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Group Show “Willful Dialects” Refuses a Frame for Asian Diasporic Artists in Boston

At the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show, curator Yi Cynthia Chen stages a defiant, expansive vision of Asian American and Asian-diasporic identity, foregrounding difference as not a gap but as a generative force.

Review by [Swagato Chakravorty](#)

Installation view, “Willful Dialects,” Distillery Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show.



“Willful Dialects” is one of the most vital exhibitions in Greater Boston right now. Organized by Boston-based artist and curator Yi Cynthia Chen, and choreographed across the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show (adjacent spaces located within the same building), “Willful Dialects” takes up a specific line of inquiry that spirals outward, expanding into larger questions of civic belonging, nationhood, difference, and self-determination that seem especially pointed lately. Embracing an expansive notion of Asia, it celebrates Asian American histories as part of American history—and insists on difference as constitutive of the American social fabric.

“Willful Dialects” includes nineteen works across mediums by Asian American or Asian-diasporic artists living and working in Greater Boston. Additionally, a forthcoming performance by Lani Asunción will conclude the show. Intended by Chen as an “anti-survey,” “Willful Dialects” explicitly rejects both the flattening force of the term “Asian American” and the notion that any single exhibition could do justice to the expansive histories and narratives around that term. Instead, works in the show offer a range of contemporary perspectives on how Asia has historically been constructed within the American imagination—as fetishized objects of desire,

as resources for extraction and consumption, as existential threats. To be Asian American is to exist in tension with these histories.

Hong Kong-born Joanna Tam's *Visibility Word Map (Being Asian-American)* (2025) diagrams this tension in a word map of metallic silver and acrylic on canvas, made to look like chalk on a blackboard. Six arrows radiate out from a central "Asian American" and point in different directions, tracing how being Asian American is to alternately be too visible ("fetishized") or not visible enough ("tokenized"). There is an inexorable logic to these arrows, most of which lead to traps of invisibility or hypervisibility, only one leading through "camouflage" to an opening of sorts, titled "survival strategy." Tam, like many artists today, is interested in opacity and camouflage as strategies for self-determination.



Monica Srivastava, *Homage to the East*, 2024. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show.

In her oil paintings, Monica Srivastava explores these strategies at both intimate and larger scales by forging a compelling dialogue between portraiture, architecture, and textiles. In *Homage to the East* (2024), Srivastava—who is second-generation Indian American—riffs on the intricately carved *jali* screens of sixteenth-to-nineteenth-century Mughal architecture, South Asian block print and textile histories, and Josef Albers's analyses of line, color, and form. As a painting, it is at once a self-portrait of the artist, a formalist meld of color field and all-over techniques, and an optical experiment. Here repetition, patterning, and color conspire to frustrate one's ability to discern clearly the woman who gazes back at us.

Elsewhere in the same space, Iran-born Hamed Noori has carved neatly with a surgeon's knife around a map of Iran in an atlas. But he has also carved deeply, cutting through every page beneath the map. A flat, two-dimensional expanse seen from the front is also a textured, three-dimensional sculptural form seen from other perspectives. Against any number of Hollywood productions condensing the vastness of West Asia (population 313 million) into a few tired stereotypes, Noori's found-object work offers cartographic precision while gesturing toward the dense strata of history underlying that geography and the cultures it sustains.

Noori's rejection of the Western colonial gaze is echoed in Lebanese American Feda Eid's large-scale citation of nineteenth-century ethnographic photography, in which Asian peoples—women in particular—were pictured as exotic objects evoking, alternately, rapacious desire and puritanical terror. Such images, reproduced as portable postcards and circulating across Europe and the US, commodified the Other for mass consumption. *Making Rose Water Out of Roses II* (2023) is a photographic self-portrait of the artist posed in a re-performance of nineteenth-century Orientalist images. In the piece, Eid gazes directly out at the viewer, quoting the region's textile histories in her use of color and attire.



(left) Samnang Reibe, *Baitong Pe Khnohng (Green from Within)*, 2024. (right) Feda Eid, *Making Rose Water Out of Roses II*, 2023. Installation view, "Willful Dialects," The Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show, 2025. Photo by Yi Cynthia Chen. Courtesy of the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show.

Here the expansive reach of Chen's organizing concepts makes itself felt. In her curatorial text, Chen cites Palestinian American critic Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a crucial text theorizing the notion of a fantastical "Orient"—geographically, culturally, and politically encompassing Asia and North Africa—that has historically structured Western cultural representations and given material form to relations of power. Said's insights have contributed enormously to the critical and activist efforts of disenfranchised and diasporic communities

across the US and—more importantly—across what we continue to call the global South (which is to say, the global majority). Some of these relations of power are traced, for instance, in Palestinian-born Qais Assali's *Monument to Santa Anna's Leg in Boston* (2025). Across photography, video, and performance, the work excerpts Assali's larger oeuvre to connect histories of nineteenth-century US colonial violence in Mexico to mid-century repetitions of colonial violence in Palestine in 1948, to—inevitably and damningly—their recurrence today. It seems to imagine a city-specific monument that defies stillness and fixity, a monument to events not yet concluded, experiences still unfolding. An anti-monument.

“Willful Dialects” extends a series of distinct yet conceptually related exhibitions seen at galleries and institutions nationwide in recent years. Collectively, they dismantle encrusted narratives that have accumulated around the descriptor “Asian American,” reclaiming those ambitions—Third World internationalism and solidarity, a rejection of assimilationist compliance, and a refusal to be perceived as the “model” minority—which gave rise to the term amidst the revolutionary energies of the Bay Area circa 1968. “Wonder Women,” organized in New York by Kathy Huang in 2022, showcased thirty Asian American and diasporic women as well as nonbinary artists working in figuration. In 2023, Herb Tam and Lu Zhang staged “Home-O-Stasis” across a mini-mall in Flushing, Queens, inserting works by artists with personal connections to the community into everyday contexts. It was one of the year's most unexpectedly compelling shows, dismantling hierarchies between art and everyday life while acknowledging the precarity, disorientation, and complex forms of belonging that, for Asian folks in America, can constitute the very act of being. Two historical exhibitions in 2024 mapped Asian American histories of political and cultural activism on the East Coast, one focusing on Godzilla Asian American Arts Network in the 1990s and the other surveying nearly ninety artists and collectives of Asian descent who negotiated identity and community in New York City between 1969 and 2001. The same year, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles presented “Scratching at the Moon,” highlighting an intergenerational group of thirteen Asian American artists with ties to the region.



Pictured: (left) Yi Cynthia Chen, *Double Consciousness in a Museum in Boston*, 2025. (right) Sopheak Sam, *I Miss You More than I remember You*, 2025. Installation view, “Willful Dialects,” No Call No Show, 2025. Photo by Yi Cynthia Chen. Courtesy of the Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show.

Within this larger context, “Willful Dialects” does not propose insights into Greater Boston’s Asian American histories in particular. This is not a bad thing. Since 2020, arts and cultural institutions nationwide have worked overtime to highlight underrepresented or otherwise minoritized communities and narratives, often favoring a regional focus for logistical and other reasons. Although such efforts have highlighted outstanding historical and contemporary work, their focus is precisely what can also obscure our understanding of the expansive relationalities, networks, and infrastructures, often confounding local-global distinctions, that sustain these very communities. Consider Chen’s attention to Iran and Lebanon, which in the American vernacular are most typically considered part of the so-called “Middle East” (terms like “Near,” “Middle,” and “Far” have, of course, always been measured from the Western colonial perspective). Chen’s strategic reframing does more than shake up typical assumptions around “Asian America(n)” in US contexts. By developing the show around Said’s critique of Orientalism, she also reconfigures contemporary polycrises as the enduring afterlives of colonial and imperial violence. “Willful Dialects” isn’t so much about how Boston informs the work of artists included in the show, as it is a sampling of the range of narratives that these artists contribute to the region’s arts and culture simply by being Asian American or Asian-diasporic. One envisions similar polyphonies unfolding across the nation, considered across other demographics.

What is compelling about “Willful Dialects” and other recent exhibitions exploring “Asian America(n)” as a concept—as individual and collective histories, as a state of *being* that is

always also a *becoming*—is a shared refusal to conform to expectations that have historically governed the contours of Asian American existence. Excavating histories, tracing collectives and communities, and highlighting contemporary practices, they reclaim narratives of refusal, deviations (and deviance), being wayward, being willful, and being “bad”—all of which have shaped what it means to be of Asian (in Said’s and Chen’s expansive sense) descent in the US. In their collective insistence on difference as a generative principle, they reconnect Asian American histories to vibrant and global histories of activism, resilience, and resistance. These histories, for Asian Americans, as for all minoritized communities, continue to resonate today as the US government persecutes college students for daring to dissent from American imperialism.

1 For a thematically related study of Black feminist refusal and self-determination, see Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2019).

2 The exhibition’s other key inspiration is Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), in which she explores willfulness and difference as generative forces operating across queer, feminist, and anti-racist contexts.

“Willful Dialects” is on view through May 24, 2025, at The Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show, 516 East 2nd Street, South Boston. A closing Performance with Lani Asunción will be held Saturday May 24, 6:00–8:00 PM.

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Contributor

Boston Art Review (BAR) is an independent online and print publication committed to facilitating active discourse around contemporary art in Boston.