

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Malaya Ulan

Sifting through the WHITE noise

by Anito Gavino

Jason Vu's performance at the [Asian Arts Initiative](#) was a live montage of memories that question identity and ancestral grief as a child of Vietnamese refugees. Vu is a nonbinary, Vietnamese American dance and performance artist. As a Queer Asian dancer, they now find their own identity in an Asian American- categorized, fragmented, and classified as an identity simplified for America's convenience.

To respond to a white man solo performance-Through Noise- I respond with fragmented thoughts.

A solo

One hu-MAN show

A story through a research practice of emBODYment

Jason Vu's investigation of tension juxtaposed against breath was evident in his expression

A practice of grounding.

I walked into

Jason Vu laying on the floor, wrapping themselves in banana leaves.

Banana leaves are more than a cultural identifier in this work

but an emblem of resourcefulness, blessing, and trauma within a Southeast Asian body

Resourcefulness?

Bananas were after all an easy source of nutrients,

available to anyone who could reach it

It grows through the lands of Hanoi reaching to the Philippine islands where I am from.

Where fruit trees are not curated to be non-bearing...

Instead, bearing stories that permeate ancient wisdom.

Ancient stories were once imprinted onto its trunks

A library

No longer available for citation but will forever be remembered by those who speak of it.

Jason speaks of it.

They danced it.

They sang it.

Banana leaves are also used to wrap food to keep flavor.

Folded into a makeshift container for whatever blessings mama has made.

Blessing. This is what Jason is.

Like his father's voice encoded in his memory and through the soundscapes he created.

I witnessed Jason wrap his body with banana leaves....

Jason's history and ancestral pride encased by their body

by these leaves

A rice sifter and rice wrapping paper were accents to this beautiful creature

who graciously offered their being

while consumed by an audience

of a mostly non Asian identifying crowd.

I wonder what they were thinking.

Trauma

A child of refugee

Unfathomable future

Jason used a choreographic phrase work to explore gravity,

Falling onto ground repeatedly

One after another

like the many times their lineage struggled to find grounding

floating from home to home

Yearning for what future brings

Finding breath in the land of the people who caused its own suffocation

Agent Orange.

Not literally evident in the work but definitely slipped into my consciousness as Jason screamed into the microphone

!!

in stillness.

*The scream lasted minutes
A mere abstraction of what really lasted for decades
An irreversible poisoning of soil, people, economy, history,
But not memory.*

*Jason unapologetically made noise
"I wanna be heard but I'm never heard"
So he created a space
a collection of memorabilia
conversing with the memories of being wrapped in banana leaves
Holding him in the contained ritual of a safe space*

*Is this a safe space?
Or is he trapped in another camp of noise
Tone deaf questions at the end of the show start to simmer
"Why didn't you use Asian cultural dances to tell your story?"
All of these....NOISE.*

*The noise intensifies.
All noise of sounds too hostile to be his own
Far from the noise of an Asian populated Bay area
as Jason testified in the talk back.*

*Complexities through noise
Layered over his movement were digital images of their memories
such as the Asian supermarket at Washington Street
or an image of his pool in his West coast family home.
Noise becomes normalized.*

*So what is noise?
Noise is being gawked at as an Asian dancer in these seemingly communal spaces with
Identity as its commodity.*

*Noise was the woman who greeted me with her whiteness at an Asian centered space,
Inhospitable
Unwelcoming with a charge of \$25 a pop
The Asian woman next to her reeking New York
into a communal space that once was also my safe space.*

*The warmth of an Asian home was not the performance I received at the door.
Watched me painfully sign into Ticketleap to pay for tickets, with no options to pay with a credit card or a QR code to quickly allow me
to do such a transaction
I was missing 15 minutes of the show..then...*

After the show...

A talk back

A time to give the artist your gratitude.

A space for reuniting with other artists

Not a space to be patrolled by a curator.

"If you enjoyed the show, can you now pay the money that you owe?" the woman said verbatim.

Suddenly, I was policed as a reviewer.

From one OTHER to anOTHER.

Asian. Queer. First Generation

Jason Vu is BOLD in sharing his apprehensions in making

His fears

His questioning of why make a dance.

This is a writing of one's history

A beginning to a life work

A testimony that art making can be complex but necessary

A process not a product

Despite the militancy experienced from the door to the hallways

happy to have witnessed

To have engulfed Jason's personal journey of sifting through the white-ness noise.

[Through Noise](#), Jason Vu, Asian Arts Initiative, April 14-August 5, 2023

By Anito Gavino

June 30, 2023