

Weinberg/
Newton
Gallery

EXPERIMENTAL MAKERS WORKSHOP

2021

**Published on the occasion of
Experimental Makers Workshop
Jun 24–Aug 28, 2021**

**An exhibition by
Weinberg/Newton Gallery**

**Artists
Isaac Couch
Joseph Lefthand
Sarah Whyte**

ARTIST STATEMENTS

*Covers:
Experimental Makers Workshop
Community Event, 2021*



While grappling with the ideas of nonviolent intervention throughout the workshop, I came to realize that the Black Panther Party (BPP) is a direct response to violence. How did they negotiate the violence toward their communities? Did they hide or run away? No, they armed themselves and showed their numbers. My goal with this work is to exaggerate that sentiment; to wear the skin as armor and camouflage. Using the leather jacket that was worn as part of the uniform for the BPP, I am experimenting with the idea of a camo pattern that establishes identity rather than concealing oneself from the enemy. As a Black American, I know my ancestors must be from Africa, but as a descendant I have no African ties. I know for a fact that I am American, however. Thinking about an origin that I will never know and a culture I could never be a part of, I take Dutch wax print fabrics and burn holes in them to make room for the red and white bars of the American flag, ultimately making a representation of my skin. The violent process of making the fabric for these garments is a symbolic gesture. The USA is based on violence; war, rebellion, apocalyptic imperialism, slavery, state-sanctioned violence against its own citizens, and continuous war overseas. Within the work I am cutting, ripping, tearing, burning, and puncturing these textiles to create an amalgamation of different ideas that come together as one.

—ISAAC COUCH

Opposite:
Isaac Couch, *Scorched*, 2021, Synthetic
fabric, cotton fabric and staples



My garment was a conception of honoring and acknowledging the role of grief, anger, rage, and hiddenness in response to the recent news of the thousands of Indigenous children who have been uncovered at residential boarding school mass grave sites across the U.S. and Canada.

The residential boarding school program was a colonial attempt at wholesale assimilation and the literal erasure of land, culture, identity, and autonomy of the hundreds of tribes and people groups across North America through religious indoctrination, forced conversions, and separation policies that kidnapped and forcefully removed hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children from their ancestral lands and families.

The first U.S. Indian boarding school was founded in Carlisle, Pennsylvania by R. H. Pratt, an Army officer and veteran of the so-called “Indian Wars”, who had spent nearly a decade imposing reservation-based genocide by chasing and corralling Native tribes across the Western U.S.. His philosophy, “Kill the Indian, and save the man”, along with military and corporal forms of punishment, dictated and defined the childhood experience of thousands of Indigenous children, who were forbidden to speak their languages, and were taught to rely only on themselves and their Christian faith to see them through the death and extinguishing of their old ways.

The purpose of our workshop was to imagine new ways to confront historical and ancestral legacies of violence while also challenging the narratives of Western colonialism. My hand-sewn garment, “His Thundercloud Sits on the Horizon (Yam Awełuyan Yushik’ya:we)”, draws from traditional A:shiwí (Zuni) symbology of cumulonimbus clouds, thunderheads that bring rain, life, and sustainability, even as they raze the earth through lightning and wildfires, just as grief envelopes, pours, and destroys, it also allows for release, justice, tenderness, and new growth.

My garment is both sculptural and malleable, able to be hung as an A:shiwí thundercloud, or draped and wrapped around the body, a pan-Indigenous acknowledgment of our relationship to clothing and craft as essential to our relationship of the land we emerged from.

—JOSEPH LEFTHAND

Opposite:
Joseph Lefthand, *His Thundercloud Sits on the Horizon (Yam Awełuyan Yushik’ya:we)*, 2021,
wool, cotton thread, polyester thread



On the path between violence and peace we search for something both familiar and unknown. To be honest I don't completely understand what you would say is right and wrong? What is justice? We often walk through life even run through it at times trying to be something. But what is that something?

I look in the mirror and I don't know who I am. Outwardly someone would tell you I am a young adult female of Asian descent who lives in America. But is that who I am? Is that all I am? In America's history there has been so much hate, violence, otherization and distrust of people of color. So much violence towards people of my ethnicity and we are tired. We are tired of being Vincent Chin dying at the hands of our home, the hands of our society. There's this tension in the air that we silently breathe in and internalize. A tension that sinks into our bones and our children's bones. This state of being stretched tight, this state of both mental and emotional strain is exhausting. It lays on our shoulders weighing us down. Why do we not just let go, you ask? Well to be honest it's not so easy. Microaggressions build up, we all get defensive and want to protect ourselves. We are both submissive and combative. What is safe?

We are subconsciously fed the idea of order, standards and acceptable behavior.

I remember growing up and wishing I could wash away any and all tan within my skin. Wishing my lips weren't so full, my nose wasn't so flat and wishing I had big eyes with double eyelids. I didn't talk about this wish nor did I realize at the time that within this wish I wanted to look western, I wanted to look white. In my mind I just wanted to look pretty and pretty was subconsciously white. We often understand and conform to the social hierarchy and construct we are brought into. There is often institutional white washing and violence within our system. Like an unspoken rule we so often degrade ourselves. I am a transracial, transnational adoptee and I was raised white. I consumed white media, with white characters. My family and most of my immediate circle growing up was white. As a child I so desperately wanted to match my

Opposite:

Sarah Whyte, *Měiguó rén* (美国人), 2021, Fake Chinese Silk, Hand Bleached Fake Chinese Silk, and Silk

surroundings and look like everyone else. Sometimes I forgot that I was not white while other times it was blatantly clear that I was not white. I stand in an odd positioning within this drowsy silent racialized American war as a transracial adoptee.

I understand and realize I am socialized and accepted into white society more than the average Asian American woman as an adoptee. Perhaps I am a black sheep given a white cloak? The cloak allows me to somewhat blend in from afar and yet it can not truly hide or change my true colors. There is so much tension within this veil of acceptance. Is it all falling apart at the seams? Is America truly a melting pot? Or are we separated and segregated? Is love and hate truly so close and far away? Why do we hate our neighbor? Why don't we trust each other? Have things truly changed since the Civil Rights Movement? Or is our hate for each other just portrayed more subtly. You know what they say, don't talk to strangers. With this piece I try to understand this path between violence and love that we walk. In my construction I reference the design of a hanfu dress which is a traditional style of dress in ancient China. It was worn by Han women. This style of dress is currently re-emerging in popularity in China. During the dynasties China was viewed as a rich nation. Known for its fine goods but now so often when people see the words made in China they think the integrity of the product is cheap. The Asian American community has gone through waves of being called dirty, cheap and sneaky while also being otherized and romanticized.

I constructed the garment mostly out of fake chinese silk. When people see this brocade style of fabric they often think that's what chinese silk is but the material melts meaning that there are synthetics in it thus not being real silk. In fact this so-called silk that I am using is 100% polyester. I choose this material as a play on my own lablized identity as a "fake Asian" like this silk I "look Chinese" and I am but I'm not. Which puts into question how we label what is and is not a part of these categories. What are the lines of the social construct that are flexible and fluid? After all, what is and is not considered to be a part of this category can change depending on the narrator.

This material also has a relationship with the oriental

romanticism we have here in America while also having the degrading quality both literally and ideologically. But what do I mean when I say this? What does this have to do with violence and love, familiar and unknown. Well so often we represent Asia and people of Asian descent especially women of Asian descent with the label of exoticism and perpetually foreign. This can be seen in the infamous where are you from question, no, where are you really from? This microaggression is important to note because it represents the idea that Asians and Asian Americans are viewed as unassimilable. Of course you may ask what about Asians being the model minority? They're viewed so highly here in America. When in fact the model minority is a lie. It's a social tool used to put people of color against each other. If Asian Americans are succeeding, why can't you, they ask? When in fact Asian Americans were chosen to be the model minority. This idea was propagandized by writings like William Peterson's "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" in 1966 and people of power like president Lyndon B. Johnson. What was going on during that time? The Civil Rights Movement. Yes the Asian American community was tokenized and used as a way of saying look, America is not racist. There is a bamboo ceiling to the model minority and it generalizes a huge demographic. There are huge wealth disparities within the Asian American community. In general there is a long history of hate towards this demographic which can be seen in the Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited people from immigrating to America simply because of their race, plus the Japanese internment camps that destroyed many U.S citizens lives, even today you can see hate crimes against Asian Americans with the rise of covid. Although with my personal experience I talk about the Asian American community specifically I would like to note that violence, tokenization and hate is not limited to just this community and this discrimination can be found across demographics.

For the bottom skirt of the dress I bleached the red fake silk. This bleaching is a literal whitewashing. This white washing represents not only my personal white washing within adoption but also the institutional white washing we have here in America. I then pleated the fabric which creates striped vertical bars. The rigid pleats are both

hard yet soft. Within this garment I play with structure and fluidity, tension and looseness. Like violence and peace there is this continuous relationship between the two. This subtle juxtaposition walks between the navigatory line of how we talk about this quiet violence we often face in our daily lives.

I bound the piece with a muted golden rope. I choose gold because it is seen as a sacred color often associated with wealth and prosperity. America is often thought of as a place of wealth and prosperity, the American dream and yet I wonder if it is truly the land of the free. Rope is something that can help us but also bind us. There is this positioning of being between when navigating between love and hate, violence and peace, are they truly two different sides of the same coin? The garment is tight at the chest making it hard to take deep breaths without feeling it. This balance of breath is similar to the balance we face when handling violence. Although the garment is tight at the chest the rest of the piece is loose and hides the person's figure. In a way there is this release. I distressed the hem leaving it fringed and knotted because although we do our best to let go of the aggression and experiences we face, those things are not so easily forgotten. Wear and tare is not always simply fixed and cleaned up sometimes we are left torn at the edges.

For the under blouse I used real black silk. The material is light, slinky, and slightly transparent. The real silk isn't as flashy as the fake silk. I decided to use both real and fake silk to play with the idea of authentic and inauthentic creating a juxtaposition between the ideology of how things are labeled. How our society categorized things and people. What is good and what is bad? What is freedom? And what is justice?

I created ruffles on the shoulders of the black under blouse to physically represent the tension we carry. I tacked down the ruffles with embroidered words that draw from my writing on this piece. The sleeves are oversized and loose as if to let go of the tension. I distressed the sleeve's edge by burning it to show a physical act of violence. A memory.

I can't tell you what is right and what is wrong. I can't tell you what this path has in store for us but I can show you the journey of tension and release. As we teeter between violence and peace, love

and hate, familiar and unfamiliar. A balance that I too am still learning as we search to peacefully correct the institutional violence we have here. As we search to create a future with equality and equity.

—SARAH WHYTE



Weinberg/Newton Gallery

David Weinberg
Executive Director

Kasia Houlihan
Director

Nabiha Khan-Giordano
Director

Lisa Lindvay
Education Coordinator

Christian Ortiz
Gallery Manager

Weinberg/Newton Gallery is a non-commercial gallery with a mission to collaborate with nonprofit organizations and artists to educate and engage the public on social justice issues. Through artwork and programming, the gallery provides a vital space for open discourse on critical contemporary issues facing our communities. Connecting artists with social justice organizations, we work to drive change and cultivate a culture of consciousness.

The Weinberg/Newton Family Foundation underwrites the efforts of the gallery and has been led jointly by David Weinberg and Jerry Newton since 2009.

Photography:
Kyle Flubacker (pp.1,12)
Lisa Lindvay (pp.2,4,6)



Weinberg/Newton Gallery
688 N Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, IL 60642

312 529 5090
weinbergnewtongallery.com
info@weinbergnewtongallery.com

For Art &
Advocacy