

Suzanne Whang Can Change the Wor(l)d

John Reyes for AIA | September 3, 2008

In a time where a politically correct world seems to be reverent, Suzanne Whang, the actress and comedian with a Masters from Brown University, writer, dog owner, television show host, and Andy Kaufman Award recipient extraordinaire, becomes politically incorrect in order to change the world one word at a time.



In the Los Angeles rush-hour traffic, amidst the heat wave of California, and in the first day that the state applied to have "No Cell Phone Use in Cars," Whang in blue-tooth earpiece and in the middle of all chaos, energetically told me, "Life is blissful." These three simple words, in a way, describe her and her personal outlook on life, optimistic. She after all began her acting career to what others may consider "somewhat later" (she did after all graduate with a Masters Degree in

Cognitive Psychology from Brown University, and to humbly mention a Bachelors Degree from Yale University).

Whang's first job out of college was not exactly acting. She first worked in Boston at a public health clinic doing research with AIDS and assisting with Planned Parenthood. It was not until she was driving to work one day and heard about a casting call on the radio in which Whang took an extended lunch break. The casting call was for the 80's series, *Spenser: For Hire*. Whang landed her first role as an extra. "I ended up oversleeping and I set my alarm [because] the power went out in the building the night before my first day on set, and my alarm never went off. I overslept and woke up to the sound of the phone ringing and it was the casting director, who said, 'Suzanne, I was wondering if you were planning to show up on set this morning.' She hung-up on me and was mad. I lived close to the set, so I hurried down there and God only knows what I was even wearing. But once I got there, I had a great time. And at that time there was this character Arnie Cox who took me under his wing and said, 'Who are you? Why haven't I've seen you before?' And I responded, 'Oh I'm Suzanne and I have a real job' and was unintentionally insulting his career. So he eventually told me to follow [these] ten things and I'll be working all the time as an actor in Boston." It was then that Whang began her career as an actress and within a month she quit the traditional nine to five life. It would ultimately lead to a successful television show and respected awards in years to come.

Suzanne debuted and became the host of the number one rated show, *House Hunters* and the spin-off show *House Hunters International*, on Home and Garden Television (HGTV). "For those people who don't know, they are both half hour weekly shows, that showcase people who are in the market to buy a house.. [We] then proceed to see what people are looking for their dream house. By the end of the show they pick a house, they put in an offer, buy it, move in, and fix it up to their liking.."Whang admires the show's underlying message. "I am proud of the fact that [House Hunters and House Hunters International] showcases a diverse group of people: single, married, divorced, single parents, interracial couples, gay couples... and we don't really point it out. I hope it increases tolerance in our country because we all have that in common. We all want a home and it crosses all demographics."

It is easy to understand that the theme of the show fosters itself with Whang's talents, as she herself crosses the demographic of one's ability to act. She has co-hosted "Bloopers" with Dick Clark on NBC and has had several appearances on television shows such as Boston Public to playing Polly, the inappropriate spa manager, on NBC's *Las Vegas*. But, it is Whang's stand-up character that she is mostly proud of and she became the first recipient of the Andy Kaufman Award at the New York Comedy Festival. Sung Hee Park, the character that Whang created at the Beverly Hills Playhouse is her alter ego. The character walks on stage and appears to be a vulnerable, subservient, quiet and scared Korean woman. She is wearing the traditional Korean hanbok dress. It is then that Sung Hee Park lashes out with politically incorrect jokes in a "fresh off the boat"-like tone. From telling black jokes to saying the word *gook* repeatedly, it is as Whang said herself, "the dichotomy of human behavior" she loves.



For myself, I told Suzanne that it was hard to watch the act at first (being that I am a politically conscious and a politically correct individual). However, the character did teach me a lesson. I told her, "I have to admit I was taken back by the act, being that it is not very PC. However, after I watched it, like any other form of art, I

took the time to understand the art behind stand-up comedy and sure enough the act gave me a better and highly appreciated understanding of why Sung Hee Park was created. Whang kindly shared her own emotions and told me, "Oh my God! I love how you took the time and actually thought about the whole act because the initial reaction is just that. But what I am trying to do is really change the power of words and in a way making it more acceptable. For example when I was younger I was made fun of and people would call me a "Chink" or a "Jap" and I would say, 'Hey, I'm a Gook! Get it right!' At least if you make fun of me make it the appropriate racial slur.' And I just remember feeling so much hurt from words being used against me. And I had the realization that our reactions and our responses are completely 100% our choice even though it may not feel that way. And I could take back the power of anything and transform the energy of it for myself. So I started to tell my friends to call me their favorite 'Gook' and I would sign my emails 'Yours Gookly,' 'In Gooks We Trust,' or "America's Favorite Gook.' And the word started to sound funny to me. People who would come to me for life coaching advice would call me their *gook-ru* instead of guru. Now that word does not have the power to hurt me anymore because language is just a group agreement, it's a group decision about what something means. Even the word 'cunt' comes from the root word meaning 'Goddess,' and look what we have done to that word. Now it's the worst possible thing you could call a woman."



It is then that Whang explained that through the use of channeling her anger into her art, being politically *incorrect* can be correct and it is a form of political activism. Activism does not necessarily mean marching the streets with your fist held high, holding signs about a corrupt government or a loud mega phone in front of city hall. It can also mean to simply be in a room where one stands alone in front of crowded group of people to them laugh. And as she continued to say, "I truly believe that artists and stand-up comedians in particular are modern day preachers in a way. And stand up comedy is one of the only pure art forms left, meaning that there is no committee, no executive, no writer, no producer, no director, , no FCC. There is nobody that can tell you what you can say or do, so you can truly do anything on stage. And that is what I love doing. Being a stand-up comedian is the freedom of speech being exercised...What I would like is to have so

many Asian American comedians to the point that it is not even a topic of conversation. No one asks that about Caucasian stand-up comedy. What I want is [for people] to channel their God energy to their art."

For such a person of talented ability to paint a picture of Suzanne Whang and describe the plethora of careers, awards, and characters she has achieved is art. It is a Monet-like work in which one must stand back and take -in the entire body of work to see the beauty of it all. And much a like a Monet, getting up close and personal tells an entirely different story and the allure, response, and most importantly the emotion unveils the true artistry of her work and voice.