

Asian Hate: an exhibit in New York changing hatred with art a little at a time

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In New York, rocked by a rash of hate crimes against ethnically Asian residents, this month a small art exhibit opened. The exhibition, featuring pieces by Asian artists, is intended to grieve a Korean-American woman who was suddenly and brutally killed two months ago. While the organizers recognize that art alone cannot overcome hate, they see the power of art and culture to change people's mentalities.

In a narrow gallery in Manhattan, about ten meters front to back, an artwork made by Christina Lee, who was 35 at the time of her death two months ago, hangs on a white wall. It's a painting of a package of a Chinese brand of cigarettes.

Eli Klein, who runs the gallery, explains that Lee made the painting for him to commemorate him quitting smoking when they expanded the gallery—Lee worked for him up until about eight years ago. “She was savvy, street smart, cool, tough,” Klein remembers. The pair went on numerous trips abroad together as part of their work with the gallery. “I felt kind of an obligation to tell people who Christina was,” he says of the exhibition.

The incident occurred on February 13 in New York's Chinatown. Lee, who had moved on from the gallery and was working in the digital music industry, was followed into her apartment by a man whom she did not know and stabbed to death. The specific motive of the suspect will be investigated at trial, but Christina's murder sent a shock through the Asian community which has been suffering from the spread of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic.

“I lived just half a mile from her apartment,” says stephanie mei huang, the curator of the exhibition. “It was very personal for me...after her death, I couldn't be alone in my apartment.” Though huang had never met Lee, Klein, who was connected with them over social media, reached out to request that they organize the exhibition. “I just didn't feel that I could move on with my life until I did something about her death,” says huang.

huang assembled around twenty works, including a sculpture of a gun made out of newspapers reporting stories of hate crimes and screen captures of images of Vietnamese women taken from footage recorded by American soldiers during the Vietnam war. The works, which were made by nine Asian American femme artists including Lee and huang, have a anti-violence message and explore the rarely considered gaze on Asian people in American society.

Klein believes that exhibits like this contribute to overcoming differences between cultures. “I like to think that she does see the show and that she's thrilled,” he says of Christina. The exhibit is ongoing through June and at least half of the proceeds will be donated to the memorial fund that Christina's family set up in her honor, which will benefit organizations supporting violence prevention, women's rights, and other issues.