling across Godzilla while working on another project. "It captured my imagination," Samet told *Hyperallergic*. The curator ultimately gathered almost 70 works that span the 1980s through the present day, representing a swath of artists who had embarked on diverse career paths since their days together as early Godzilla members.



Installation view of *Godzilla*, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

At Eric Firestone, the most eye-catching artwork consumes an entire wall on the ground floor of the gallery's 40 Great Jones Street location. Ik-Joong Kang's immersive "Happy World" (1984–2010) envisions the random assortment of items sold in a Chinatown curio shop: A bowl of ramen, a lucky cat mid-wave, and a thermos are among hundreds of objects emerging from a canvas foregrounded by a gold-hued Buddha statue.



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In 2001, Godzilla staged its last official artistic action with a series of banners across Chinatown titled *Why Asia?* The group decided to dissolve — or “atrophy,” as Yuen put it — with the sense that their work had been accomplished.



Nina Kuo, Pigtail Family Boombox, Color Chart, 1999-2006, drawing on acrylic rag, 14 x 16 in

“It wasn’t the end; it was just the beginning,” said Lee. Indeed, in 2021, nearly 20 Godzilla members withdrew their work from an upcoming retrospective at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in protest of the institution’s alleged complicity in the construction of a new jail, marking one final political gesture — for now.