Unsettled Visions explores Asian American ethnic identity in art within the concepts of “positionalities” (how knowledge and actions are related to geographical space), “othering,” social memory, and migration. Machida chose to focus primarily on the art of the 1990s, in large part due to the proliferation of Asian American art during this decade and the wide range of media, subjects and styles that emerged in its wake. Some of the larger themes that run throughout the book are immigration, place, cultural identity, and the effects of western cultural hegemony. The theoretical exploration is accompanied by sections on individual artists, including quotes and images of pieces and installations.

Machida has a unique perspective on how many of these issues have played out. Coming to the mainland United States as a Hawaiian native in the 1960s, her first experiences as a minority unfolded amidst the social movements and upheavals of the 60s and 70s. She was drawn into the New York art community by visual representations of issues such as poverty and ethnic identity.

The developments in critical theory during the 1980s and 1990s in American academia led to new ways of considering ethnic identity. There is no single cohesive way to group Asian Americans or their art. By defining “Asian American” as an “all embracing metacultural term that refers to a wide collection of groups” Machida considers a variety of artists and the meaning of ethnicity itself. By drawing in the various intellectual approaches to ethnic identity she addresses the issues from different viewpoints. While acknowledging the fact that ethnicity and culture are in a sense social and cognitive constructs and that many individuals may wish to disassociate themselves from such assigned identities as artists, she concludes that ethnicity is an important aspect of identity and continues to play a role within cultural and artistic development.

Machida explains that this book is intended to contribute to a dialogue amongst artists and scholars regarding the issues of art and the Asian American Diaspora. As an academic (Associate Professor of Art History and Asian American Studies at the University of Connecticut) and an author, she contextualizes herself as an actor in this dialogue, an approach that is quite compelling. This book would be particularly appropriate for upper level discussion seminars on issues relating to historical and critical theory, as well as Asian American art. Machida’s exploration of the issues also provides a starting point for future Asian American exhibitions and food for thought for curatorship in this area.

Heather Kline, Registrar, Nedra Matteucci Galleries (Santa Fe, NM), heather9387@yahoo.com