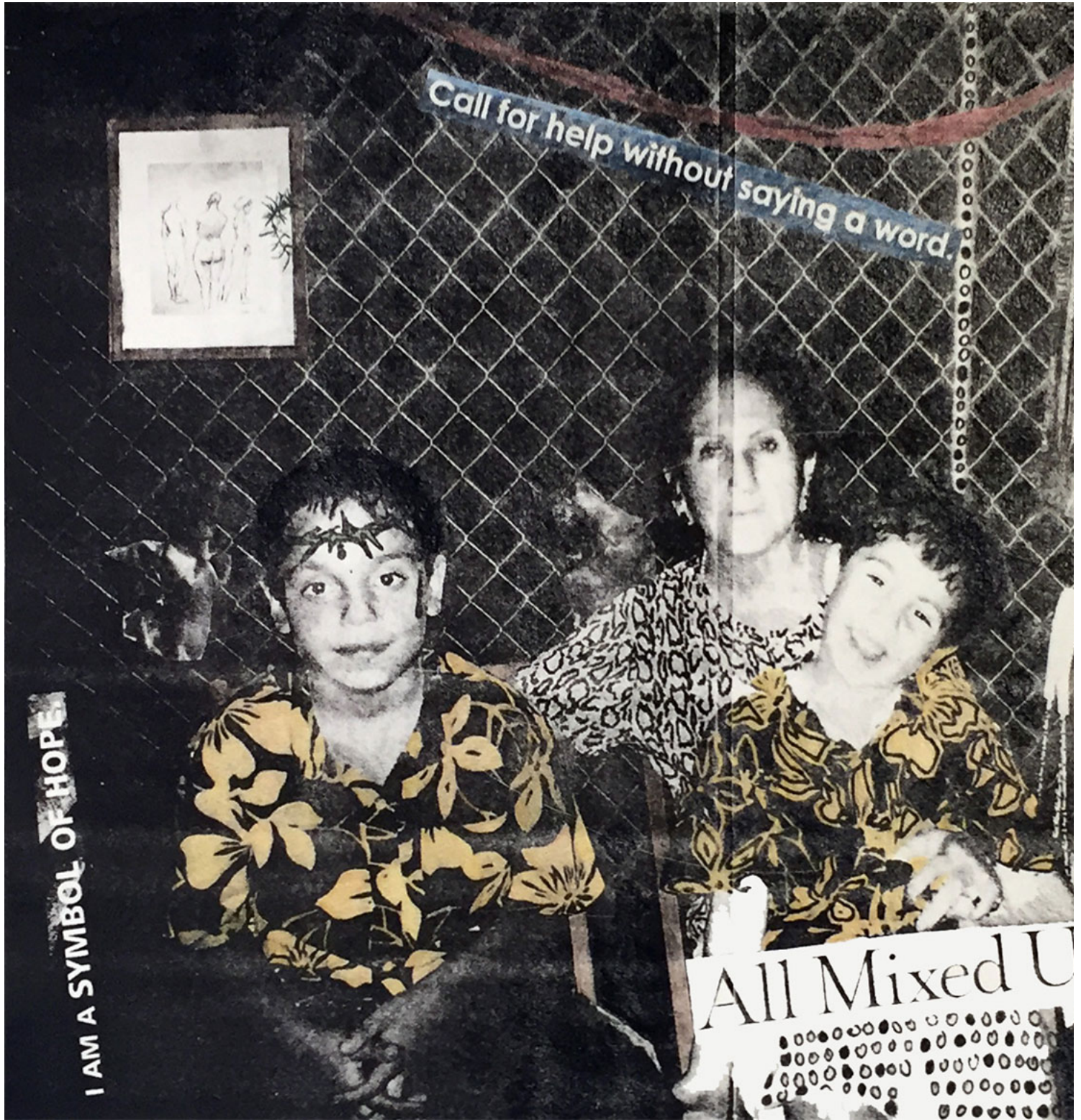


## Between Here and There: Personal Histories and The Anxieties of Existing at the Margins

Derek Macario looks at the works of Kayla Quan, Michelle Lee, and Carlos Ortiz-Gallo, artists who interpret and share untold or, rather, unheard stories of individuals existing and surviving on the fringe.



Carlos Ortiz-Gallo. *Sole Sacrifice*, 2016.

The work of minority artists in America is often typecast as exclusively addressing the subject of identity, which in the contemporary art world can be perceived as niche. But when these artists and writers share stories that highlight their struggles to interact with people from different backgrounds, we not only learn about their experiences at the margins and the effects on their identity, but also about the impact of the insidious microaggressions they endure from the dominant culture. Through paying attention to this kind of work, we may begin to identify patterns and to understand the everyday realities of being

the “Other,” including the disrespect directed toward difference of any kind. While it is not the sole responsibility of minority artists to teach people about privilege, oppression, and respect for others, they take up the task through a multitude of platforms and mediums, often expanding and dispersing a shared narrative. Art continues to be a core and critical component of cultural and social movements. It empowers participants and provides a channel for communicating our experiences, reminding the public of the concerns in question.



Kayla Quan. *Papaya Face*, 2016.

Whether they address gender, race, or national origin, the works of Kayla Quan, Michelle Lee, and Carlos Ortiz-Gallo are intimately linked to their lived experiences and personal histories. Utilizing photography, collage, illustration, and text in their work, Quan, Lee, and Ortiz-Gallo explore the daily circumstances of their lives and reflect on the past to make sense of the present and forge a path forward. Each artist taps into the trauma and anxiety of their distinct, yet analogous, narratives, and in many ways the work becomes a form of catharsis and healing for both the maker and the viewer. The work opens up a space not only for the artists' stories, but for stories that often don't have a voice or platform to be told and to be heard. Based in three very distinct cities, Quan, Lee, and Ortiz-Gallo all attempt to convey the nuanced ways in which they navigate living in the USA, confronting the complexities of being a minority today.

In much of her work, Kayla Quan portrays scenes from her daily life and from the lives of those closest to her. With forms evocative of a graphic novel, Quan's paintings, illustrations, and zines depict non-linear narratives of selected moments in which she confronts aspects of her identity as an Asian American woman. Using explanatory text and direct quotes, the artist reveals the atrocious remarks and actions directed at her by entitled men—men who say whatever and act however they want toward women without consequence. Quan approaches these subjects in her work with subtle comedy, pairing her unique mark making style with well-chosen texts.

Quan also draws influence from the street art of the Mission School—a movement that emerged in the 1990s among artists in San Francisco's Mission District whose work focused on the urban street, the local, and the personal. Through her refined line quality and her technique of adding illustrations to photographs, Quan creates whimsical and energetic portraits of her subjects. Her style oscillates between detailed descriptions in full color and simple black ink on less defined characters. Her portraits and figures are sometimes out of proportion and exaggerated, heads slightly larger than bodies. With flailing arms, particular postures, and strong body language, the figures stand their ground—deflecting violent words and actions. But with unfazed gazes, the protagonists in Quan's work seem accustomed to their situations and surroundings. The scenes Quan depicts—recounting real events—often seem outrageous, making the viewer pause and reflect on the actual daily occurrences in the life of an Asian American woman.



Quan's newly published zine, *You Ain't That Special & Other Words You Don't Deserve to Hear* (2016), was inspired by an incident with a man who told her "she wasn't even that special" after she called him disgusting for bragging that he "goes to San Mateo to fuck all the Filipino bitches." In her zine, the artist collects descriptions of similar situations in which men verbally, or otherwise, harassed and attacked women. These retold moments are appalling and disgusting and they are a reality many women and people of color face. Quan uses her work as a vehicle to expose perpetrators of harassment while also empowering the women who share their stories and claiming space for voices that are unheard or are actively ignored. She represents these narratives through an intersectional lens, highlighting how harassment, violence, sexism, and racism work to oppress. Quan makes these stories accessible, places importance on these issues, and positions herself and her work in opposition to injustice.



Michelle Lee. *Que Sera.*

Taking inspiration from her personal relationships, Michelle Lee often collaborates with her mother in her artwork. In her photographs, collages, and text-based work, Lee focuses on repeating and reiterating past moments between herself and her mother. She slowly unveils her mother's particular personality—the way her mother presents herself and interacts with others—as well as the dynamic between them and the effect of the relationship on their identities. The artist's new zine project, *I MADE A FRIEND TODAY* (2016), describes experiences in which Nathaly, Lee's mother, encounters and interacts with men around her community. The relationships are both borderline romantic and definitively platonic, but often the men make sexual advances toward Nathaly. The zine's format introduces new male characters, briefing the reader on how Lee's mother met them, how they spent their time, and how their interaction ended. The narratives offer a singular perspective on how a woman navigates befriending various men. Noticeably, the men seem to almost always consider this new friendship a sure gateway to romantic and physical relations.

In the zine, Lee reveals that Nathaly has bipolar disorder, making the reader carefully reconsider the behaviors just retold. Examining Nathaly's specific interactions with men, the reader is confronted with questions of what is considered usual and unusual behavior. In her own right, Nathaly occasionally wants to make personal connections, and possibly pursue a relationship, with some of the men she meets. The recollections of the interactions are quite frank, and through Lee's lens, Nathaly is in control of her sexuality, able to decline certain requests while allowing herself to indulge in others. Lee's work navigates the themes of communication and consent between men and women through her mother's experience, while honoring her autonomy and agency.



Michelle Lee. *When I Was Your Age*.

At the age of seven, Carlos Ortiz-Gallo moved with his family from Lima, Peru to the United States and began the process of obtaining American citizenship. As a child, Ortiz-Gallo experienced the traumas of growing up an immigrant in America. The complicated feelings associated with a sense of not belonging are influential in his practice. He incorporates appropriated and personal images that act as symbols of and references to his memories and experiences. In his newest installation piece *Whitelash Cannonball* (2016), Gallo-Ortiz uses collage methods to constructs a train, a nostalgic mode of transportation, taking us on a metaphorical journey. He collects and creates images that are then recomposed, almost in a scrapbook fashion, loosely chronicling his path and narrative thus far. The collage elements of Ortiz-Gallo's train mirror his mix of identities and experiences, and through the range of marks and images pieced together, he creates a new, more whole representation of himself.

Carlos Ortiz-Gallo. *Take Me Out*, 2016.

The visual tone of Ortiz-Gallo's work is somber. As many who experience a transition to America must know, it is devastatingly difficult to be unrepresented—to exist while being undocumented in this country. That is the experience from which Ortiz-Gallo is working. Migrating and relocating affected Ortiz-Gallo's perspective on his position in the US, both personally and politically. He manages struggle, patiently waiting for things to improve, and, like many other immigrants, he is asking himself if and when the sacrifices will pay off. His work poignantly reflects the stories and lives of many immigrants and first-generation Americans who grapple with the loss of and longing for self, and the anxiety of attempting to discover the hard ground between here and there.

Deeply informed by their own lives, Quan, Lee, and Ortiz-Gallo's works express contemporary experiences that are shared by people across the country. Their work is relatable and directly in tune with what is occurring today. The artists are galvanized by difficult moments in their lives, which they typically process and deal with alone, reflecting a common experience known to many people of color and women. There is rarely a place they can turn to deal with traumas and anxieties. Society tells us to "get over it," and we are expected to survive by our own means. These artists give themselves the time and space to hone and disseminate their perspectives, and, most of all, through their work they acknowledge self-care and self-worth in a country that continues to marginalize them and their communities.