

Dubbed the “Undisputed, Unofficial Asian American Photographer Laureate,” Corky documented the Asian American community from coast to coast for the last 50 years. Born and raised in New York City, he began chronicling the local Chinese community in 1971 (coincidentally, the same year Pearl River opened its first store) to provide the public with an in-depth look into the daily lives and struggles of the then-burgeoning immigrant population.

Corky’s mission throughout his storied career was to give voice to individuals and groups who’d been overlooked by the mainstream media. He received numerous honors and awards over the years and his photographs were featured in the collections of prestigious institutions including the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, the Chinese Historical Society of America, and the Beijing National Museum of Overseas Chinese.

In November 2016, when Pearl River reopened in Tribeca, I had no idea what I was doing but was delighted to meet Corky in person at our opening reception. As a student of Asian American history, I was familiar with his work and asked him on the spot if he would be willing to mount an exhibition in the small, humble space that I had decided only days before would become an art gallery. Without skipping a beat, he agreed and asked when. “Two weeks?” I said, immediately realizing how ridiculous this request sounded. He paused, considering, then smiled his signature mischievous smile. “Okay!” I felt like I had hit the jackpot.

And I had. From December 2016 to January 2017, Corky served as our second ever artist-in-residence. His exhibition, “Chinese America On My Mind,” included 62 images that documented the Chinese American experience over a span of five decades. The photographs were breathtaking and covered so much in terms of both subject matter and emotion — the horror of a bleeding man being hauled off by cops at a police brutality march; the anger of protests in the aftermath of the 1982 Vincent Chin murder trial; the patriotism on display in Chinatown after 9/11; the sheer joy of an entire community during Linsanity; the regal dignity of veterans, po pos, and Chinatown cooks; and the dynamic athleticism of 9-man competitors and dragon boat racers, to name a few. I couldn’t believe it when I came across an image from my own protesting days at Columbia (to establish an Ethnic Studies program); I didn’t make it into the shot, but I was definitely there. And of course, so was Corky.

For every image, there was an extremely detailed backstory, complete with dates, names, and historical context. He recalled stories about my in-laws from the '70s that they had no recollection of whatsoever! Corky forgot nothing. And

when he did forget something, it bothered him such that he would research it the next day and come back with the facts and five more stories he discovered while finding those facts.

For me, perhaps even more important than the work itself was how he modeled being a friend and a vital member of a community. Corky always took the time to show up. And his friends showed up for him. He introduced me to all his friends in Chinatown, who over the course of his show made a point to come see the exhibition and bring all of their friends. He made sure to schedule ample time for dim sum before or dinner after artist talks on the weekends. He encouraged fellow artists to call me to get their work shown in the gallery, which resulted in some of our best exhibitions by far — those by Arlan Huang, Kam Mak, and Louis Chan.

I will always remember the joy of seeing him at an event, and without fail, a few days later, he'd drop by the store with a flash drive of images and always a few shots printed out and signed, because he was old school like that. He'd say hi to the Chens and then poke his head into my office, which proudly displays four of my favorite Corky Lee images on the wall. I can't remember all of what we'd talk about, but we often chatted for a long time, which I never minded, even when I was insanely busy. Corky taught me that when friends come to call, you make the time.

I last saw Corky when we installed the Light Up Chinatown initiative on Mott Street, right before the holidays. It was such a joyous, crisp night and I'm grateful to have had that opportunity to see him, along with Grayson Chin, Ed Cheng, Prisca Choe, Chung Seto, Patrick Mock, Yuh-Line Niou, Jenny Low, Melissa Ip, Kevin Hsi, James Hsi, and others. Tucked in my backpack is a ziploc with seven signed Corky Lee prints and a flash drive of images from that night. The man was nothing if not consistent. I will treasure them forever.

My deepest condolences to his family and his many friends. The Asian American community has lost a pillar, a legend, and a witness to history. Rest in power, Corky. Thank you for being you.

Joanne Kwong  
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