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Portraits of Asian America amid an era of spiking hate crimes

Inspired by the reality of pandemic prompted racism, 'I Am Not a Virus' art exhibition features Rye Brook police officer

By Sarah Wolpoff

Thursday, February 10, 2022 3:51 AM

Titus Alexander has never considered himself "an art person."

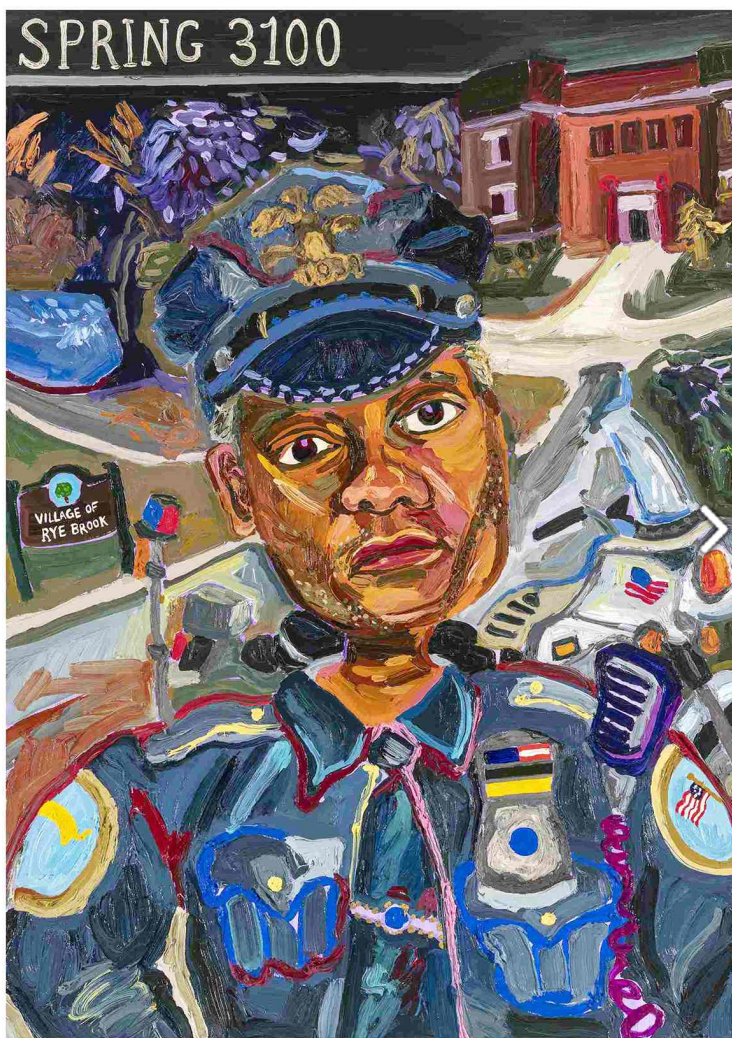
But it's hard not to reevaluate that position after getting intimately involved in the artistic process—which he did, in a way that made him repaint his perceptions of his own life experiences with a fresh, enlightened coat.

"This whole thing, it opened my eyes to art in a way that I wasn't used to," he said, describing how powerful the impact of a painting can be. "Being a part of it, it makes you understand how it all comes together."

Alexander was one of 17 subjects, or "sitters," featured in an art exhibition at the Night Gallery in Los Angeles in September-October 2021. The show, titled "I Am Not a Virus," displayed various portraits painted by Susan Chen—an up and coming artist approaching her milestone 30th birthday who explores the idea of diversity and identity in the Asian-American community through oils on a canvas.

The collection was manifested during the pandemic throughout 2021, with what Chen described as a subtle inspiration rooted in the spike in Asian hate crimes across the world—bigotry rearing its head under the stress of the China originated COVID-19 infection.

In the U.S., Asian hate crimes rose by more than 73% percent in 2020, according to an NBC News report. Though crime in general had been on the rise since the onset of the pandemic, violent



Connecticut-based artist Susan Chen's portrait of Rye Brook Police Officer Titus Alexander was one of 18 oil paintings displayed in a Los Angeles art exhibition titled "I Am Not a Virus." Alexander takes pride in the show's motive to show diversity in the workforce. Painting by Susan Chen

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actions directed toward the Asian community were disproportional.

Chen's work reflects her solitude-induced contemplations of that reality by highlighting snapshots of who Asian-Americans are and the vast net that identity covers—exemplifying individuality by showcasing people embraced by the demographic who treasure an array of professions, interests and backgrounds.

"I think a lot about East Asian superiority and how the Asian community encompasses a lot of different backgrounds," Chen said. "It's not about me trying to represent everyone, but more of a questioning, showing this term is very broad. The Asian community is complicated, it's expansive, and people come from complex histories."

The exhibition itself was named after the protest movement of the same name that started in France.

"Honestly, I don't think the title was very creative, it just reflected what was going on. It's a movement bigger than myself," she said. "But also, the phrase is interesting, because it has deeper underlying meanings and reflections for how particular groups of people feel about themselves."

Chen can be found on her Instagram @susanmbchen or through her website www.susanmbchen.com.

Alexander can be found in the Village of Rye Brook.

Becoming purposeful art

Alexander, a 49-year-old who lives in Pelham with his family, has been serving the Village since 2007 as a dedicated law enforcement official with the Rye Brook Police Department—often working night shifts, patrolling on the agency's motorcycle.

He and Chen connected through the Asian Jade Society, a criminal justice nonprofit philanthropic group of which Alexander is a member and Chen contacted to meet potential sitters.

"The president of the group, he put it out there to see if anyone is interested. And I don't know if you know police officers, they don't typically want to volunteer for this kind of stuff," Alexander, a self-proclaimed happy-go-lucky guy, chuckled. "But I thought it would be a cool idea to do it. With me getting up there in age, I figured why not. Not only for myself, but it would be good for the Village of Rye Brook."

"I was happy and glad to be a part of this," he later added. "Not only for what it represents, which has had more meaning the more I've thought about it, but to put the Village out there. I enjoy working here. Our job as police officers is to serve the public, and I take pride in doing that."

Chen is acclaimed for portraying not just her sitters' likenesses, but their desires, experiences and emotions. She accomplished such complexity—despite only meeting and learning about her subjects through Zoom conversations where she physically painted while they chatted—by putting as much effort into their faces as she did their surroundings.

Though the artist currently resides in Manhattan, engaged in an artist residency program funded by large-scale philanthropy and anti-racism organizations, she is often found based in Hartford, Conn. That's where she was while painting most of her "I Am Not a Virus" portraits, stowed away in her family's garage with her computer tuned into Zoom for hours at a time.

She thinks of her collection less as an exhibit and more as visual diary entries. Each piece represents a "surprise gift box" she encountered with every experience that allowed her to learn new things about life and appreciate different perspectives within her own community.

"I think representation is something I think about a lot. Like when I go to museums, you don't see yourself there. And you don't know how important that is until it affects you and your mental health when you're older," she said. "I think having an Asian police officer represented—especially after George Floyd, America is in a weird time where there's racial dynamics incorporated into everything in society—it just made me feel really proud to hear Titus's story."

Born in India, Alexander immigrated to Yonkers when he was 8 years old. His mother, a nurse who had worked all over the world, found a sponsor in the U.S. that would vouch for them. And she wanted to jump at the chance, for the sake of heightened opportunity for her family.

She came over at first to set the stage and find a home. Her husband came later with Alexander and his siblings, with a mere \$14 in his wallet.

"Imagine them leaving to come to a brand new country that they knew nothing about, setting up and raising three boys," Alexander reflected. "We didn't live in the best of neighborhoods in Yonkers. But all three of us turned out fine because of their love and dedication to us. And we took that and made lives for ourselves."

Alexander joined the New York City police force 25 years ago, serving as a first responder during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. After working in the City for close to a decade, he took a patrol job in New Rochelle, briefly—staying just over a year before pursuing a career in Rye Brook.


Meaning behind the paint

This week, Chen's sister has been walking around with bruises on her face. In what's made the artist reflect on her project through a new lens, she said her loved one was randomly attacked on the way home from the grocery store on Monday.

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“When it affects your family member, it’s way too close to home,” she said.

Meanwhile, to Alexander, despite his position as a police officer, his involvement in the project didn’t force much reflection over hate crimes. While the conversation admittedly made him remember the role he played responding to such calls in the City years ago, he said he also can’t help but see it from a law enforcement standpoint.

“There was a spike in Asian hate crimes, I noticed it. But I’ve also always felt, especially from my time working in the City, you always had crime,” he said. “I think of it like the stock market, it spikes and comes down in waves. People will say it’s happening for all these different reasons, but until you get to the root of the problem, it’s going to keep happening.”

He feels lucky in believing he’s never experienced discrimination from his colleagues—another testament, he said, to why he cherishes the Rye Brook police. And though racist incidents have inevitably arisen during civilian encounters, he’s gotten skilled at disassociating, never taking it to heart.

Instead, however, the portrait experience significantly struck a chord with him regarding his thoughts on representation—shining a light into his own life that he hadn’t contemplated before.

When Alexander first enlisted, he knew he was joining the force as a minority. Frankly, and to this day, there aren’t many Asian-Americans committed to policing.

As of 2019, Asian-Americans made up 2.2% of police officers nationwide, according to Data USA, an analytical organization that collects and presents visualized data from governmental agencies. Of that, far fewer are specifically Indian—Alexander said he’s worked with just one other cop, who became a close friend, while policing in New York City.

At the time, as a young man, he didn’t think much about the gravity of his position. He was getting a regular paycheck to help people in need, it seemed like a win-win.

“I felt especially the Indian community wasn’t represented well in policing,” he said. “At the time, I didn’t think too much about it. But when I sat back and really thought about it after this experience, it made me realize this is really a great thing Susan is doing.”

It’s great because it challenges stereotypes and stigmas about Asian-Americans in the workforce, he said. There’s an expectation from folks both within and outside the community pressuring them to pursue specific career paths, he said.

But the Asian community is just like everyone else, interests are diverse.

“I hate to generalize things, but there’s also this pressure of going into the medical field or the engineering field or that type of stuff. I just happened to go out of the box and say ‘no, I want to be a police officer,’” Alexander said. “When you look through all the paintings, you see all these different professions represented. A police officer, a pilot, a military sergeant. It’s a great thing to put out there because I don’t think too many people look around and really see us.

“I think it’s important especially for the Asian community,” he said. “It’s good for other communities, too, to see that there’s Asian people involved in different types of professions. But I believe this is more for the Asian community itself. You can be anything, you can be something outside the norm of what’s expected.”

In Alexander’s own life, that impact unintentionally already happened. Following in his footsteps, his daughter Anjolie is pursuing a career in law enforcement. Hired by the Pelham Police Department, she’s currently enrolled in the police academy.

It brings great pride, he said, to think that impact could reach even further—being the representation with potential to inspire other young Asian-Americans to break outside the box.

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