Artist Jaana Baker talks about motherhood and Filipino American identity in her first solo show
After giving birth to her daughter, artist Jaana Baker felt an urgency to paint.

She had dropped out of Cal State Fullerton’s art program years prior and decided to return. Becoming a mother made Baker reevaluate her upbringing, identity and her voice.

“I always wanted to have my voice be heard, but I just didn’t know how to do it,” Baker said via Zoom from her home studio in La Mirada. “I became much more of an open and emotional person. Before I had my daughter, I was kind of
hardened and I was internalizing a lot of things. For some reason after having her, I felt a lot more open to make work about myself and my experiences.”

The now 37-year-old graduated with an art degree last fall and two weeks ago opened her first solo exhibit at City of Brea Art Gallery called “Poppies and Sampaguitas.”

The gallery puts out a yearly call for its “Made in California” juried exhibit and for the last five years has also chosen an artist to feature in a solo show to run concurrently with the exhibit.

In a 20-foot-by-12-foot room within the gallery, Baker’s body of work (chosen out of 157 applicants) is spread out into photography, painting, sculpture and textile design. The pieces are a result of Baker’s unpacking of what it means to be a Filipino American woman that she started two years ago.

The crux of the show is one single dress glowing in the corner of the room. It’s fashioned in the shape of a traditional Filipino dress called a terno and hand-constructed out of holographic, clear PVC material — a meshing of both tradition and modernity.

The dress was inspired by artist Wang Jin’s traditional Chinese robes made with industrial material featured in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s “The Allure of Matter: Material Art From China.”
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In the photographs lining the wall, Baker wears the dress in front of iconic places in California speaking to her experience of being born in the Philippines and immigrating to Southern California as a child — La Habra’s In-N-Out, a taco truck and a 99 Cents Only store. In another set of photos with Baker nearly nude, she contends with the pressures put on women’s bodies. Wrapped in textile she made based on an indigenous tribe pattern, Baker photographs the trajectory she took to get in touch with Filipino culture.

“It felt like she was putting it all out there, quite literally, to explore a topic, and she didn’t have an answer yet,” said Heather Bowling, Brea Art Gallery director and curator. “We all use art as tools for exploration or to convey concepts or emotions and so she’s using this series as a way to try to find herself and continue to express her dual identities as one.”

Baker described cultural expectations and gender roles as painful.
“When I left home and got married, my relationship to my culture got better over time, especially after I had my daughter,” Baker said. “I really wanted to have a grounded sense of identity in my native culture. I wanted to be a catalyst or a conduit for that in case she wants to explore it.”

In the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, Asian American identity has been a household discussion. Baker’s 7-year-old daughter saw a photo of someone holding a sign reading “Stop Asian Hate,” and she had to have a talk she thought she could put off until her child is at least age 10 — the time period Baker said she started to experience microaggressions and later (as a teen) fetishization.

Baker isn’t done with the series either. In the past year, she joined a Filipino folk dance group called Kayamanan Ng Lahi, who are performing on June 12 in lieu of an exhibit opening reception. She’s also continuing to build other items out of the holographic material — a fan and a traditional Filipino men’s shirt.

“I was hiding myself from the beauty of my culture for a long time, and I’m just starting to find it,” Baker said.

If you go

What: “Made in California” and “Poppies and Sampaguitas”
Where: Brea Gallery, 1 Civic Center Circle, Brea and in a virtual gallery
When: April 24 to June 18, Wednesday to Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.
Cost: General admission, $3; seniors, military and students, $2; free for Brea residents and children under 12
Info: (714) 990-7731 or brea-gallery.squarespace.com
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