

Impact Statement

Hannah Yee, Grade 11.

Sword of Injustice, 2024.

Graphite, colored pencil, mixed media on paper, 10 x 8 inches.

Esperanza High School, Anaheim, CA

Unsung Hero: Corky Lee

Born in 1947 and raised in Queens, New York, Corky Lee was a second-generation Chinese American who dedicated his photography to documenting and exposing prejudice towards minority-American cultures, describing his work as “a sword to combat indifference, injustice, and discrimination. Trying to get rid of stereotypes.” Corky always took an interest in photojournalism, especially motivated following the 1896 photograph at Promontory Summit and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad where Corky noticed there were only white workers depicted and not a single individual to represent the thousands of Chinese railroad workers who had equally risked their lives. His rise to prominence was largely credited to his photographs of furious protesters following the 1983 murder trial of Vincent Chin; a Chinese American who was killed in a racially motivated assault by two white autoworkers. Ultimately, these aggressors were released from all charges. Learning of this dark history, I felt compelled to choose Corky Lee as my Unsung Hero to encourage a new generation of artists to continue voicing the cries of the outspoken.

Corky Lee was brought up from humble beginnings; his father was a laundry man, and his mother was a seamstress. Despite this, Corky was able to pioneer a new life for himself where he was able to reach a whole community of those who shared his experiences through his photographs. As I familiarized myself with his motivation and background, I was deeply inspired by his pursuit of equality, which resonated with his upbringing as a Chinese American. I recognize that my experience as a first-generation Chinese American has been paved by my parents who courageously made the first steps toward a new life. At the same time, individuals who came before my family held similar hopes of achieving a fruitful future. In a way, this artwork reminded me of the culminating efforts that have contributed to my chance at success in America. Because of this, I was determined to create a piece that I was proud of and that represents my gratitude.

During my process of illustrating, I hoped to convey a visual with deeper meaning and high points of interest. For example, I utilized deceptive vibrant colors to contrast the protesters depicted by the black and white photographs that Corky Lee shot. These colors captivate the viewer and bring a feeling of intensity and passion to the cause to which those individuals in the photographs dedicated themselves. To further assist in my storytelling, I integrated China's national bird, the Red-Crowned Crane, to symbolize the Chinese immigrants' unwavering hope and resiliency in the face of racial injustice. Additionally, I incorporated a snarling tiger splayed in an aggressive pose to signify Corky Lee's tenacity. Both stylized elements complement the realistic portraiture of Corky Lee, which draws the most attention to the Unsung Hero himself.

Throughout my creative process, I found myself thoroughly enjoying all the new risks I was taking by experimenting with styles, storytelling, symbolization, and composition. Moreover, I

believe that the profound story of Corky Lee and the connections I draw between us will motivate me to produce more meaningful artwork that may also serve as an inspiration for my peers or generations after me. In conclusion, through such a meaningful experience, I implore my viewers to take risks and act towards fueling a more positive future; just as Corky describes his own mission to “change America one photograph at a time.”