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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Asian Arts Initiative Teams with Amber Art and Design For Youth-Driven Social Practice Art Exhibition Based On North Philly's Corner Stores**

*"Corner Store (Take-Out Stories)," on view June 6 – August 22, explores neighborhood cross-cultural interactions in collaboration with Asian Arts Initiative's Youth Arts Workshop*

PHILADELPHIA — In collaboration with **Asian Arts Initiative**, artists **Keir Johnston** and **Ernel Martinez** of **Amber Art and Design** are using the ubiquitous city corner store as a focal point to explore cross-cultural interactions among Philadelphia's pan-ethnic black and Asian communities. Often located in lower-class neighborhoods' food deserts, corner stores are a place of forced commercial contact, but not often thought of as a space for positive social interaction. The culmination of a months-long visual art and community engagement project, **Corner Store (Take-Out Stories) (June 6 – Aug. 22)** turns to art as a means of fostering empathy and mutual understanding between neighborhood groups. Artworks on view in Asian Arts Initiative's gallery space will range from photographs, video and mixed-media portraits to pop-up performances in which Asian Arts Initiative's middle-school **Youth Arts Workshop (YAW)** participants will conduct business in mock "corner store" structures, using handmade currency and merchandise and selling goods behind a Plexiglas window.

Lunch breaks at Amber Art and Design are frequently spent grabbing a quick meal from the only available locations — neighborhood corner stores. The idea for *Corner Store (Take-Out Stories)* emerged from multiple conversations with Johnston, Martinez and exhibition curator **Katherine Shozawa** as they observed the dynamics between customers and store owners. The artists then began the process of opening a dialogue "from both sides of the glass" about Philadelphia's corner stores, where owners work nonstop in less-than-satisfactory conditions with little hope of improving their financial circumstances. "One of the major points of this project is to collect the stories from one community and share them with another," Johnston says. To that end, the first phase of *Corner Store* is an information-gathering period, in which the artists are surveying corner store owners and neighborhood residents about their experiences as both purveyors and customers. The project will produce a survey of new immigrant-owned businesses in North Philadelphia.

Another major component of *Corner Store* is the artists' collaboration with local youth. Under Johnston and Martinez's guidance, middle-schoolers enrolled in Asian Arts Initiative's Youth Arts Workshop summer program (July 7 – August 15) will build their own corner stores, including woodworking, painting, sculpting and photographing their creations; they will also "perform" acts of commerce, buying and selling goods in their created structures.

A team of YAW students will serve as a video documentary team to record the research phase of the exhibition from April through June, during which time the students will also organize Chinese take-out/corner store walking tours of Chinatown North. Amber Art and Design works with youth in the majority of their work, especially with a public engagement process. "They are the ones who frequent these stores as often as anyone," Johnston says. "In working with the youth to help define the story for the *Corner Store*, they will have a better sense of what their community means and a broadened scope of what the definition of art is."

Amber Art and Design artists view visual art as a rich platform for the multiple perspectives of intercultural exchange, a concept driving their growing body of work that includes a 2013 installation at the National Museum of American Jewish History connecting the history of textiles with the Jewish immigration experience. "Art allows for an easier transition and the facilitation of dialogue over diverse and complex issues that normal forms of speech cannot approach with the same level of success," Johnston says. The artists hope that increasing the consciousness of corner store experiences through the exhibition will help the community gain a new perspective and a heightened level of advocacy for everyday corner store exchanges.

Adds **Gayle Isa**, Asian Arts Initiative's executive director: "*Corner Store* follows on the heels of our 20th anniversary exhibition *PARTICIPATE*, which also addressed the important issue of cross-cultural race relations. This work is at the core of our mission and the reason we founded Asian Arts Initiative in 1993: to connect cultural expression with social change. We encourage young people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to participate in our Youth Arts Workshop, to harness their creativity in a positive way."

Asian Arts Initiative is located at 1219 Vine St., Philadelphia, PA 19107. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday, 12-6 p.m., and by special appointment. Admission to the gallery is free. For more information, call 215-557-4055 or visit [www.asianartsinitiative.org](http://www.asianartsinitiative.org).

### **Schedule of Events**

#### ***Corner Store***

*June 1 – August 22, 2014*

Asian Arts Initiative

1219 Vine St.

Philadelphia, PA 19107

**Opening Reception:** Friday, June 6, 6-8 p.m. (details TBA)

**First Friday Open House:** Friday, August 1, 6-8 p.m.

**Closing Reception, in conjunction with Youth Arts Workshop summer celebration:** Friday, August 15, 6-8 p.m.

#### ***Youth Arts Workshop Summer Program***

*July 7 – August 15, 2014*

Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m.—3:30 p.m.

Registration deadline: June 23, 2014

### **About Youth Arts Workshop**

Youth Arts Workshop (YAW) is a safe and fun space and idea lab for young people entering grades 6-8 to create socially engaged art. We use a multidisciplinary and community-based approach to promote learning, cross-cultural understanding, and leadership. In addition to participating in the *Corner Store* build, the 2014 YAW summer program will include mural making, guitar and open studio sessions led by professional artists. Sliding scale tuition and scholarships are available. For a complete schedule or to register, contact Thao Tran at [thao@asianartsinitiative.org](mailto:thao@asianartsinitiative.org) or (215) 557-0455, ext. 228. More at <http://asianartsinitiative.org/programs/youth-arts-workshop>.

### **About Amber Art and Design**

Amber Art and Design is comprised of five international public artists with years of specialized experience: Ernel Martinez, Keir Johnston, Willis Humphrey and Charles Barbin. Based in Philadelphia, PA, Amber Art and Design is committed to creating meaningful public art that continually challenges the norm with innovative designs and cutting edge fabrication.

### **About Asian Arts Initiative**

A meeting place, an idea lab, a support system, and an engine for positive change, Asian Arts Initiative strives to empower communities through the richness of art. We believe in a universal human capacity for creativity, and we support local art and artists as a means of interpreting, sharing, and shaping contemporary cultural identity. For more information, please call 215-557-0455 or visit [www.asianartsinitiative.org](http://www.asianartsinitiative.org).

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**To request photos, interviews and more information, please contact:**

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