

## Corky in the Darkroom

When photographer Corky Lee passed away this past January, we lost a titan. Lee was beloved and highly regarded as the person behind some of the most iconic images of Asian American activism. For over four decades, Lee ensured that Asian American resistance to the Vietnam War in the '70s, Vincent Chin's murder in the '80s, anti-Indian American violence in the '90s, Islamophobia post-9/11, and the racism that surged with the COVID-19 pandemic would be embedded in public memory. In the weeks following his passing, tributes poured in from mainstream news outlets and grassroots community forums alike, rightfully focused on his unparalleled influence in Asian American movements. We remember Corky for who he was in our community.

But who was Corky during the countless hours he spent alone in the darkroom? Who was he as he privately negotiated his next shot behind the lens? Photography is often a private artform — something we can forget in this era where our moments and movements are instantly digitized to appear on our social feeds. We take for granted that, for a photographer like Corky, capturing images meant artfully considering composition, lighting, focus, and timing while navigating the very hostilities and marginalizations that his subjects protested. We remember a young Yuri Kochiyama demonstrating for restaurant workers' rights in Bowery, not only because Corky's image depicts it, but because he portrays it skillfully and beautifully in all of its power and emotion.

This is a burden of many Asian American artists, particularly those who do their work in community. A history of being stereotyped as quiet, emotionless laborers causes us to interpret their work as that which is driven by necessity. We disregard the chefs in Chinatown restaurants as people merely trying to put food on their own tables, and fail to recognize the mastery that goes behind perfectly velveting a plate of meat or hand-pulling noodles to the right consistency. We see farmers and construction workers as people going about their shifts, as opposed to creative thinkers applying their expertise in agriculture and architecture. Even as we encounter America's Asian-owned storefronts of porcelain wares, brushed scrolls, and photography studios, we have been conditioned to view them as akin to their neighboring grocery stands and wet markets. Unless the artists behind them are bronzed by that *New York Times* feature, that Guggenheim fellowship, that Smithsonian exhibition, they may be disregarded as just another trinket merchant trying to make a buck. For his part, Corky has had his share of prestigious residencies and inductions into museums collections — yet his work is seldom given the treatment of his counterparts in the Art World.

Even as we honor Corky for his legacy as a documentarian of entire national movements, we risk forgetting that he was not only an essential public servant. He was an artist.

As someone who also grew up with Asian American activism — and who has tried to photograph them — I know firsthand how difficult it can be to capture an image that does justice. In the moment of rage, the volatility of resistance, the threat of looming counter-protests and police disturbance, it takes incredible mastery of the camera and surrounding environment to accomplish a shot that doesn't blur, crop out, or leave in the shadows those fighting for representation. Especially in the earlier years, Corky must have shown up at countless events only to be greeted by an underwhelming number of demonstrators, yet he was able to point his lens in a way that captured the imaginations of thousands for generations to come. Through half a century of serving a population of people resisting constant marginalization and underrepresentation, Corky Lee honed a unique and skillful eye for making the invisible seen.

I'm guilty for spending most of my life seeing Corky as everything but the true artist he was. As an undergrad, he was the credit line for the visual aids in my Asian American Studies classes. When he shot me with a group of poets at the 2005 Asian Pacific Islander American Spoken Word Summit in Boston, he was the cool, quiet elder with a camera. When he helped spread the word for A Day in the Life of Asian Pacific America, a crowd-source photo exhibition I curated for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, he was the seasoned veteran corralling a class of young and emerging photographers. When he passed, I was inspired like so many others to look through the trove of images that he took throughout time, across the nation, and encompassing a diversity of communities. It's impossible to ignore how his photography has informed how we envision and document today's protest movements, and thus how we remember this moment we are in. Thanks to Corky, Asian American activist history will always be remembered for its impactful beauty, and I hope that this is how we remember the man behind the photos too.

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