

IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“The Color of Emergency”: Joan Kee on Chao-Chen Yang’s *Apprehension*



Chao-Chen Yang (b. China, d. Seattle, Washington, 1945–1969), *Apprehension*, c. 1942.
Photograph, 16 x 12 1/2 inches. Collection of Edgar Yang.

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Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Joan Kee, professor of art history at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, describes the persistent timeliness of Chao-Chen Yang's 1942 photograph, *Apprehension*, which vividly evokes muteness, surveillance, and precarity, particularly as experienced by those who are Asian in the United States, whether during World War II or today.

Joan Kee

My name is Joan Kee. And today I'll be speaking about a 1942 photograph taken by Chinese American photographer Chao-Chen Yang, who was based in Seattle. I've been thinking a great deal about this photograph on and off since I first saw it in 2008, at the landmark survey of Asian American art that took place at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. But it's only been in the last few weeks that the timeliness of this photograph has all but compelled me to verbalize perhaps some of the thoughts that have been latent.

It's not a very large image. When it's shown for display in a museum, it's about 15 by 12.5 inches, so roughly about the dimensions of a piece of typing paper, maybe a little larger. It shows a young man of East Asian extraction, looking anxious, frazzled. He's not wearing a shirt or any sort of upper bodily garment, and it looks like he's been roused from slumber at an ungodly hour. He's shown holding a phone and you see that the way he holds the phone, his fingers are curled almost like a fist, so there's a distinctly combative affect to the work. His face is illuminated by an outside source that seems to be coming from below. So what that does is that the light then reflects and reverberates against his features so that his face starts to reemerge as a terrain not only of light and shadow, but also of tension. We see his brow furrowed. We see an unruly lock of hair, cascading down his forehead, and one of the hairs almost resembles something of a blade, just about to pierce his nose. There's a hint of five o'clock shadow gracing his upper lip. This sense of time, of the nocturnal, is also emphasized by the background. We don't see where he is. We don't know if he's in his home. We don't know if he's outside. There's no sense of origin that's present.

But for me, perhaps the most striking part of this photograph is its color. This was taken decades before debates regarding color photography would become mainstream. Yang was a pioneer in color photography in his adopted hometown of Seattle. And we see that the flesh looks like it's based in gold. The cheeks are especially ruddy. They're flushed, and we don't know if they're flushed from anger; shame; anxiety. Yang is very careful not to give away too much information. But we do know that the color that he's using here, this isn't the color of a color advertisement, or of Technicolor film.

This is really the color of emergency. Now part of that emergency is suffused with a certain receptivity to film. Yang actually worked at RKO Pictures in 1946, the same studio and also the same year that Alfred Hitchcock released *Notorious*, *Notorious* being the film with Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman, about a Nazi conspiracy in South America, and perhaps most notable for one of its last scenes, where Bergman's character is deprived of a phone, so she can't call for help. Here in *Apprehension*, the phone seems to loom much larger than we ordinarily might expect it. You see the receiver looking larger than it actually is. So when the light hits the surface of the receiver, we see its shadow bouncing off the man's body, so it becomes larger than life. Now the color that we see here, it could be caused by the light of a bedside lamp. But to me, it registers more as the color of emergency: of flashing sirens, exploding bombs, fires that refuse to be put out. Or even the glare of an interrogation bulb. And I say this because for Yang, who had been interrogated by Vancouver police on suspicion of being a Japanese spy simply because he was photographing city sites – this is an anecdote that seems to have structured his attention, even though it took place in 1939.

Now Yang served as a diplomat under the Republic of China at government. So this is the government that preceded that of Mao Zedong in 1949. This is important because if we think about the color of emergency, the emergency that was also taking place is that of the transfer of suspicion, when it came to the perennial suspect Asian body: you have the transfer of suspicion from the Japanese, the former wartime enemy, to that of China. So the pathology that's ascribed to the Chinese body in particular is something that Yang had personal knowledge [of]. He was a go-between for illiterate Chinese seamen, so men who had worked on merchant ships during World War II had been promised U.S. permanent residency as a reward for their work, only to be met with deportation proceedings. It's sort of one of the great untold tragedies of the postwar era. And it was so egregious that even US. congressmen like Henry Jackson of Washington State, who had in fact supported Japanese American internment, said: "You know what, the ways these seamen have been treated, they've been treated, quote unquote 'rather badly,' the least we could do is to grant them their green cards to reward their loyalty." Now, Yang was very deeply involved in this. And I don't want to say that this photograph is necessarily a reenactment of how he might have imagined the internal emotional state of the seamen. I don't think it's staged speculation of what it would have been like to be one of these men, but it definitely serves as a trace.

What also strikes me about *Apprehension* is that it's an image that was of its time, and certainly reflected particular anxieties. But one of the reasons why this image has stayed with me is that it is eminently applicable to numerous temporalities. Originally when I saw this image at the DeYoung Museum, the museum label indicated it as having been made in 1951. So roughly 10 years after it had originally been created. But even with that dating, *Apprehension* is able to summon many different threads of discrimination, of alienation, of unbelonging, of unfreedom, in ways that also cast a new

light on our current age of endemic violence. But also: How does this photograph allow us to think about these structures that appear to keep on repeating?

[brief musical interlude]

The title of the work is especially apt: “apprehension” being a word that connotes either the fear of imminent harm, or legally permissible seizure. And, again, if you were a Chinese body, this is something that was deeply intertwined. That the two really couldn’t really be extricated from the other. *Apprehension* is a picture of listening, and also of muteness. So we see that the man’s face is magnified here. And sometimes we might associate magnification was being able to make yourself heard at a much larger magnitude or scale. So if magnification were assigned an aural metaphoric equivalent, that might be screaming. But here, the man doesn’t speak. His lips are slightly parted, but there’s no sound. And while pictures are of course not audible unless there’s a direct, say, built-in sound component, Yang does, I think, a very good job in suggesting that the man is capable of saying something. And then he prevents us from hearing it altogether. The man has no name. He has no indication of an identity, even though the scale of the head nudges us towards ascribing a portrait status to the work.

Yang doesn’t let us see things so easily. And in many ways, the visibility of the model that he uses here depends on us *not* hearing him. This is maybe why the figure seems trapped. Not because of the tight cropping, but because all he can do is to be seen in vivid, excessive color. I can’t help think about the relevance of this image now. Maybe it’s us that is trapped in a box configured by an image-making machine that makes all kinds of visual material constantly, even incessantly, available. But it’s also a machine that’s structured in a way that precludes any real intervention. And here is where I think that the perpetual timeliness of the image comes into play. *Apprehension* resonates even now, because that fear of imminent harm is—even more than before—the baseline of existence for those who are Asian in America.

[brief tonal musical interlude]

There’s one last detail I’d like to note. Back to the telephone receiver. Its surface mimics the effects of polished wood, but its shape echoes that of a gavel, an object sounded to mark the beginning of a ceremony, or the finality of a verdict. And this is a work that twins apprehension of judgment, and perhaps is a call for us to intervene in ways that the verdict doesn’t always result in the terminal guilt of those who are inevitably marked as Asian.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican

people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies.