

Impact Statement

Porscha Richelle Force, Grade 11

Corky Lee, 2024.

Mixed media, drawing, work on paper, 16 x 14 inches.

Taylor High School, Campbellsville, KY

Unsung Hero: Corky Lee

Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman—everybody could give at least one word to describe each of these individuals, their cause, and how they affected our world as we know it. Unfortunately, many individuals' knowledge ends at the buzz words and the big names—people forget to recognize the “little” or the “middle” man. While looking for my Unsung Hero, I wanted a person who was impossible for me to recognize or even infer what they had done. I wanted to create a piece about an individual that no teenager would show care for until they saw said person's life presented in an abstract artistic way. Flipping through pages, and clicking through articles, I realized that I wanted Corky Lee.

Corky Lee was an Asian American artist—a photographer whose focus was on grayscale portraits— and, like me— a Native American artist whose focus is on colorfully exaggerated portraiture—, opposed my palette of canvas and ideology. Until I began studying the intention behind Corky Lee's pieces, to spread awareness of Asian American profiling, I was under the impression that immigrants from Asia were not as discriminated against as other minorities. I was wrong. Creating art and researching other artists helped me realize my position. As a way to take accountability as a minority descendant supporting another minority, I created my Corky Lee artwork.

The Corky Lee piece created by me, Porscha Richelle Force, is a convectively flowing articulation. The artwork is built on my drawings of individuals that Corky Lee photographed and the issues that they represent. A viewer's focus is meant to begin at the emphasized face of the Unsung Hero and the sharp, colorful contrasts in his facial features. The exaggerated saturations depict the many different “colors” of Asians which metaphorically translates to the “cultures” of Asian individuals who immigrate to America. By photographing these varying groups of Asian Americans, Corky Lee inherited a part of them into himself. I value this piece of the artistic process the most as I create memorial artworks for individuals in my community. With each piece that I develop, I take a piece of that person's history with me into each of my proceeding artworks.

Traveling leftward from Lee's face to the six middle-aged individuals holding protesting signs, I made the artistic alternative to add the letters of the word “STOP” on four of their hands. Implicitly, these letters construct a rejecting perspective— a plea to stay

away from their country, held by “natural” Americans, to a cry for mercy and acceptance, by “unnatural” Americans, as their poverty and abuse rates skyrocket. Just like the hands of these protestors, the hands of my ancestors hold a red print over their mouths to spread awareness of the rapidly increasing rape and human trafficking cases for Native American women. At this point in my Corky Lee artwork, I began understanding the valor that my Unsung Hero has as he bravely puts himself in situations where dangerous, racist individuals belittle him and his people. Yet, Lee proudly photographs in these environments. I aspire to speak outwardly on my people’s issues until I pass away, just as Corky Lee has done.

Slowly gliding the viewer’s vision down, the elderly and the youth peacefully protest for the approval of their citizenship by society. Via their beliefs in the great country’s democracy and their want of representation in the State’s community, both the old and young are harmed by the lack of care and attention from the United States but continue to spread their love for America. Following this imagery, the viewer will circle to the right as their eyes indulge in the multitudes of blue that are the camera and Lady Liberty.

The vibrant cyan in the camera lens is a colored interpretation of a cartoon made in the 1880s about the Chinese Exclusion Act which was the first legal racist profiling made towards Asian Americans. My ancestors were kicked off their land, forced to walk miles and leave their children behind who died from the journey, and are continually threatened by the government every day. Corky Lee shows how this discrimination began for his people in 1882 and didn’t stop in 2021. That is why I intentionally included a black timeline extending from 1882 in the drawing to 2021 when Corky Lee passed away and was no longer able to photograph the hundreds of years of abuse by American society. In Corky Lee’s tie, the Statue of Liberty is drawn to honor the Unsung Hero’s dedication to raising awareness and fighting for freedom for all citizens of the United States of America.

Eventually, as the viewer sees the many cultures, ages, and histories behind the individuals that Corky Lee photographed, they are led full circle to Corky Lee’s face where he stares into the viewer’s eyes enticing purpose. Purpose to lead, purpose to speak, purpose to protect and fight for the outcasts of society where just one of the many are Asian Americans. Corky Lee sparked a flame in me to continue creating art to expose the cruel and unusual treatment by societies. The objective of my Corky Lee piece is to fuel a social-justice-led passion in youth as I move on to college and leave my teenage years. This Unsung Hero allows me to leave an era of my life understanding that I have made a difference in my school and community via my art. As my work impacts others, I am propelled into greater artworks that continue to focus on the heroes of our society who lack recognition.