

Maneuvering Margins – Adventures From The Between

By [Leah Nanako Winkler](#)

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It didn't take long after I moved from a cramped apartment I couldn't afford on Manhattan's Upper East Side to a friend's house in Astoria, a highly cultural yet homely neighborhood in Queens, that I began to notice that my surroundings had become more Japanese. Whether I was buying *onigiri* and *natto* at the Family Market (no relation to the eerily similar looking Family Mart—the Japanese *konbini* franchise) around the corner or dining at the deliciously authentic Lin restaurant (also providing nice sharpening services), being a hapa who grew up with Japanese food and culture suddenly seemed a little more convenient in my new digs. So I wasn't all that surprised when I heard that Justin Baldwin, a local hapa artist had a new show, at RESOBOX, a neighboring Japanese Gallery.



JUSTIN BALDWIN
MANEUVERING MARGINS
ADVENTURES FROM THE BETWEEN

DECEMBER 16th, 2011 – JANUARY 13th, 2012

PLEASE JOIN US FOR THE OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16th, 2011, FROM 7:30 – 9:30 PM

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RESOBOX GALLERY
41-26 27th STREET, LONG ISLAND CITY,
NEW YORK 11101, TEL 718 784 3680
(BETWEEN QUEENS PLAZA & 41st AVE, ON 27th STREET)
11.02.87 TRAIN: QUEENSBORO PLAZA STOP + 1 MIN. WALK
E.A.S.R TRAIN: QUEENS PLAZA STOP + 4 MIN. WALK

info@resobox.com www.resobox.com www.facebook.com/resobox
Monday – Friday, 12:00 – 6:00 pm Saturday & Sunday by appointment

"We feel comfortable here" says Resobox founder Fumio Tashiro when I asked him why I see so many Japanese people in the Astoria and LIC area, "A lot of Europeans live here and our culture is very similar to theirs. American culture and Japanese cultures are too opposite."

It's these opposite cultures, however, that have made the work of Justin Baldwin so uniquely perceptive and devastatingly local. In his latest exhibition, aptly titled *Maneuvering Margins—Adventures From The Between*, Eastern and Western values simultaneously meld and clash, resulting in a versatile showcase of identity art, sly pop-culture criticism, and a brave representation of an artist's struggle. Baldwin, who grew up in Kansas with his mother from Sapporo and a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American father, states that he has walked many margins between different cultures, values, identities, and belief systems all his life.

Upon entering Resobox's sharply packed space near Queensboro Plaza, viewers are graciously invited to walk alongside Baldwin on his balance beam of extremes. His aesthetic, like his identity, is a mesh of culturally relevant characteristics, an artist's candid investigation of those characteristics, and a genuinely sentimental tribute to the homes that continue to shape his vision. With every instance Baldwin bats a critical eye to the flaws of the worlds he has been immersed in, whether it be the McDonald's ambushed modern

Asian pop culture or the glamorization of his own outsider identity enhanced by his looks alone, there lies a romantic appreciation and an encouragement for the viewer to see the truth of his existence. Attendees of this versatile exhibition get the pleasure of being transported from an industrial New York street to a warm, clean atmosphere reminiscent of a Japanese department store. Shoes are required to be taken off. Snacks are served at the door. RESOBOX and Baldwin work together to create an aesthetic that fits his work as perfectly as the geta one is required to wear before excusing themselves to the bathroom.* Whether experiencing his acclaimed “Gaijin Art Collection,” which was inspired by Baldwin’s journey as a “Gaijin” English teacher in rural Japan or viewing the subtly sarcastic yet frighteningly familiar in this psychologically intricate and poetic series, viewers get a taste of a unique world. Baldwin dares to explore the themes of cultural appropriation, the West’s influences on the East and vice versa, and what defines a person’s race, especially when they hail from not one, but two domineering forces with vastly different values.



8X8 USA & 8X8 JPN – 2005 –2 framed inkjet prints - Photo courtesy of Adam Kuban

Although I profiled [Baldwin's "Gaijin Art"](#) previously, I hadn't seen much of the work in person until I attended his latest exhibit and was completely blown away. Think the precision of Kip Fulbeck meets the darkness of Roger Shimomura, spliced with a poetic flair and a deep understanding of cultural isolation. Hapa or not, Baldwin's art forces us to look at our own value systems and how they're tainted by a product-driven society where everything is for sale, including the little traditions humanity has left. Simultaneously though, his art is proof that we must make our own rituals, to find our own cultural home, mixed up or not.



Urban Tribal Salary Organization Chart 2 - 2011 - 39 framed 9" x 12" subway drawings with title cards and tape.
Perhaps the most edgy collection in *Maneuvering Margins*, is Baldwin's "Urban Tribal Salarymen Series". The artist, who currently "pushes paper" for a Japanese Corporation based in NYC as a day job, shows off multiple portraits of employees for a fictional corporation drawn while commuting in the NYC subway system. The portraits, which are strategically placed in positions of power via a chart, give off the frustrations of business politics and an artist's struggle of finding the time to make art, whether it be in the studio or on his daily commute to his means of basic income.



Urban Tribal Salary Aerial Apologist and Paradoxical Priestess of Exponential Equilibrium, 2011 - Pen on Paper - 9" x 12" - No

Model Used - Subway Drawing

I particularly loved that Baldwin wishfully places the women in his fictional corporation at the top of the power instead of the bottom, and gives the goons all anonymous faces similar to an Ojizosan. With titles like, "*Urban Tribal Salary Aerial Apologist and Paradoxical Priestess of Exponential Equilibrium*," viewers are sure to appreciate Baldwin's humor as well as his insights about the warped world he sees on a daily basis.

The exhibit also features some of my favorite art I've seen in a while, a series of handmade flying houseboats called *tobu yakatabune*. Influenced by boats traditionally for the elite that are now accessible to anyone as a popular way to celebrate on water in Japan, Baldwin intricately combines a beautiful combination of the latter and various themes in Western art such as flight, the sky, and birds. The models, reminiscent of Japanese aircraft toys with bird-like feathers, are described as endlessly being in transit through various experiences and eras. These seemingly fragile yet powerful sculptures represent the artist's soul—ever wondering in the in-between, never fully belonging but finding a way to fly without ever falling.



RESOBOX YAKATABUNE BIG 18, Photo courtesy of Adam Kuban

Don't miss *Maneuvering Margins—Adventures in the Between* running through January 13, 2012 at RESOBOX, Inc in Queens.

For more information visit <http://resobox.com/>

Pics from show:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/justinbaldwin/sets/72157628286075563/>

Video by Abner Martis:

<http://vimeo.com/33856685>

Artist Site:

www.justinbaldwin.net

*When attending the exhibition, look for a particularly hilarious portrait by Baldwin which I won't give away here, hung in the bathroom of Resobox.

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