

# ARTIST Q&A

PART 1 OF 3

Philadelphia-based artists Colette Fu, Claes Gabriel, and Hiro Sakaguchi share their thoughts and experiences as they continue to make artwork during the uniquely challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic.



COLETTE FU



CLAES GABRIEL



HIRO SAKAGUCHI

## TRACING ORIGINS

ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

## COLETTE FU



*What are the biggest changes you've seen in the arts over the past decade, and how have these changes influenced your work?*

We're seeing more efforts to alter the power dynamics in the art world. Staff, programming, exhibitions, are slowly becoming more inclusive and diverse, adding people of color, female and LGBTQ artists... We still have a long way to go but at least fewer people are telling me my English is surprisingly good. The best response was last year when a daughter of an attendee at my lecture replied, "Dad, she already said she was born in NJ."

*What do you want viewers to take away from your art?*

My work in the show initially began 12 years ago as a Fulbright project to document the ethnic minority groups of China. I know that the movement, the size, the bright colors, can easily distract a viewer from seeing the content. There is a lot of tension between the US and China right now, so I also want to show that China is not a homogenous entity, often like how people outside the USA stereotype Americans. While the apparent subject matter on the surface is about China, the work is very intimate and personal. It is my way of presenting and processing things that I experience and care about. I want the work to say that through this diversity, and the stories, we all essentially want the same things in life.

*How are you staying creative through COVID-19?*



Colette Fu, *Return to the Land of Deities*, 2020

On March 10th, when Philadelphia announced its first Coronavirus case and universities started going online, I ordered ink, paper, and adhesive to last me for a few months as all my Spring engagements were canceled. I figured summer would follow, so I planned on finishing an edition that I started 7 years previously. The edition is inspired by a Naxi minority poem about how Man is being punished for his constant ill-treatment to his half-brother Nature. Seemed fitting now as we are now seeing a significant decrease in air pollution. In Philadelphia, carbon monoxide was down about 25 percent last month (source Philadelphia Dept of Health). This book also interested me because it was a bit complicated, technically, and I needed focused time to work it out. 6 weeks later the book sat on my desk untouched. I finally finished the first edition last week, although I still have to make a cover for it.





Image courtesy of Colette Fu



Colette Fu in studio, image courtesy of the artist

*Where are you finding inspiration right now?*

I'm trying to stay healthy and make sure my parents, who moved to Philly last Fall, are taken care of. I'm trying to live in the present, do busywork, and not get too anxious about the future. All of this has inspired me to think more about what matters, but at the same time emphasizes that a lot doesn't matter as much. I am grateful to be able to keep working at home - although unproductively, and what we are going through will inevitably show up in my artwork in some form. These 2 months have gone by quickly for me.



Image courtesy of Colette Fu

I don't usually like to walk. I drive or ride my bike. With less or no people on the streets, I go for more walks now and have been taking photos of the shutdown city. The silence provides temporary solace in the sadness. 2 months ago I signed up for some free online classes and just started looking at them, ie through the Guild of Book Workers, Lynda.com, various universities, and MOMA. I'm cooking more. I am trying to sort out the anti-Asian sentiment going around. I hear stories from Asian people close to me that they are being harassed in NYC. I do feel more like an outsider in my own city - likely because of where I am going now- only essential places like the grocery store... but I have not felt that I have been in any sort of physical danger. I am grateful for all the support out there, particularly for institutional sales I've made virtually that specifically wanted to help artists right now, and funding that I have received from various artist organizations like COVID-19 Arts Aid PHL, an artist grant given by the City's Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. I am disappointed to hear that the Mayor has eliminated many of these crucial art programs.

*What is your favorite aspect of the arts community in Philadelphia?*

We are lucky to have so many diverse organizations supporting us all within a short bike ride away. From the Leeway Foundation, Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia Photo Arts Center, Mural Arts, Arts in City Hall, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Barnes Foundation, Free Library, Art at the Airport, Nextfab, PAFA, Fleisher Art Memorial...these are just a few of the many that I have been privileged to work with over the years.