NOA BRONSTEIN

Family Photos and Blurred Memories

A Conversation with Jarod Lew

Photographer Jarod Lew attunes his camera to the Asian American experience. Rather than the flattening effects that monikers such as "Asian American" can have, Lew's images build complexity and depth by visualizing moments in the daily lives of his family and community. Often situated in domestic spaces, Lew's intimate portraits of people and place connect across personal and communal histories that are revealingly underrepresented or misunderstood within broader socio-political contexts.

Lew completed his MFA at Yale University School of Art in 2024 and has produced several notable photo series, including *Please Take Off Your Shoes* (2016–21), which was shortlisted for the Aperture Portfolio Prize in 2021 and was featured in the 2023 group exhibition *Kinship: Photography and Connection* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His most recent body of work, *Mimicry* (2022), was featured alongside several existing projects in *Strange You Never Knew* (2025) at the University of Michigan Museum of Art—marking the artist's first major solo museum exhibition.

Taking an intergenerational view and approach, Lew links the past and present through depictions that do not always provide easy access to those in front of or behind the camera. In this way, he synchronously contends with the limits and possibilities of imagemaking and the enduring legacies of how photography both empowers and exploits racialized subjects. Ultimately, Lew's practice challenges the concept of the photograph as a document. Instead, he queries the instability of images as records of memory and meaning and invites us to read between the lines. The following conversation, which took place on November 14, 2025, via Zoom, endeavors to reveal Lew's process for producing images as a keen observer of the periphery.

NOA BRONSTEIN: To start, I am hoping you can tell us about how your relationship with photography began. I am always curious if photographers who make portraits in one form or another grew up surrounded by images and by portraits specifically.

JAROD LEW: My initial relationship with photography began in high school when I enrolled in an art class where I had to assist the photography teacher and clean the darkroom after each class. I enjoyed the smell of the chemicals and the quietness of the space while tidying up. At home, I grew up with family snapshots in little silver frames placed neatly on long hallway tables. The rest of the images that my family took were placed in photo albums that were tucked away in one specific closet that held our bathroom towels, bedding, and a vacuum. There were never any photographs big enough to hang on a wall. I similarly never played with cameras growing

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Untitled (Mom) from the series *In Between You and Your Shadow* (2021–) by Jarod Lew.

up. I was someone who was pretty good at drawing, so I did not understand the camera as an artistic tool—it was just something that my parents always had on family vacations. I never liked being in front of the camera during these vacations either and I would always try to opt out of being in a photo.

I became serious about photography in 2009 after graduating from Michigan State University with a BFA in studio art, with a concentration in graphic design. When I graduated, the economy in Michigan was on the decline. The city of Detroit was going bankrupt with unemployment across the United States at around 9 percent. It was not a good time to be pursuing a career in graphic design. That summer, my college girlfriend's grandmother called to tell me that she had a dream about me. My anxiety skyrocketed because she was a pretty conservative person who never really engaged with me at family or holiday events. She dreamt that I worked at her and her husband's photography studio and brought new energy to the traditional high school senior portraits that they had been making for fifty-plus years. That conversation directly led to my working in their photo studio that fall. Two weeks after my first day, my girlfriend broke up with me and I was left with having to decide if I should continue on or if I should quit. Luckily, her uncle and grandmother convinced me to stay, so I continued to work at the portrait studio until 2012 or 2013.

NB: Your practice is largely focused on intergenerational exchange, with your family members recurrently appearing in your work. What kind of dialogue have these collaborations allowed you to have with your family members, especially your parents? I am thinking specifically of *In Between You and Your Shadow* (2021–), a series of images through which you grapple with uncovering a piece of intimate family history, considering the impact of memories and past experiences on familial relations. The work contends with discovering that

your mom was once engaged to Vincent Chin, who was murdered in Detroit in 1982 in a hate crime that ignited an Asian American civil rights movement.

JL: Before starting this project, I worked with a young adult novelist on a book about Vincent Chin's history. Throughout that process, she was very adamant about wanting to do an interview with my mother. My mom was initially very skeptical about doing an interview, but I slowly convinced her it would be a good idea. She later agreed and we set a date for my mom and the journalist to chat. A few days prior, my mom called me, in an unrecognizable voice, explaining that she did not think she could do the interview and that she had not been able to sleep for the last few days. Ever since hearing my mom's distress, I promised her that she would never have to speak about this with anyone.

For me, *In Between You and Your Shadow* is a project that allows my mother to reclaim her agency as an individual who has endured a trauma that only she can fully understand. The project is a refusal and a response to the journalists, Hollywood screenwriters, and documentarians who have reached out to my mom and myself over the years wanting my mother to speak about this history, particularly around the anniversary of the tragedy. The only way my mom felt comfortable collaborating with me on this project was because I promised that her face would not appear in any of the photographs. She actually ended up really enjoying the idea and it became this challenge and competition between the two of us, with my mom teasingly asking how many photographs could I actually make of her this way that were interesting? Through the course of making these images and allowing a new form of trust to be unveiled in the process, my mom slowly became more open to talking with me about this history. However, because of the past experience with the young adult novelist, I do not feel the need to be invasive, especially since at the time of making these images hate crimes against Asians were happening all over the US. I did not see this ongoing painful conversation with my mom as being beneficial to her mental health.

NB: And what about your dad? The image of him in his postal service uniform immediately comes to mind, perhaps because this specific uniform is so emblematic of Americanness while uniforms in general can serve to point toward histories of racialized labor.

JL: I am glad you bring this up because I had a really interesting moment with that photograph. I had asked my dad if I could get a picture of him in his uniform because I did not have one and it was such an important character in his life. It is a very American uniform with the eagle and in the colors of red, white, and blue, so I asked him to put it back on because he had been retired for maybe two or three years at this point. I was waiting outside his bedroom, and I could hear him shuffling about and then heard him say that he was going to cry. My mom asked him why and he explained that it was because "this is who I was and I do not necessarily know who I am now without this thing on." It was a very emotional moment. And I think he was quite surprised by his own reaction, and I was touched by how connected he was to this object, this uniform, this kind of skin that he wore for my whole life. As soon as he sat down for the camera, I could feel that he must have been remembering his experience as a mail carrier. Out of all the photographs I have made of my dad, this one feels the most vulnerable but also connected to the lens in a different way.

NB: I am interested to know more about what your process of familial collaboration looks like. How much agency do your family members have as photographic subjects in the staging of their likeness or otherwise?

Untitled (Dad the Mail Carrier) from the series *In Between You and Your Shadow* (2021–) by Jarod Lew.

JL: My family is pretty private and being in front of a lens can be uncomfortable for them. I find many of my subjects have this conflicted relationship to and with the camera. I think this is why the process of me directing is often appreciated. For *In Between You and Your Shadow*, it was very important for me to reconstruct scenes that I remember from when I was young, but then using different forms of light to create a more cinematic image. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to use light and shadow as a way of obscuring my mom and also details of the space. My parents and my brother would re-perform these core memories that I have and I would direct and photograph them until I was able to achieve the image I envisioned. This allowed everyone to become more comfortable being photographed, which then lead into more spontaneous images later on in the series. As I mentioned, *In Between You and Your Shadow* is also a project about my mom's agency and her right to opacity regarding the Vincent Chin story, so it was also very important for my mom to see these images while they were being made. Because I was using a digital camera, I would always show my parents sets of photographs on the fly. My father and my brother were more ambivalent when I showed them the pictures, approving and trusting me on which images worked best.

There were often times when my memories and the staging of those memories were contested by my family. Someone would say, oh this never happen. But then, when they would see the picture, they would remember. So, to come back to your previous question, there were these really magical occurrences of reclaimed memories that allowed for dialogue to unfold, and that really helped create a collaboration between us.

NB: Given your interest in privacy and opacity, I am curious to know how you think about the audience of your images. Perhaps the work that best connects to this question is *Please Take Off Your Shoes*—a portrait series of second-generation Asian Americans in their parents' homes serving as a visual essay on intergenerational identities as related to diasporic experiences. There are many culturally specific traces in this work (including the title of the series) while also being highly relatable across cultural contexts. Can you speak to the ways you simultaneously engage specific and broad audiences throughout your practice? What do these visual breadcrumbs allow you to do with these images?

JL: I do not necessarily think about audience when starting a project, which is rooted more in my own self-inquiry about my experiences or answering questions that I have about who I am and who my community is. That said, much of my work is really constructed from a place of specificity. For *Please Take Off Your Shoes*, I was interested in thinking about semiotics and its ability to trigger a memory for the viewer of an image. All of the photographs were made in different Asian American homes, so there were specific scenes that I wanted to explore and capture. It was important for me to visualize cultural signifiers and gestures that would allow for tension to emerge in the process of making each picture, which would ultimately be seen in the final image.

Listening to viewer's readings of the images in relation to their own stories and personal connections turned out to be a compelling moment for me when the work was first exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2023 [in the group show *Kinship: Photography and Connection*]. Many viewers expressed that they never thought they would see a

Please Take Off Your Shoes from the series *Please Take Off Your Shoes* (2016–21) by Jarod Lew.

home that looked like their Asian American home in a museum setting. As I sat with these kinds of comments, it made me think a great deal about the relationship between the subject in the image and the periphery surrounding the subject, which tells a more subtle and complex story, and that the periphery of the image is an important aspect throughout all my work. For example, the image of Eugene being handed a plate of fruit is about Eugene but it is even more about that cut-up plate of fruit, about the off-camera mom who prepared it and is handing it over—a gesture familiar to many Asian Americans—and about her life and personal history that led to this display of care for her son. The periphery proposes a way of seeing that centers the margins—where ambiguity, contradiction, and discomfort can live. Here, knowing becomes less about illumination and more about sitting with what remains unresolved and unknown. So, the obscurity in both *In Between You and Your Shadow* and *Please Take Off Your Shoes* is actually about a kind of representation in itself.

NB: That is an excellent segue to my next question, which touches on exactly this topic. Since so much of your work plays with issues of visibility, can you talk further about the ways in which you personally and artistically traverse the tensions between invisibility and hypervisibility that so inform the racialized experience in North America? For you, what are both the possibilities and shortfalls of imagemaking in mining or responding to this tension?
JL: *In Between You and Your Shadow* was a project that helped me understand the power of invisibility and its relation to refusal as a protective measure to keep my community, subjects, and art from becoming instrumentalized in doing the work of grief for a public that wants spectacle

Consumption of Love (Eugene, Myi, and Qun) from the series *Please Take Off Your Shoes* (2016–21) by Jarod Lew.

and hypervisibility of a history that they do not actually want to confront. This paradox is at the center of much of my work. The photograph is an object that presents an illusion of reality to a heightened degree, but more often it actually functions in offering the viewer a confrontation with a subject or image that refuses to show you what you might be hoping to see.

On the other hand, *Please Take Off Your Shoes* is much more about exposure and showing the complexities of an Asian American home where I was not relying on shadows to hide anything. Instead, I wanted to really look at these spaces in all their details and nuances, as I was trying to understand my own experience and identity as someone who is Chinese American and grew up living in a very Midwest suburb with hardly any Asian American community. The work is much more about giving visibility to the complexities of our experiences.

NB: There is certainly an emotional weight to *In Between You and Your Shadow* but elsewhere in your practice humor emerges frequently. I am referring to several of the images in *Please Take Off Your Shoes* that are quite playful and humorous, or at least somewhat tongue and cheek. It seems this may at times be a coping mechanism and at others a means to deflate the weight of history or to reclaim difficult subject matter. Is this an apt reading or is something else at work here?

JL: Many of the works in *Please Take Off Your Shoes* were constructed or based on images that I came across in people's homes. I would say that a significant portion of these photographs were a collaborative effort in making an image that tried to understand certain themes and concepts that I was interested in addressing. I think I have a pretty good sense of humor and at times wield it as a way to help myself understand the gravity of what I am trying to unpack. I do not ever start a project or even construct a picture with comedy in mind. But sometimes it reveals itself in the process of making because it is simply who I am as a human being.

NB: Many of the themes underpinning your practice—including enduring and systemic racially motivated violence, discrimination, and stereotyping—have risen more concretely to the foreground with your most recent work, *Mimicry*. How and where did this project begin?

JL: In 2018, I went to an estate sale in a neighborhood near where my parents live. Going through this mid-century home, I found myself in the basement with a large box of Kodachrome slides. Because I came into photography at a point when Kodachrome slides had been discontinued, I have a fascination with them as a material object and their connection to American pop culture more broadly. I started sifting through this large container and was pleasantly surprised by how well each picture was composed and made. I remember thinking that someone in this family must have been an amateur photographer. I started to curate and organize the images that I wanted to keep—putting them into small piles to the side. I then came across a slide that was labeled "Chinese Block Party." As soon as I put the slide up toward the basement light, I was confronted with an image of a white woman dressed in a kimono, which I was shocked and surprised to see. I became immediately compelled to go through this large box to find every image that I possibly could that was made at this event. I spent three days at this family's house sifting through these images, searching for every photo I could find, eventually uncovering around twelve images.

Fast forward to 2022, I had just moved from Michigan to New Haven, Connecticut, to pursue my MFA at Yale University. Critiques were starting for the program, and I had to scramble to think about what project I wanted to present. I found the Kodachrome slides in my studio drawer and started to think about performance in front of the camera—the

Family Christmas, 1951 from the series *Mimicry* (2022) by Jarod Lew.

performativity of race that was happening during the block party, mimicry, the white nuclear family, war, the racist history of Kodachrome slides, and the underlying darkness that happens in suburban neighborhoods. I was also thinking about Michigan's history, including when the Japanese community was released from internment camps and then hired to come to Detroit to work in the auto industry and, of course, the general postwar influx of Asian families coming into white suburbs, white spaces and what that meant and felt like for those coming in and those already there. I decided to re-perform and mimic every facial expression in each slide in front of my camera—imitating everything from facial expressions to the kind of light that was in each image. I then collaged my face onto the slides that showed everyday, mundane moments in this family's archive to be in conversation with the images from the "Chinese Block Party." When I began to share the work at school, I started to notice that there were interesting instances when the viewer would laugh at certain images and be completely silent with others. Conversations around humor became a focal point in response to the work, which felt productive because it ultimately served as an entry point. Through the laughter and silence, however, I hope one starts to question why they respond in one way or another. In other words, how is the performativity of whiteness so easily reduced to humor while the performativity of Asianness is not?

The project further evolved for my 2025 solo exhibition *Strange You Never Knew* at The University of Michigan Museum of Art, where curator Jen Friess commissioned me to complete the series—given her interest in vernacular collections—and to incorporate images that the community had selected for the museum's collection into my installation. Around this time, I started to find Kodachrome slides of Asian Americans from the 1950s and '60s on eBay, making me think about what images survive, and those that do not. I began to

see these Kodachrome slides as an archive of the Asian American experience not held by most institutions. So, I have now placed these alongside my own collaged, found images and when the work is shown or collected it includes this unofficial archive of Asian American vernaculars. ■

NB: I think that is a fitting final note, as it relates back to many of the questions we have explored in terms of your work giving visibility to often under-presented histories and experiences, be they personal or collective. So, thank you for creating that space of recognition.

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