

Disobedient Daughters



*Mihyun Kang, Gwan Tung Dorothy Lau, Pixy Liao,
Janelle Low, Andy Mullens, Ma Qiusha, Sad Asian Girls,
Sancintya Mohini Simpson, Zoe Wong*

Curated by Sophia Cai

RED, HOT ANGER

by Michelle Law

Several years ago, I posted a Facebook status about a microaggression that happened to me at my workplace at the time. It was a common story from the retail trenches: a customer said something offensive to me and as the person serving them I didn't feel like I could retaliate. Most of my posts then were tongue-in-cheek recordings of racist, or sexist, or racist and sexist encounters I experienced in my everyday life; I wanted to rage and commiserate with other women of colour, and I wanted to provide some insight into what it feels like to embody those identities.

When I posted this status, I was having a conversation over messenger with an older friend: it was banal chitchat about our lives and promises to have coffee with each other that we both knew would fall through because we were too busy. 'Hey, just read your status,' she messaged me after my post went up. 'If it helps, the older I get the less angry I've become about that kind of stuff,' she said. 'I've learnt to let go of that anger after realising that the world isn't out to get me. I feel much healthier for it.'

That message stayed with me because it made me question whether or not I was getting unnecessarily upset about being discriminated against. Why couldn't I let go? Why couldn't I allow myself to be healthy and happy? Was my anger simply coming from a place of self-righteousness and slowly poisoning me, draining me, blinding me to the goodness in the world?

After reflecting on my friend's message over years, I've realised two things: that when it comes to anger, I absorb it and then let it go. The problem is that I keep generating it because the onslaught of racism and sexism I face as an Asian Australian woman, both overt and underhanded displays of it, is endless. The other thing I've realised is that the friend who messaged me, the one attempting to soothe and reassure me, is white. She has the breathing space to release her anger; she has the privilege of rest. She doesn't need to fight for things to get better for her, because for her they already are.

Meanwhile, I've been perpetually pissed off. And at each life stage, my rage has been different.

As a kid growing up on the Sunshine Coast in the 1990s, when Pauline Hanson and her racist rhetoric was queen, I was angry about my isolation. The only other Asian people I knew were my relatives, and the only Asian people I saw on television were being mocked for speaking broken English or being accused of eating domestic pets that belonged to Anglo Australians (see The Lim family on *Neighbours*). On the way to school, my siblings and I would have locals screaming 'China' and 'go home' at us as they sped by in their utes. From then, I understood that I existed in a nowhere space: I'd never been 'home' to China, and the country I did call home was being denied to me by others.

As a teenager, I was angry about being different. My classmates were blonde, blue-eyed beauties who looked like they'd walked off the set of *Home and Away*. Without ever seeking permission, they'd touch my black hair ('It's so silky!') and stroke my arms ('How are your arms so smooth!'). They'd outright ridicule me for having a flat nose ('You look like a wombat!'). When I hit puberty, I realised I would never be more than a sexual curiosity; the only boys who were ever interested in me were obsessed with anime and manga, or they were homesick exchange students. Or they weren't boys—they were old, white men.

Soon enough, I gave up on any ideas of romance and focused on fitting in. I restricted my wardrobe to neutral colours like black, navy and grey—anything that made me unremarkable enough for me to survive school. Every teenager attempts to fit in to some extent, but when you're a cultural minority in Australia, fitting in means assimilating in innumerable ways that confound your identity. You begin to speak differently, eat differently, and learn differently. You begin denying your other culture(s); you try to become white.

When I was a young adult living in the city I was hopeful that things would change. I thought that I'd finally be able to breathe. What changed was that I met other women of colour with experiences similar to mine. From them, I learnt that I was not alone in my experiences (comforting), which meant that these problems were far more widespread than I imagined and not just confined to monocultural hometowns (horrifying). Once I was older and starting to date, people felt more comfortable sexualising me in a way that served their own fantasies: I was an international student; a whore; a geisha; a Japanese schoolgirl; a cleaner; a ninja; a masseuse; a maths nerd. There's nothing wrong with any of those identities, but they've never applied to me.

Now my anger simmers beneath the surface. I have a very bubbly and compliant exterior because that's naturally who I am, but it's also the most palatable part of who I am and I'm being strategic in how I present myself. Nobody wants to be the angry Asian in the room. And my anger isn't useless; rather, it's an anger imbued with hope. It mobilises me to keep trying and continue making work that demands equity. Because at the end of the day, the people who will enact change for women of colour is women of colour. We have to be our own champions. We can't afford not to be angry.

Recently, I was online shopping and found myself drawn to brightly coloured clothing: purple skirts, orange swimmers, pastel pink sandals, and enough mustard t-shirts to offset the amount of yellow clothing my mum discouraged me from wearing as a kid because it clashed with my skin tone. It occurred to me that the clothes I was browsing were mostly modeled by white women, and it struck me how liberating that must be—to have the pleasure of being seen for who you are; to have the pleasure of being seen at all.

I bought a bright red dress online. I've always loved the colour red and how it unashamedly demands attention. It's particularly popular in Chinese culture; it's joyous and happy and wards off evil. In western culture it signifies something too: red, hot anger.

*Michelle Law is a writer working across fiction, non-fiction, screen and stage. She is the co-author of the comedy book *Sh*t Asian Mothers Say*, and has had her work anthologised in books like *Women of Letters* and *Best Australian Comedy Writing*. She is a regular contributor to Australian literary journals and magazines, and has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Daily Life*, *Frankie* magazine and the *Griffith Review*. As a screenwriter, she's received an AWGIE award for her interactive media work and had her films screened on the ABC and at film festivals locally and abroad. In 2016, she won the Queensland Premier's Award for Young Publishers and Writers. Her debut stage play *Single Asian Female* was performed at La Boite Theatre Company earlier this year to sold out audiences. It will have a second run at Belvoir St Theatre in 2018. *Homecoming Queens*, a web series that she co-created, co-wrote and stars in will be available on SBS On Demand in 2018.*

Curator's Intro

Disobedient Daughters is a group exhibition that brings together the works of nine female artists and artist collectives to critically examine stereotypical images of Asian women in a global context.

The artists in this exhibition work predominantly with photography and video to playfully explore the interplay between race, gender, sexuality and societal expectations. Through a particular focus on portraiture or self-portraiture, many of the exhibiting artists challenge visual tropes of Asian women, and their continued objectification and/or exoticism in popular media. While not purely autobiographical, many of the works are derived from introspective encounters and personal narratives, blurring the boundaries of public and private life.

Some of the works in the exhibition are bold and loud, others are more quiet and subtle, but together the artists in Disobedient Daughters offer a diverse and nuanced perspective on themes of everyday relations and individual life as it relates to 'Asian female experience'. The exhibition does not seek to define what this experience might be, but instead hopes to offer new perspectives and possibilities for the future.

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IMAGE CREDIT

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nation's cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians. Always was, Always will be.

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