



Impact Statement

Annie Liang, Grade 10

For Those Who Were Finally Seen, 2026

Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 16 inches

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Unsung Hero: Corky Lee

Corky Lee was a Chinese American photographer and activist known for his lifelong dedication to documenting Asian American life. Often referred to as the unofficial Asian American Photographer Laureate, he used his camera to capture moments that were frequently overlooked, ranging from protests and acts of injustice to everyday life within communities like New York City's Chinatown.

Around a year ago, I dedicated my English final to a presentation on anti-Chinese hate. I remember vividly, Corky Lee's photo was the first to pop up. It was called the "1975 photograph of Peter Yew." Looking at the picture with Chinese people all joined together, I didn't have the words for what I felt. I still don't. In retrospect, it was merely a crowd of Chinese faces, shoulder to shoulder, standing together, holding hands and signs. Yet at that moment, I cried.

As a first-generation immigrant, I've always felt the loom of discrimination toward my ethnicity, either in the form of remarks or outright hate-speech. So Lee's photographs, which captured protests, grief, anger, and everyday life in Chinatown with unfiltered honesty, hit closer to home than I had imagined. Through his art, Asian American lives were unignorable, unyielding, and unapologetic. What I admire most is that he chose to dedicate his entire life to this cause. You could feel in his photographs that it was not for attention or wealth, but real commitment to spend your life making sure your community is seen, remembered, and respected.

Corky Lee was born and raised in Queens, New York as the child of Chinese immigrant parents who ran a laundry business in 1947, a time when Asian Americans were barely represented or only shown through stereotypes. Instead of accepting that, he chose to respond to it. Not because he needed to, but because he wanted to. So, he picked up a camera and used it to make his community visible. He didn't take random photos. He documented protests, cultural events, and everyday life in places like Chinatown, capturing discrimination and unity in moments most people would overlook. He even recreated the famous transcontinental railroad photograph because the original erased the Chinese workers who actually built it. At that point, his art wasn't just photography, it was history. The unification and gatherings of his subjects is something I sought to capture in my artwork: their coming together, their will, and their motivation.

Over 50 years of photographic justice, he documented hundreds of thousands of images to ensure Asian Americans were seen as integral to American society rather than "eternal foreigners." He passed away in 2021 from COVID-19, which he contracted

while documenting anti-Asian hate crimes. Even in his final efforts, he was still fighting for visibility, which shows his lifelong dedication and willpower. My artistic vision behind this piece was to honor Corky Lee in a way that made him stand out alongside his trade and passion. I chose to paint him in acrylic in bright, vivid color against a dark background, so he immediately draws the viewer's attention. Acrylic paint allowed me to build bold, layered color and strong contrast between light and dark; it dries quickly and holds intensity well, which made it perfect for creating a sharp separation between him and the deep black background.

I didn't want him to be associated only with black and white documentation. Most of his photography is monochrome, reflecting reality as it is, but I wanted to shift that perspective and show that his legacy still carries life, energy, and meaning. I wanted people to remember him in color because he brought visibility and life into spaces that were often left unseen.

Alongside him, the film tape is also in relatively bright color. On the other hand, his camera reinforces his dedication and identity. It represents his lifelong commitment to "photographic justice," showing his willpower until the end of his life. The elements in the background, his photograph of the protest in honor of Peter Yew's violent arrest, Chinese individuals with arms linked, the "End All Oppression" banner turning into film tape, and the black and white American flag are intentionally less vibrant to draw attention to the foreground.

This contrast reflects Corky Lee's impact. By placing the background in muted tones while the film tape remains vivid, I wanted to show how his work brought light and color to places that were often ignored. Overall, Corky Lee's story has stayed with me in a way I didn't initially expect. Before learning about him, I thought change could only be achieved through speech and protest. But the more I learned about his life and mission, I found a third way: action.

He didn't wait for permission to document his community. He just did it, again and again, for decades until the end of his life. That persistence makes me rethink what it means to care deeply enough to commit your life to something.

Because of him, I began to think differently about my own actions. I don't want to exist quietly in spaces where I feel unseen; I want to notice what others are feeling and give meaning to it through my artistic ability, even in small ways. His life makes me want to be more intentional about what I choose to remember and share.

With my artwork, I hope it reaches people in a way that feels personal, not just visual. I want someone to look at it and pause the way I did when I first saw his photographs, smile, point, maybe shed a few tears, but most importantly, remember.

I hope it is displayed digitally on the ARTEFFECT website, allowing it to reach beyond my school and personal circle, especially to people who might see themselves in Corky Lee's story the way I did. More than anything, I hope this project doesn't just stay as an artwork. I hope it lingers. Because Corky Lee's work didn't just document people, it gave them back to themselves. And I think that is something worth carrying forward.