

Q. Can you introduce yourself and tell us a little about who you are?

A. My name is Kaylee Park, and I am currently a junior at Passaic County Technical Institute in the school of Communication Arts. I am a second generation Korean American, born and raised in New Jersey. Since I was little, the arts have always been my passion, whether that be through music, performance, writing, or visual art. Being able to share my paintings and artwork with others makes me beyond happy, and I hope to inspire others who see themselves in my work.

Q. How did it feel when you found out you were a winner?

A. I was honestly thrilled to find out that I was the winner of this competition, as I haven't entered many art based competitions until recently. I am grateful for such a title, and beyond happy that my work was able to speak to people and stand out.

Q. Can you tell us about the idea behind your work?

A. The idea behind my work came first from wondering what culturally significant moment I could touch on that would be relatable for many like me. Growing up, two of the things that would bother me were people acting as if I were negatively different, and people "yucking my yum". The food from my culture is very important to me and I can with no shame say I love it! However when I was younger it was difficult for me to express my likes around friends and strangers, since my lunch wasn't the typical deli meat sandwich with a bag of chips. Growing up, seeing a thermos packed in my lunch was a mix of excitement for food that I enjoyed, and embarrassment for having something strange and unfamiliar to others.

Q. What are you most proud of in your piece?

A. Despite the seemingly sad message behind my work, what I'm proud of is that my painting isn't meant just to be a flashback and remembrance of feeling different. This piece is meant as a self reminder of growth from being embarrassed to express my love for my culture to embracing it and loving it confidently. To this day I still pack rice in the small purple thermos featured, and my friends would never even think to judge me for what I enjoy. The faces of the children sitting beside me in the painting are the faces of the friends I sit with at lunch now, whose elementary pictures I compiled and photoshopped for my reference. My painting symbolizes growth, not shame.

Q. What do you hope resonates with people when they experience your work?

A. I hope that people can view my art and feel seen by our shared experiences. It's always reassuring to know that other people have been through the same troubles that you had, but even better and more empowering to see others' growth from those same experiences. I hope to see my art help people feel recognized and reconnected with their culture.