

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Devoted: Religion in Asian American Art

On view May 9 - June 4, 2024

Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 12-6 PM

Opening Reception: Thursday, May 9, 6-8 PM

In partnership with **Asian American Arts Alliance**

Curated by Danielle Wu

Artists: Zain Alam, Shelly Bahl, Baseera Khan, Dew Kim, Heesoo Kwon, and Sunnie Liu

Image: Zain Alam, *Meter & Light: Day*, 2024, 3-channel video, 20:00 minutes. Photo by Sam B. Jones



Asian American Arts Alliance is pleased to partner with EFA Project Space, a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, to present *Devoted: Religion in Asian American Art*, a group exhibition on theological influences in work by Zain Alam, Shelly Bahl, Baseera Khan, Dew Kim, Heesoo Kwon, and Sunnie Liu. Whether practicing or non-practicing, the featured artists draw upon tensions arising from making work as Asian Americans in the context of the United States as a de facto Christian nation.

Sunnie Liu's installation 施洗 (*To Baptize*), 2022, recalls their family's indoctrination within the Southern Baptist church, a process that shares eerie parallels with their immigration from China and broader histories of Western colonization. Their baptism robes hang like ghostly scrim over wash bins filled with liquids that evoke allegiances to empire, capitalism, and Christianity: black tea, Dr. Pepper, and wine. The figures face TVs playing a recorded performance in which Liu reenacts a baptism/naturalization of their own design, baptizing themselves repeatedly and building a sacred domestic altar.

For their ongoing *Law of Antiquities* series, Baseera Khan photographed herself as close as possible to a selection of objects from the Brooklyn Museum's Arts of the Islamic World collection. The absurdity of the resulting scenes, such as a gloved conservator holding a hair comb inches from Khan's hair, illuminate the power dynamics—as well as potential violence—within acts of preservation or care.

Dew Kim's pair of wall sculptures *Till I Know What Love Is 01 & 02*, 2023, depict arrows piercing human nipples cast in silicone. Typically seen being wielded by biblical angels, here, these arrows materialize a

taboo, homoerotic sensation familiar to Kim's time spent in congregation envisioning bondage to a heavenly father, especially with great bodily harm or sacrifice.

A new work from Shelly Bahl's *Songs of Lament* series draws upon the artist's personal loss after a prior iteration was destroyed during a studio break-in. This reincarnation memorializes the lost artwork, in addition to reflecting upon the fates of religious iconography more broadly, in which consumer culture transmutes traditional forms. The black wax candles in the imagined forms of devadasis (ritual dancing girls) who resided in medieval Hindu temple complexes are arranged in an abstract pattern. They are meant to function as a Rorschach test, suggesting that images of devotion can shift meaning across cultural contexts.

Heesoo Kwon's *A Ritual for Metamorphosis* 탈피를 위한 의식, 2019, is created from family videos that were filmed by her father. Quotidian scenes like her parent's traditional Catholic wedding and home cooked meals show evidence of her mother's gendered subservience in a patriarchal household. This realization led Kwon to create "Leymusoom," a fictional feminist religion whose name is derived from the Korean word for asexual (무성별). The religion's snake goddess, Leymusoom, and Kwon's avatar for herself are inserted into the tapes as rebellious spirits and spiritual guardians of her family's matriarchs in the found footage.

Finally, *Meter & Light: Day*, 2024, by Zain Alam is a three-channel audiovisual installation enacting in miniature the interlocking rhythms of time in Muslim life: breath, utterance, daily prayer, and more. The work provides an opportunity to consider Islamic sound and visuality as distinctive, melodic, contemporary, and a challenge to values of supreme authority over individual human perception.

Though by no means comprehensive in scope, *Devoted* presents potential facets of religious influence, whether it be divine revelation, challenging dominant theological claims, or simply pious commitment to one's craft. By following the link between religion and Asian American identity, the exhibition confronts myths of the East as inherently more mystical than the rational West (as voiced in criticisms by Palestinian scholar Edward Said¹). They also refute the vision of so-called Orientals as "heathens" in need of rescue—as Kathryn Gin Lum has described perceptions of non-Christian immigrants in the US, alongside Indigenous and enslaved Black peoples—that has continued since the nation's founding.² Religious belief, then, plays a central yet under-acknowledged role in racial othering, fomenting some of the most urgent political tensions today and forming a common link of inquiry between the works on view.

Public Programs

All events and programs are free and open to the public, unless otherwise mentioned, at EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, 2nd floor, NYC.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics (2003).

² Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History*, Harvard University Press (2002).



Opening Reception

Thursday, May 9, 6-8 PM

Join us for a gathering with the artists and curator to celebrate the opening of this exhibition.

Town Hall: Sanctuary

Tuesday May 21, 6:30-8:15 PM

Join A4 for a Town Hall on the topic of “sanctuary,” inviting artists to speak on how they examine concepts of refuge and safety in their work. How do you create a zone of safety for yourself and others in your work? How might traditional ideas of security actually be dangerous?

We will be hearing from two multidisciplinary visual artists whose practices traverse these themes and more: Shelly Bahl, whose work is currently on view, as well as Sook Jin Jo, whose work transforms found objects into spaces described as transcendent and sacred. The evening will also feature a line-up of two-minute pitches from the community. After the presentations, we'll host a potluck meal, so please bring something to share; homemade or store bought items are welcome. A4 will provide drinks.

This event is FREE and open to the public. [RSVP is required to pitch and/or attend](#), but please note you **do not have to pitch to attend**. Interested in pitching?

[Please carefully read about the pitch process here](#)

Portfolio in Practice

Tuesday, June 4, 6:00-8:30 PM

A4 invites AAPI visual artists to register for 1:1 consultations and portfolio reviews with leading NYC-based curators: **Howie Chen**, Curator, 80WSE Gallery at NYU; **Hitomi Iwasaki**, Director of Exhibitions + Head Curator, Queens Museum; **Jinny Khanduja**, Executive Director, CUE Arts; **Jasmine Wahi**, Founder + Co-Director, Project for Empty Space; **Lisa Yin Zhang**, Editor, Hyperallergic.

The event consists of a brief introduction of the curators and one-on-one 20-minute sessions made by appointment through [online registration](#), with curators providing close consultation on artist projects.

This is a paid ticketed event:

[For more information and registration](#)



About Asian American Arts Alliance

A4 is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring greater representation, equity, and opportunities for Asian American artists and cultural organizations through resource sharing, promotion, and community building.

This exhibition is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council; the National Endowment for the Arts; the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature; the Howard Gilman Foundation; and numerous individuals. www.aaartsalliance.org

FOR PRESS INQUIRIES

Danielle Wu, Curator, Communications Manager, Asian American Arts Alliance
dwu@aaartsalliance.org

Naomi Lev, Director and Chief Curator, EFA Project Space
naomi@efanyc.org

EFA Project Space, launched in September 2008 as a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary arts venue founded on the belief that art is directly connected to the individuals who produce it and the communities that arise because of it. By providing an arena for exploring these connections, we empower artists, curators, and other participants to forge new partnerships and encourage the expansion of ideas. The program is based on Open Calls as well as invitational exhibitions and projects. It is a home for emerging, mid-career, as well as established curators and artists. We focus our attention on community engagement and public programming. www.projectspace-efanyc.org **The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA)** is a 501(c)(3) public charity. Through its three core programs, EFA Studios, EFA Project Space, and EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, EFA is dedicated to providing artists across all disciplines with space, tools and a cooperative forum for the development of individual practice. EFA is a catalyst for cultural growth, stimulating new interactions between artists, creative communities, and the public. www.efanyc.org EFA Project Space is supported in part by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and additional funding from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.