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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

a grain of rice embedded in my chest

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Cat Gunn

Committee in Charge:

Professor Monique van Genderen, Chair
Professor Mohammad Kazim Ali
Professor Anya Gallaccio
Professor Janelle Iglesias

2023

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University of California San Diego
2023

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Lola and Lolo, Abuelina Villanueva Castro and Olpiano Dibuisio Sibulan, both of whom I never got to meet and yet we existed under the same sky. Their stories humble me as I sift through our family's modest beginnings of poverty in Manila.

To my mother, Lida Castro Sibulan, who serves as my lifeline to our Asian ancestry. Her efforts in sharing her narrative, even when difficult, made this work possible. Her perseverance through countless hardships made my life as an artist possible.

And lastly, to my dear friends and peers, Naomi Nadreau, Junyi Min, Heige Kim, and Kirstyn Hom. From the bottom of my ever-expanding heart, thank you for holding space to process and dream. You helped me find the AAPI community I didn't know I needed during this MFA program.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

a grain of rice embedded in my chest

by

Cat Gunn

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Monique van Genderen, Chair

a grain of rice embedded in my chest is an installation consisting of a central, wooden structure that holds material studies, ceramic sculptures, found objects, personal photographs, live plants, candles, incense, rice water, and uncooked jasmine rice. I am grappling with the intersection of an untold familial history and my queer personal history. This work extends a series of gestures of ancestral offerings, material investigations, and creative-fictional poetics that together contemplate endless possibilities across various temporalities. My conceptual framing is informed by racial melancholia theory, painterly methods of making, and Asian American literature, film, and poetry. By reaching backwards through time in this fragmented

history and using fiction to bridge connections, I am able to orient myself as I move forward. As my immigrant mother felt the pressure to assimilate as a means to survive, I am now longing for something that has always been near yet just out of reach. By playing with dichotomies and hovering between them— real/not real, fiction/non-fiction, figurative/abstract, light/dark, masculine/feminine, past/future, near/far— this work contemplates endless potentialities of what is, what could have been, and what will be.



“The pull of ancestry. How without stint I could love someone I will never meet...”¹

Durga Chew-Bose



¹ Durga Chew-Bose, “Heart Museum,” in *Too Much and Not the Mood*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017) 27-28.

Introduction

My therapist asked me recently if I thought I felt generational trauma in my body. Shocked and astounded at the thought, I had to smile and laugh uncomfortably as I said, “I’m so sure I do, but how would you even know what that feels like?” Being transgender has forced me to have a hyper awareness of my body. It is surreal to experience my body aging through my late 20s, yet grow in ways an adolescent body would. My jawline slowly becomes more defined. My mustache begins to grow. My voice deepens. Weight shifts away from my hips. So where is this generational trauma sitting in my body, physically manifesting?

In not knowing my maternal family history, I feel a sense of grief. Even filled with sorrow, I remember that grief is fertile ground. It can be turned into fertile ground in learning someone’s story, so that you can know how to honor them. Knowing can open up opportunities on how to process, and gestures can strengthen and deepen connections. This is the work of healing.

I’m reminded of my mother’s china cabinet. A large, bulky structure with crystal clear glass windows. The grain of the wood, maybe oak, smells faintly of Lemon Pledge. The metal drawer handles have an ornamental curvature that is echoed in the feet of the cabinet. I remember looking into the cabinet and seeing all the precious objects it held. The tableware we took out only on holidays. Crystal glasses my mom bought to give her children when they would eventually marry. Small antique statues that marked our home as being an Asian one, because even when we don’t know or can’t name it we can still tell when it makes us *feel* more Asian. These objects together forge a collection that occupy multiple temporalities; this cabinet holds the possibilities of merging the past, present, and future in a single space. How can this structure hold the potential to honor and offer, and contemplate how histories collide?



Before entering the gallery you must enter a smaller entrance room. As you enter the room, you are greeted by a green, worn out, ornamental rug. The rug shows discoloration on

one end, from when my mother had tried to clean it once and accidentally lifted some of the colors off the fibers. The rug softens your steps as you step through two heavy, black curtains at the entrance of the gallery. As you enter the black box, a central installation is staged with spotlights lighting only the 10 foot high, 26 foot long, and 2 foot deep wooden structure adorned with various objects. The stillness of sculptures contrast the erratic movements of candles flickering and smoke dancing. The smell of incense fills the room, allowing some viewers to be transported somewhere familiar and others to be transported somewhere foreign. The heat of the spotlights fills the room with a warmth that contrasts the chilled air outside. Spotlights vary from warm lights to violet lights, highlighting various arrangements in differing illuminations. Situated in the center of the room, the walls fade away into a black abyss, disorienting the viewer's sense of space and yet directing them to carefully approach the installation. A 20 foot long ornamental runner rug sits in the front of the installation, allowing viewers an echoed sensation of softness from the green rug at the entrance. The potential of the black box allows this work to harness a moment of time that felt simultaneously in the past, in the future, and present.



Fig. 1: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot.



Fig. 2: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* installation shot.

Untold Familial Histories

My mother has spoken so little about her own life that my maternal family history feels virtually unknown. Over the past couple of years, I've tried to ask my mom questions to get more information: What was it like growing up in Manila? Where are your parents from? What did lola² and lolo³ do for work? Records were hardly kept, so I'm left working with a nearly non-existent archive. I am eager to know and understand, and therefore eager to believe. There are Filipino photographic archives that I've found in some of my searches, but their subject matter is often staged ethnographic images that perpetuate racist stereotypes. I've even searched for family members in various ancestry databases in hopes of seeing even a fragment of a family tree, but those also lead nowhere. One search engine had a "Philippines Births and Baptisms, 1642-1994" database— this index turned up no results for my family no matter what names I tried. Yet, when I switched to having no specific index on the same search engine, I tried using my dad's info (Richard Gunn, born 1951) and he came up immediately as the first result under the index "California Birth Index, 1905-1995." Maybe this is just evidence that since my mother's family grew up in poverty, their records were handled with less care. It could also be that erasure has endured beyond the colonization of the Philippines and some familial histories are lost to time.

The work I am producing is coming from the desire to know more. I am endlessly engaging in an investigative mode to get even a piece of information that could lead to more. My studio practice has become the act of wanting to discover and engaging in a creative-fictional mode that builds the bridge to my Asian ancestry. I say "fictional" because while I am slowly uncovering some of this history, there are many absences where I must forge a connection. However, I don't feel the need to fill in all the blanks. Sometimes the absence is necessary, just as a break and pause is necessary in a poem; the importance of hovering between and rhythm.

² "Grandmother" in tagalog.

³ "Grandfather" in tagalog.

In having to ask myself what my intentions are, asking my mom for information, and dreaming of what her hometown is like, it becomes more about the fiction and potentials. Given the parameters I have to work with and that oftentimes my searches lead me to dead ends, I've begun using fiction to gesture towards desires that I have. My desire to see and know my ancestral islands. My desire to honor ancestors who may or may not have existed. My desire as a commitment or a force to simply *know*. I don't have all the details but I have enough to proceed in my pursuit to grasp this untold history.



Due to colonization, the culture and history of the Philippines is so deeply woven with Spanish influence. For example, when I wanted to see what the most common last names in the Philippines were, it seemed like the first (at least) 100 most popular surnames were of Spanish descent, including two of my familial names on my lola's side— Castro and Villanueva. My lolo's familial names— Sibulan and Dibuisio— nowhere to be found on the list (Sibulan does come up as a surname in the Philippines, but Dibuisio hasn't come up yet in my searches).

Surname	Similarity	Worldwide Incidence	Prevalency
Saibulan	93	231	 / 
Sibulane	93	1	 / 
Sibullan	93	1	 / 
Saibulang	88	34	 / 
Shibulane	88	1	 / 
Sibulon	86	77	 / 
Jibulan	86	33	 / 
Sebulan	86	28	 / 
Sibolan	86	16	 / 
Cibulan	86	3	 / 

Fig. 3: A chart showing surnames that may be derivative of the Filipino surname “Sibulan.” These names are predominantly found in the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Africa.




















Surname	Similarity	Worldwide Incidence	Prevalency
D'blasio	94	1	 / 
Diblasioj	94	1	 / 
Diblaso	93	2	 / 
Deblasio	88	1,935	 / 
Divlasio	88	1	 / 
Deblasios	82	8	 / 
D'Eblasio	82	1	 / 
Deblasioe	82	1	 / 
Deblaso	80	23	 / 
Deblaiso	75	10	 / 

Fig. 4: After a similar search for the surname “Dibuisio” I was directed to statistics for the surname “Diblasio.” This chart shows the names that may be derivative of this Italian surname. These names are predominantly found in the United States, Canada, Argentina, and England.

Aside from their names and two small, framed photos of my lola and lolo, I have virtually no information on them. The portraits of them are two of the only objects in my family home that I could have identified as being from my mom’s life in the Philippines. These small, precious portraits always sat on my mom’s bedroom altar, surrounded by adornments of Roman Catholic statues, rosary, and offerings. I wonder if the lack of physical Filipino objects in our home was due to the pressures of having to maintain an assimilated, military family home? I wonder if there were even objects in our home that were saturated with colonial and imperial history that I couldn’t identify as such. Regardless, without these two portraits and a few stories my mom has shared with me about her parents, they are nearly lost to history. That is another motivation for me to do this research.



In *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han state the melancholic, “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.”⁴ In never having had access to my lola, lolo, and other maternal relatives, questions around familial histories become more apparent. Why can my mother’s familial history only be found in fragments? Why wasn’t I raised in a household that also spoke Tagalog? Why have I never been allowed to visit the motherland on the rare occasion my mom has gone?

Eng and Han describe racial melancholia as unresolved grief and depression due to the process of assimilation, immigration, and racialization. This theory develops from experiences of racial exclusion and discrimination. While mourning is a process of gradually letting go, melancholia cannot get over this loss. Eng and Han refer to this loss in the inability for Asian Americans to blend into the melting pot, and how “Asian Americans’ ideals of whiteness are perpetually stained— continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal.”⁵ Being mixed race with both Asian and white ancestry, this notion feels amplified; in one sense, I occupy both identities all the time, and yet there is never a moment where I can exist beyond this in-between. The unattainable distance implied in existing in-between holds tension and a slightly more ambiguous experience of otherness. Further, being mixed in the western world has added to the pressures to assimilate. My mother has pushed us to assimilate to compensate for the ways that she will remain a perpetual foreigner in this country.

Eng and Han’s racial melancholia reminds me closely of Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings*. Hong defines these minor feelings as the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic.⁶ Minor feelings involve a sense of lack, the knowledge that this lack is a social construction, and the resentment of those who constructed

⁴ David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018). 38.

⁵ Ibid, 36.

⁶ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. (New York: One World, 2020) 55.

it.⁷ It's almost as if you live under a constant gaslighting, where someone is making you question your own reality or perception of what the Asian American experience is. The fact that I cannot speak or understand Tagalog is a minor feeling. Begging my mother to teach me and the frustration of not understanding why she wouldn't have just raised me bilingual is a minor feeling. Hong articulates that the predicament of the Asian American writer is to fear that both your existence and your interpretation of that existence will always be read the wrong way. I wonder if this is due to the myth of the "model minority," in which a minority group is perceived as having achieved success through hard work and determination, thus serving as an inspiring model for other minority groups saying "we did it, so can you!" Reflecting back to Eng and Han, this model minority myth relates to the compelling fantasy and lost ideal of Asian Americans' ideals of whiteness. This myth is truly just a myth, used as a device to alienate people of color away from other groups of color.

Hong describes moments in which people have told her "Asians are next in line to be white." As she deconstructs this notion, Hong replaces the word "white" with "disappear."⁸ Asians are next in line to disappear, known for being accomplished, law-abiding, and trapped in this country's amnesiac fog. We will not be the power but become absorbed by power, not share the power of whites but be stooges to a white ideology that exploited our ancestors.⁹ Instead of "becoming white" we are really meant to become invisible. I am considering invisibility in the ways it relates to erasure; perhaps this is why so many immigrant familial histories go untold, because silence collects, becomes amplified, becomes misread, and eventually passes into something forgotten. What can you do when colonization is embedded in your family's history, in your genetic background, and even in your features? In reading *Minor Feelings*, it was as if I could feel layers of generational trauma peeling back, a deep buzzing that emanated from my chest and sent tremors throughout my body. It was as if Hong's words

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 35.

⁹ Ibid.

cut through me with a surgical precision to find a dormant discomfort that I became accustomed to ignoring. Now that I remember it's there, what do I do?



The history of the Asian American involves assimilation and repression, but the details that are often forgotten are that it also involves radicalism and invention. The term “Asian American” was invented by student activists in California in the 1960s, who were inspired by the civil-rights movement and dreamed of activating a coalition of people from immigrant backgrounds who might organize against structural inequality. There was nothing before it; Asians would have either identified by their nationality or were called Oriental. The creation of this term is powerful, and sets a precedent that our systems of identification are ever-expansive as new identities, intersectionalities, and communities come forth. The activist Chris Iijima said, “It was less a marker for what one was and more for what one believed.”¹⁰ I am making this work not to find direct answers, but as a means of searching and dreaming of possibilities. This work is trying to recognize, narrate, and come to terms with an inevitable loss in my family’s assimilation, immigration, and diasporic history.



This inevitable loss that was on track to happen decades before I was born.



¹⁰ Ibid, 190.

An Altar, Or Something Close To It

The installation consists of vertical and horizontal beams that separate the work into fragments. Thinking of these separations as framing devices, the work elicits paintings and drawings of interiors and still lifes. In some moments, the work is maximalist with many objects situated within a single frame. Reading the installation from left to right, there are six frames, each containing a different composition.

To the far left of the installation, there are two small shelves in the first frame that hold altar-like moments. The first one is seen most clearly from the side of the installation, where the viewer can see nearly all the compositions layered over one another. This shelf holds a delicate, white doily which my mother crocheted. On top of the doily sits a single, ceramic Philippine peso with the subtle relief of an ox and a bowl of black, frothy, lava-like glazes that hold a ceramic mango with a single star painted on it. The mango is reminiscent of a Dragon Ball from the popular 90s anime series of the same name. A short, decorative vessel with green patterns and a dragon serves as an incense holder, and the accumulation of ash falls onto the shelf and onto the black floor below it. Beneath the incense burner with wisps of smoke is a photo of an Asian woman with a pixie cut and two toddlers. In the photo, the woman is smiling while watching the children play with a bundle of balloons, each an orb of color obscuring the surrounding landscape. The woman is my mother, Lida. The older child is my eldest sister, Siobhan, and the younger child looking away is my sister, Morgan. Both born in the Philippines, they are only two years apart from each other and accompanied my mother when she immigrated out of the motherland with my father. This photo is one of only a handful of photos I have of my family before my mom decided to send all our photos to a distant relative whom she can't remember, and therefore I can't contact. The photo is obscured by the violet spot light and the shadow of the mango and bowl, but the illumination of a white pillar candle allows just enough light for the viewer to see the image.

The second shelf in this frame is much smaller. Upon a 4 inch post jutting out from one of the beams, a blow flocked shelf is held with an orange clamp. Upon the blue velvety surface,

an eight person Chinese pin cushion holds a photo of two Filipino people dancing while wearing barongs. The pin cushion is just like the one my mother had while I was growing up, but it was one I found while going through a thrift store in San Diego. The people in the photo hold their arms out as they dance, with the woman closing her eyes and the man looking towards her. The violet light transforms the sepia tone of the photograph into an intense magenta. In front of the pin cushion and photo, sit two small rocks. The rocks were found at Torrey Pines State Beach as I walked through the waves of the Pacific Ocean. I used some of these rocks in an experiment to see if they could be glazed and fired in the kiln. While some rocks crumbled from the intense heat, some survived and became rocks embellished with glazes.

Between and below these shelves, a large fan palm tree sits with orchids attached to its trunks. The magenta flowers of the orchid glow from the violet spotlights, and point us to the large vessel next to it. The vase has a round base, an engorged center, and a tiny mouth. The vessel is textured with a black, pumice-like surface, as if it had once been covered in molten lava. Floating above, a shelf holds two black planters with blooming orchids. The flowers are just beyond the peak of their bloom, and have begun to fall to the ground below them. The ground below is painted black, but the texture of chip plywood shows through. Nearly missed in the shadow of the large black vessel, a bittermelon half made from a black clay sits as if emerging from the plywood. Next to this bittermelon a pile of ash is forming from the incense above, falling over the edge of the platform and onto the floor of the black box gallery.

The importance of the structure that my objects rest on isn't its specificity, but rather its non-specificity. The wood is so non-specific— just 2x4s and plywood— that it could be purchased nearly anywhere in the world, and therefore I could build this as a new iteration anywhere in the world. Altars and graves are two examples of sites where we may leave offerings, and they can be erected anywhere in the world. For example, I've seen many roadside altars on city streets, intersections, and backroads adorned with personal effects, flowers, candles, stuffed animals, money, and photographs while driving in my car. My wooden

structure exists as a modular altar-like construction. Modular as in the sculpture can be broken down and rebuilt as a new version of the structure. Altar-like as in the sculpture is activated with various objects that I contribute as offerings. Reminiscing on my mother's china cabinet, I am less interested in the sturdiness of that structure and more aim for precarity; for a configuration to maintain a precarious nature but hold something precious. Meditating on arrangements, objects, and histories, I begin to wonder: How can materials be revealing but also add complications? How can we purposefully complicate reads and identifications? How can withholding be used as a tool to obscure?



Rashid Johnson's work has become a source of inspiration, giving me visual cues on understanding systems of collection and how to display them. I am especially drawn to Johnson's shelf pieces. His shelves are made from black wax, pieces of mirrors, tiles, and branded wood, all materials chosen to portray notions of domestic objects and to make us aware of their construction. Johnson lines the shelves with moments of his Afro-centric material life, adding books he reads, records he listens to, and things he applies to his body. This arrangement of objects becomes a stand-in for the artist and his cultural affiliations, creating a narrative that the viewer can begin to read as they move through the work. Johnson's *Capsule*, a large gridded sculpture that attempts to capture and organize his ideas and concerns, was also a great source of inspiration. The title illustrates an attempt of the artist to hold time, and the use of this sculpture to place and gather, perform, and reflect. Formally, the work displays what appears to be a perfect grid of right angles, each cube the same size and housing various grow lights, plants, books, and other domestic objects. This system of collecting reflects upon how we acquire knowledge from objects that surround us. Placed in the larger context of his practice that investigates themes of anxiety and escapism through

meditations on race and class, I wonder if Johnson is working through how to place himself in these histories?

Anne Anlin Cheng assesses the ways that bodies can relate to objects by exploring moments of history in which bodies, specifically Asian feminine bodies, were once seen as objects themselves. Cheng also explores the ways in which specific modes of representation, racialization, and adorning the body aided in this exoticized image. She uses the term “alchemy” to refer to the transformation of persons into things and the byproducts of those transformations.¹¹ In relation to altars, I wonder if there is an alchemy to engaging with abstraction to create an offering for my ancestors? I am thinking of Cheng’s *Ornamentalism* as a methodology that makes space for, in lieu of traditional notions of agency, the unexpected and even unspeakable forms and residues of ontology and survival. It makes space for stranger less-than-human or spiritual agency that can erupt out of moments of ornamentalist transformation. So how can this be used to assess the potentiality of my ancestors who have no formal birth, death, or other records of existence that I can find?

I am actively working on the discrepancy between presence and absence as it relates to embodiment and abstraction. This has manifested through working with altar-like structures to honor ancestors whom I’ve never met. The ancestors are real, but in fantasizing how I could love them a fictive element becomes introduced. I know their names, but I do not know *who* they were. I must also take into account that much of what I know has been from my mother’s memories, and memories can shift with time. These variables create opportunities to utilize abstraction, whether by formal material investigations or through arrangements that allow for poetic narratives to be formed. How can objects be staged to show that an ancestor is being honored? What evidence is there that I am maintaining these offerings, and does it become ingrained in the installation and thus part of the artwork?

¹¹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 19.



Fig. 5: Rashid Johnson, *Triple Consciousness*, 2009, black soap, black wax and pigment, vinyl, shea butter, and brass. Photo Courtesy: Monique Meloche Gallery. <https://www.moniquemeloche.com/artists/42-rashid-johnson/works/11238-rashid-johnson-triple-consciousness-2009/>. Accessed August 16, 2023.

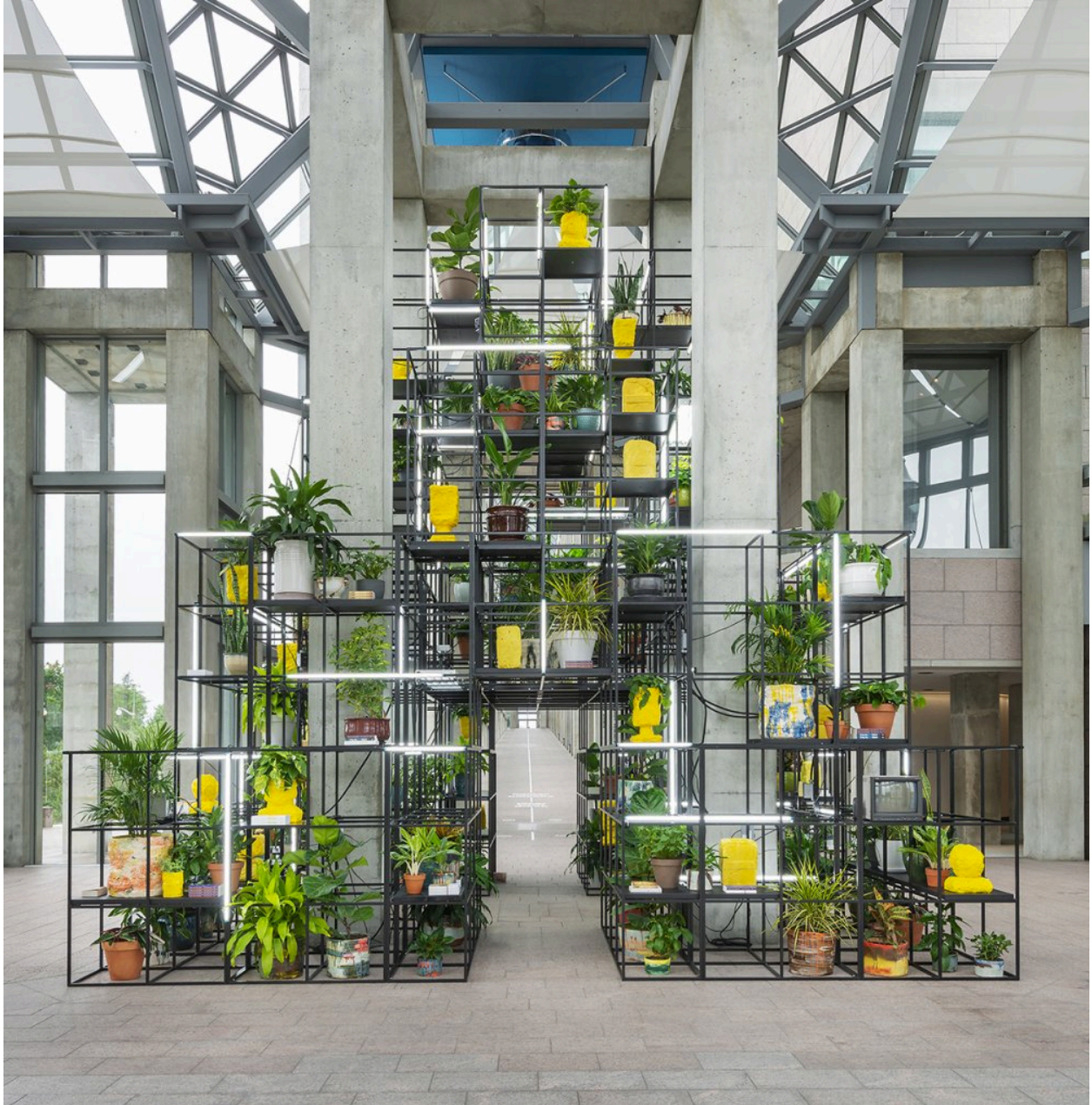


Fig. 6: Rashid Johnson, *Capsule*, 2020-21, powder-coated steel, plants, ceramics, rugs, fiberglass, shea butter, books, video, monitors, and grow lights. Photo Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/the-art-of-rashid-johnson-an-effective-delivery-system-and-tool-for-change>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 7: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot, frame one.



Fig. 8: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.



Fig. 9: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.



Fig. 10: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.



Fig. 11: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.

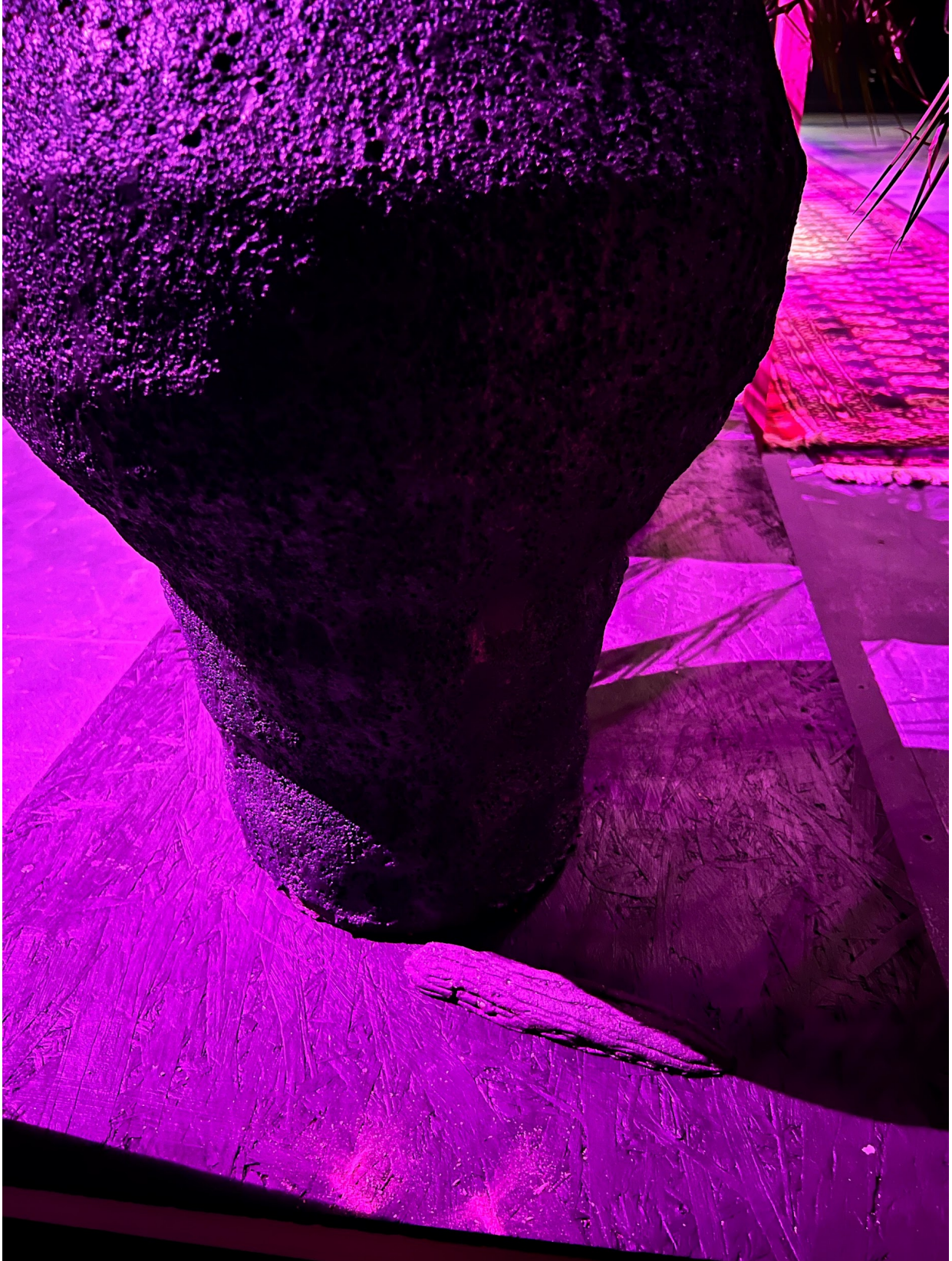


Fig. 12: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.

Everything Everywhere All At Once

Moving into the second frame, the bottom shelf is covered with an Egyptian patterned rug that is slightly too big and folds over itself on one edge. The rug holds a pile of jackfruit, each with a different surface. Some hold a matte glaze of a single color, some have glittery, metallic, or luster surfaces, and some have more textural surfaces with crackling, crawling glazes or lava glazes. When seen from the front of the installation, the viewer sees the jackfruit piled up, balancing on the ones below it. When the viewer sees this fragment from the back, they find a surreal moment of one jackfruit that has been broken open and rice spills out from its mouth. The pile of uncooked rice cascades out of the luster, black jackfruit spilling onto the rug and even further onto the black floor. This rug, like the green, ornamental rug at the entrance, was given to me by my mom before I moved to San Diego. They were both acquired long before I was born, one in Okinawa and one in Denver. They have existed in various placements in my apartment and my studio, just as they had existed in various placements in the many homes we occupied when I was growing up. Incorporating them into the work reminds me that any place can feel like home when adorned with the objects that make us feel comfortable and sentimental. The jackfruit serves as a motif to my lola, Abuelina Villanueva Castro. When my mom was growing up, my lola worked in a cannery that focused on canning jackfruit. My mom said that jackfruit was a household staple since my lola was occasionally allowed to take a few cans home from work. When I became vegan, jackfruit became a common substitute for meat. Now that I know it holds a place in my familial history, I feel much closer to it as a sentimental food, like suddenly it holds a space in my heart that it hadn't before.

Contrasting the heavy pile of ceramic jackfruit beneath it, in a singular moment of minimalism a tiny ceramic bottle with a reflective, metallic glaze sits on a black flocked shelf. Adorned with a violet spot light, the bottle itself has no label or inscription to clue the viewer in on what it is exactly. If the viewer walks to the back of the work, they have a chance to see a line of bottles on the bottom of the structure. The bottles appear to become part of the

support, holding a wooden board that supports a large black vase and a palm tree with orchids grafted onto it. If the viewer is able to get a closer look, they can read the labels: testosterone cypionate 200 MG/ML soln. The ceramic T¹² bottle is a moment of my queerness intersecting this familial history. It serves as a portrait, placing myself into this familial timeline while also placing myself into this ambiguous abyss. The black flocking softens this placement, as if to say there is comfort in being placed in-between.



Just before this work truly manifested, I finally watched *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. This film follows Evelyn Wang, a Chinese-American immigrant who, while being audited by the IRS for her laundromat business, discovers she must connect with parallel universe versions of herself in order to save the multiverse from being obliterated by a greater evil. Evelyn is a seemingly unlikely hero— as someone who is clearly frustrated with her business, the IRS, her husband, Waymond, her daughter, Joy, and overall her mundane life— and yet this immigrant Asian mother who speaks accented english is the only hope for the multiverse because she is living as the worst version of herself. Therefore, she holds an unlimited potential to become better.

Upon my first viewing, I could instantly pick up the themes of generational trauma, and how living with trauma will often inflict trauma on the ones closest to us. This is seen with Evelyn, who chose to marry Waymond even with her father’s disapproval. Feeling abandoned by her parents, she lives the rest of her life with unprocessed guilt and anger, seething like a thorn embedded in her chest. She eventually blames Waymond, and distances herself from him physically and emotionally. The judgment her father gave her for marrying Waymond she then inflicts upon her daughter Joy, leaving Joy with trauma of her own and thus passing it to the next generation. Her personal experience becomes conflated with a collective one; through

¹² Common shorthand for “testosterone.”

all of this, she is also reckoning with being a Chinese-American immigrant running a laundromat business in Los Angeles. However, we see that Evelyn is overwhelmingly lonely and does not seem to have a sense of community. As the plot of the movie progresses, Evelyn finally recognizes her trauma and the effect it has had on her family. By recognizing it she can find catharsis and begin to move on.

This film spoke to me not just for the representation of an Asian American family with an immigrant mother seeking to resolve their trauma, but in the ways that multiple universes are tapped into and various possibilities are seen and felt. In the realm of creative-fictional poetics, even the title of the film is an all-encompassing ultimate. It's not just one or two or a million things. It's *everything*. And it's not just one or two or a million places. It's *everywhere*. And it's not one at a time, a few at a time, or even a million at a time. It's *all at once*. An overwhelming intensity of the endless possible timelines, alternates, futurisms, potentials, desires, and fantasies.

The title actually gets at the idea of verse-jumping and the fracturing that gives unprecedented power to those who can do it. By being able to jump into other universes where her life has a different trajectory, Evelyn sees many lives in which she never marries Waymond, never runs a laundromat, or follows through on an ambition. By jumping into a universe where she had become a Chinese opera singer, Evelyn gains increased lung capacity. Similarly, jumping into a universe where she studied kung fu gives her amazing strength and fighting skills. These newfound skills come to her aid as she fights to stop the multiverse from being annihilated. Hilariously enough, to verse-jump you have to perform a specific action to make sure you are jumping to the right universe, and nearly all of them are absurd. We see characters eat chapstick, stick a butt plug in their anus, and pee themselves. It seems that every decision someone would make would offer a new alternate timeline. Throughout the film, Evelyn speaks in accented English. At one point, she describes a movie her family had watched with a raccoon that sat on top of a chef's head. By pulling on the chef's hair, the raccoon could control his actions and turned him from a horrible chef to an amazing chef. She calls this film

“Raccacoonie,” and Waymond and Joy correct her that she is referring to “Ratatouille” and she meant to say rat. Later in the film, we are shown an alternate timeline in which Raccacoonie is real, and Evelyn works in the kitchen with her friend who is controlled by the talking raccoon chef. Aside from just various decisions we make creating alternate dimensions, Evelyn’s bad english is so powerful that it too is able to create a new timeline.

In the film when characters achieve the ability to be everything, everywhere, all at once, their experiences become highly desaturated, they sink into nothingness, and become nihilistic. Evelyn finds peace when she becomes enlightened by the ability and thus chooses to be one thing in one place at one time. She creates importance by being selective. In an art practice where I am constantly searching for new information and filling in gaps of time with fictive possibilities, how can I create importance? Perhaps by highlighting specific moments. This installation is dedicated to all my ancestors that ever were, and yet it is dedicated with a few specific ancestors in mind. By being selective in this familial history, I have chosen to highlight specific moments of time and create specific offerings.

My mother describes her family as being relatively liberal when she was growing up; my Lola Abuelina worked in a factory that focused on canning jackfruit, and my Lolo Olpiano worked as a carpenter after denying the opportunity to pursue rice farming in the province. The details my mom offers of her parents are few and far between, and this is nearly all I know about them. The visual motifs of jackfruit and rice are direct offerings to my maternal grandparents, items that symbolize my mental union between a person and an object, an alchemy of association. And like much of my upbringing, food was the one way I was able to connect with any sense of feeling Asian.

In contemplating how to create arrangements of objects and this ideal of everything everywhere and endless potentialities, I am brought back to Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s idea of “speaking nearby.” This concept of “speaking nearby” instead of “speaking for” seems helpful

in thinking about the desire or willfulness to address a place that is not one's origin.¹³ This acknowledges the gap between yourself and the subject you are engaging with. By not speaking on their behalf, you create an opening for other people to fill in the meaning. Minh-Ha uses this strategy as a way to dismantle hierarchies of knowledge production in her filmmaking practice. In making these works that pay tribute to my lola and lolo I am not objectively making work about them, but rather about the desires I have to know and connect with them. The physical and temporal distance between me and my maternal family leaves space for me to fictionalize and fantasize.

¹³ Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha." *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 1992), 82 . <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82>



Fig. 13: Screenshot from *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, Evelyn learns to verse-jump. Image Courtesy: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6710474/>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 14: Screenshot from *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, Raccacoonie. Image Courtesy: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6710474/>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 15: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot, frame two.



Fig. 16: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame two.*

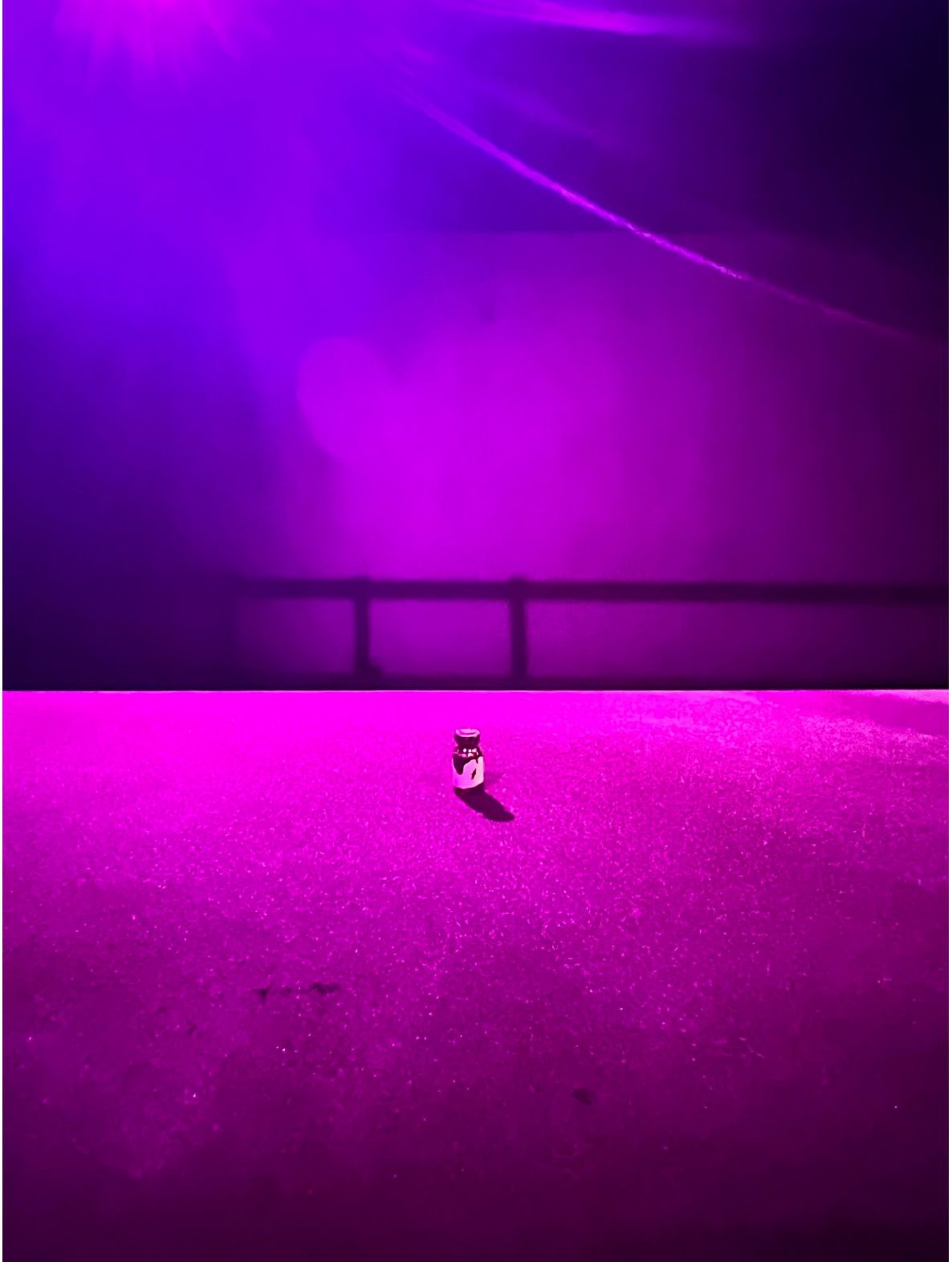


Fig. 17: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* detail shot, frame two.

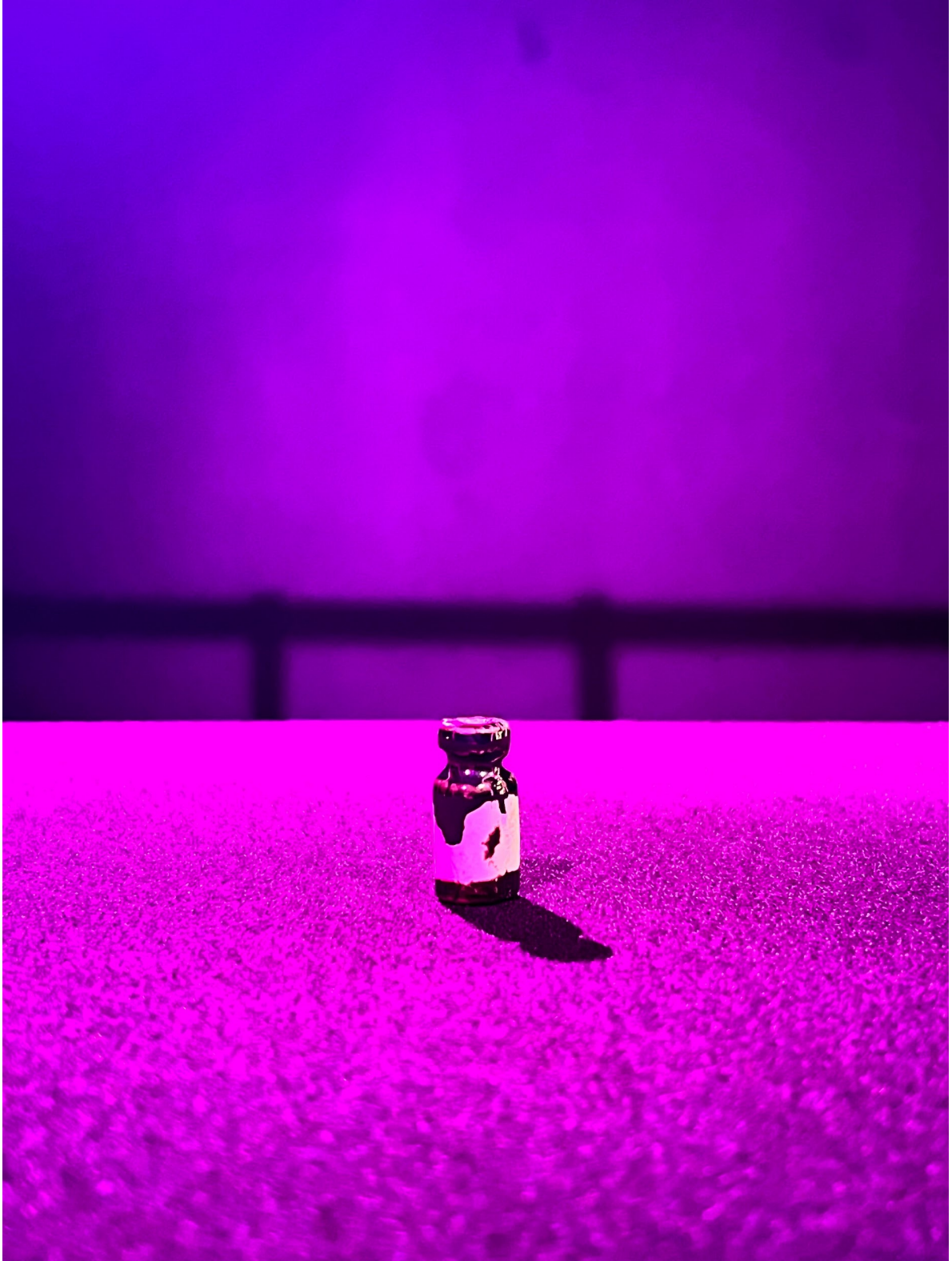


Fig. 18: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* detail shot, frame two.



Fig. 19: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.

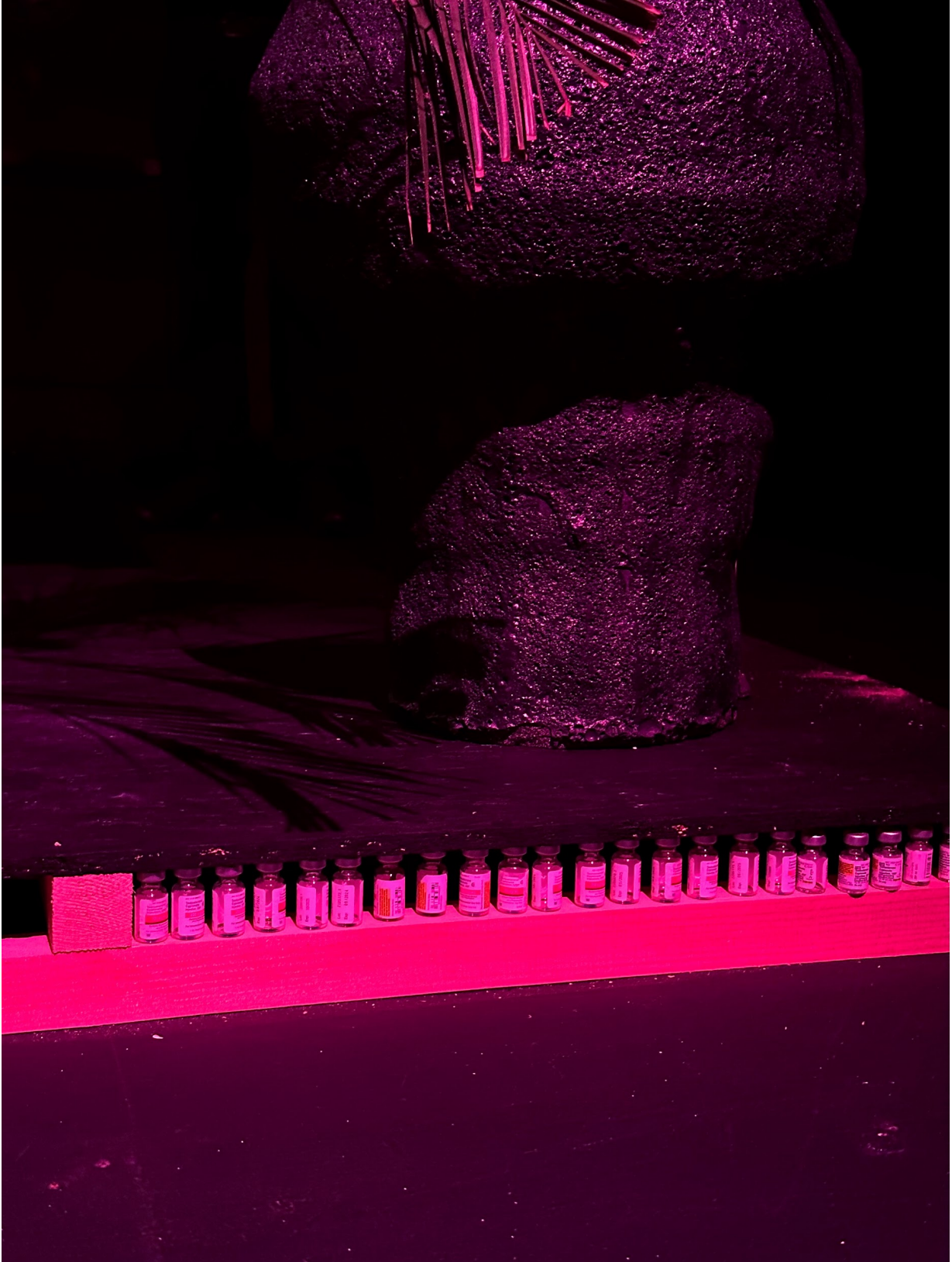


Fig. 20: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame one.

Staging and Unseen Performances

The third frame is slightly larger than the rest. A stack of wooden platforms sits, housing various ceramic sculptures, plants, photographs and found objects. In one level hidden away on the bottom of a platform, an orange clamp holds a photograph of the ocean and sky. With time, something can be seen within the textures of the waves; a figure in the sea. The platforms elevate a large, ceramic arch. The raw black clay shows beneath multitudes of thick glazes layered over one another. Nearby the arch is a ceramic mango with three stars painted on it and a black clay planter with a white frothy glaze. The planter holds a tall orchid with many aerial roots, with buds that are nearing a bloom but not yet blooming. Rising higher than the arch, a tall white planter with puffy glazes holds an orchid with white flowers. The flowers turn downward, facing a drip of glaze hanging over the edge of a broken kiln shelf, frozen in suspension. The drip would fall to the small pile of glaze beneath it, sitting on top of reflective mylar. In the reflection of the mylar are the wavy continuations of a pile of rice holding a burning pillar candle and a ceramic pillar. Similar to the arch, this pillar is adorned with multitudes of thick glazes, but here they reveal a speckled tan clay body. Near it, a small blue velvet shelf holds a bud vase with blue and yellow beaded glazes over black puffy glazes. An old photograph of oxen in a rice paddy is held in place with two rocks adorned with beaded glazes. A dried orchid flower glows in the violet lights.

Moving from the third to fourth frame, beneath the shelf sits three pillar candles on a wooden platform. Two porcelain bowls embellished with metallic glazes sit holding rice water. Next to these offerings is a stack of black ceramic stilts, arranged as if forming a small pedestal. On top, the stack elevates a short, wide bowl that matches its own clay body. Illuminated by warm, violet lights, ceramic Philippine pesos glazed in lustery-silver palladium are placed as offerings in the bowl. The platform below it holds a 20 pound bag of DYNASTY jasmine rice, torn open to allow a spillage of rice onto the rug below. Nearby this arrangement is another one that mimics the construction of the stack with porcelain stilts glazed in palladium. This stack elevates a just-as-lustery silver jackfruit. Beneath it, two mangos with

various experimental glazes sit on a reflective mylar surface, and a pile of ash continues to form from an incense burning above it. Within view but out of reach, a shelf hovers with another arrangement of objects. A potted calamansi tree bearing a single fruit opposes a tall reflective pillar sculpture. Between them, a stack of three bowls sits. The bottom bowl has a mirror-like surface, allowing for the reflection of a photograph to be seen. The reflection is hard to make out, but with time an image begins to appear; a figure in tropical vegetation.

From the backside, a new view is seen of the stacked wooden platforms, revealing more objects playfully arranged. A plain black planter with an orchid hangs over the edge of one platform. The planter is kept from falling by a few short porcelain stilts with a metallic glaze and a box labeled: testosterone cypionate 200 MG/ML soln. The precarious stack parallels the verticals of the structure around it. Among, between, and below the platforms, various arrangements can be seen; vertical stilts hiding two ceramic cat figures, a short stack of stilts holding an orchid as if it were a planter, a clear plastic sheet with the ghostly impression of an orchid, rocks with glazes, and a ceramic maroon jackfruit that has been smashed and broken under pressure.



Like Rashid Johnson, I take inspiration from the work of Candice Lin for systems of collection and display. Lin is making work that seeks to denaturalize and make visible the ways that power operates in the world through a research-based, material-focused, historical approach. Rather than just a system of display, her installations utilize living processes of fermentation, distillation, or decay that slowly evolve over time, exceeding her own control. Her installation *La China Charada* is composed of an earthen floor with a raised platform containing a human silhouette, which has been embedded with seeds of opium poppy, sugarcane, and poisonous plants from the Caribbean. The space glows magenta from grow lights used to illuminate the room. The materials reference histories of imported Chinese laborers. The shape

of the Charada China figure in the center is inspired by the Cuban-Chinese gambling game and syncretic magic ritual that was used to distribute wealth within the Chinese community. At the head of this raised platform, a collection of objects ranges from bottles and jars, organic materials, photographs, and utilitarian tools. This moment of objects feel like the display of a narrative I can only understand in fragments; I'm not aware of all the historical events Lin is working with, and yet I am being given clues here. In working with these larger historical, political, and social narratives, I wonder if Lin ever contemplates how to insert herself into the work aside from taking on such an intellectual endeavor.

Rather than seeing my installation as a purely intellectual endeavor, I see it also as a moment in a personal journey, a self reckoning. While I can only speculate the decisions Lin makes for placing objects, knowing that operable systems are in place surely dictates some placements and proximities. I also take note of the staging of Lin's installations, and how the placement of objects and the way a body moves through the space can alter how the work is read. I am considering not just the overall narrative I am building, but the smaller moments within the frames; fragments of the story. Some placements happen to mirror and parallel, thereby amplifying formal qualities. Other placements happen to lean into absurd decision making, adding an occasional moment of playfulness. Still, many placements seek when a combination of things become the altar-like, the offering, the devotional moment. Some arrangements are more overtly a moment of offering, such as the bowl of Philippine pesos elevated by the ceramic stilts. This stack is supplemented by the nearby burning candles and bowls of rice water. Money, fire, and water are all common offerings at shrines and altars across many cultures. The staging of objects like these also makes space for the unseen performative aspects imbued in this work; each day I must light and blow out the candles, the rice water evaporates over time and I have the choice to refill it, in other moments there are incense I restock and light. While Lin's work thrives off a system that can continue to operate in her absence, my work requires small, intimate moments of daily maintenance. These

arrangements hover between the poetic spaces of the less-than-human spiritual experience and formal artistic material investigations, at times utilizing aspects of both.



Fig. 21: Candice Lin, *La Charada China*, 2018, red clay, cement, dirt, opium poppy, sugar cane, poisonous tropical plant seeds, embedded sprinkler system, audio and video projection, mylar, ceramic objects, dried herbs, research materials and objects. Photo Courtesy: Hammer Museum. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2018/made-in-la-2018/candice-lin>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 22: Candice Lin, *La Charada China* (detail), 2018, red clay, cement, dirt, opium poppy, sugar cane, poisonous tropical plant seeds, embedded sprinkler system, audio and video projection, mylar, ceramic objects, dried herbs, research materials and objects. Photo Courtesy: Hammer Museum. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2018/made-in-la-2018/candice-lin>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 23: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot, frame three.



Fig. 24: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 25: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 26: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 27: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 28: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 29: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 30: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 31: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 32: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 33: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 34: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three-four.



Fig. 35: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot, frame four.



Fig. 36: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 37: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 38: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 39: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 40: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 41: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 42: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 43: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 44: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 45: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 46: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 47: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame three.



Fig. 48: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 49: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.



Fig. 50: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame four.

Not a (Total) Departure from Painting

Similar to the first frame, the fifth frame consists of an altar-like shelf, a black ceramic sculpture, and a tropical plant. The platform is covered with a green carpet-like fabric as if imitating fake grass. Sitting in the corner, a tall planter with a lustery-reflective glaze mirrors its surroundings. It holds an orchid with just a few black flowers. A porcelain stilt coated in the same glaze is attached to the planter but hovers over the edge of the wooden structure. An orchid cutting is situated in the top opening of the stilt, mimicking the planter itself. Paralleling the verticals of the wooden structure, a tall dracaena plant dominates much of the space. Placed before it are two smaller ceramic objects: a cat that has white, puffy glazes on its backside and a small bud vase layered with various white and purple glazes. Next to them is a black mound covered with globules of black and gold glazes. Some of them have fallen off and sit directly on the green carpet. Remnants of incense ash fall onto the carpet from above.

An altar-like shelf holds a shorter reflective planter with another orchid. This orchid looks as though it is stretching beyond itself, holding its pink flowers high. In front of this plant, a bowl covered in black velvet holds a few ceramic Philippine pesos, a dried orchid flower, remnants of rocks and shells from the Pacific Ocean, and a photograph. The photograph shows a group of mostly Asian people in a domestic-like setting, possibly on an outdoor patio. Two figures in the center look directly at the camera. A white man with a barong and receding blonde hair places his hand on the shoulder of a Filipino woman with short black hair holding a bottle of Coke. She wears a short, white wedding dress and a giddy smile that purses her lips. The photo shows my parents, Richard and Lida, on their wedding day in Manila. The photo is bathed by the violet spotlight, turning the image into various shades of magenta and purple. In front of the bowl and its gatherings are two cans of Ocean Bomb sparkling waters, each with a Sailor Moon character on them. The red can features Sailor Mars and is being used as an incense burner. The smoke wisps from the can, and ash falls while the incense burns away. The pink can features Chibi-Usa and is being used as a bud vase to hold a bloom of orchid

magenta flowers. The violet light saturates the cans and their contents, making their colors glow as if fluorescent.



This photograph of my parents on their wedding day is one of the only concrete objects existing in this nearly non-existent archive I am working with. Searching for familial records, evidence of migrations, and collections of photographs turn up slim to no results every endeavor. This photo displays my parents in a moment of what seems like bliss amongst harsh realities they would have been facing at this time. My mother would have been raising two toddlers, contemplating how she could give them a better life instead of growing up in poverty in Manila like she had. At this point in time, I wonder if she would still hike into the mountains after rainfall to gather clean water to carry back home. My father, a Vietnamese linguist in the air force, would have been traveling all throughout Southeast Asia searching for traces of American soldiers who went missing during the Vietnam War. I imagine my dad traveling from village to village, looking for people whose whereabouts had become a mystery; I wonder if he ever meditated on what it meant to search for these people. The feeling of searching for someone who has been lost for decades, whose families continue living without the comfort of knowing what happened to their loved one.

I would like to “speak nearby”¹⁴ my father’s experience of searching for those who had been lost in the Vietnam War. How having only fragments of information can drive us to search and eventually arrive at a destination. I find that in my practice I feel like I am constantly arriving at the next juncture, because who can say that this work will ever bring me to a final destination that resolves it all? My dad told me that oftentimes he would interview villagers with vague memories of a person he was looking for, but those memories were already years old

¹⁴ Nancy N. Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby:’ A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha.” *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 1992), 82 . <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/var.1992.8.1.82>

and typically led him nowhere new. I wonder if he ever held time to mourn these people whom he constantly searched for and never found.



Looking back to my painting practice, I see the ways that these arrangements of objects have been built as if they were still life images. These still life-like moments also elicit hints of interior portraits, yet the installation itself maintains an in-between of interior, still life, and altar. The process of placing things feels similar to moments in which I have created a still life to paint from, only here the step of painting is removed. Instead, I think about the pleasure I take in viewing a 2D work with a strong composition and use this to begin placing objects together. I think of Anna Valdez's paintings and the way she examines the relationship between objects, cultural formations, and collective consciousness. Her paintings move seamlessly between still life and landscape, creating a moment in which I question if the image is taking place inside or outside. Like Rashid Johnson and Candice Lin, she is playing with notions of collecting and displaying. Her paintings read not just as a still life set up for the purposes of formal painting explorations, but also as a candid moment of an arrangement in her studio and home.

In paintings like *Sketch on Log* and *Objects of Affection*, I think about the ways she is showing space and choosing to complicate it; in all the bright colors and patterns, it becomes difficult to know how deep the space actually is. In *Sketch on Log*, we are also given this meta moment in which the composition of the painting is given within the painting itself, on a sketch on a log. I also contemplate her use of tropical plants, and my impulse to use them in my work. I primarily included orchids throughout this installation because my mother has always kept an orchid collection; keeping them and caring for them became a way to care for something my mom loved, and by extension an abstracted way of caring for her. I also utilize some other tropical plants, such as cuttings of cacti and succulents I have found, the fan palm tree, and

the dracaena. In thinking of global trade routes and the popularity of exotic plants in domestic homes, I feel they help to place us in a (non)specific space by collapsing spaces together; how can something native to another country across the ocean be found in my family home growing and thriving outside of its natural element?

Tomory Dodge was a painter I took great inspiration from before pursuing my MFA. His explorations of color, space, and processes of painting influence me even as I explore ceramics. His paintings, similar to Valdez, also play with creating interior and exterior spaces but through abstraction. Tapping into the history of painting and the rise of abstraction, Dodge acknowledges the shift from when brushstrokes constructed images to when they *became* the image. In *Flora*, we see a composition of bright colors and patterns laid over each other, creating a central vertical “figure.” I read this figure as a vase of flowers, like one that sits on my table after buying fresh flowers from the farmer’s market. The fields of white push back the patterned layers behind them, but don’t completely erase them. When my practice was primarily painting, I was interested in this play of space as well; I used abstract painting as a way of creating a space that felt as tricky to navigate visually as it felt to move through this world in a visibly queer body. In some moments you understand how to move through the space, and just as quickly as you move into it you are stuck within it. I didn’t move away from painting entirely and I still view a lot of my experiments as a way of playing with sculpture through a painterly lens. Further, as I utilize strategies of installation, my painting practice has given me the foundation to understand how to build compositions. Now, I can move from creating an illusionistic window of space to arranging within actual space.



Fig. 51: Anna Valdez, *Sketch on Log*, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas. Photo Courtesy: Hashimoto Contemporary. <https://www.hashimotocontemporary.com/artists/46-anna-valdez/>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 52: Anna Valdez, *Objects of Affection*, 2020, oil on canvas. Photo Courtesy: American Museum of Ceramic Art. <https://www.hashimotocontemporary.com/artists/46-anna-valdez/>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 53: Tomory Dodge, *Flora*, 2023, oil on canvas. Photo Courtesy: Miles McEnergy Gallery. <https://www.milesmcenergy.com/artists/tomory-dodge>. Accessed August 16, 2023.



Fig. 54: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot, frame five.



Fig. 55: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five.



Fig. 56: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five-six.



Fig. 57: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five.



Fig. 58: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five.



Fig. 59: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five.



Fig. 60: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame five.

Alchemy

To the far right of the installation is the sixth and final frame. A green extension cord extends from the ceiling and wraps around one of the wooden beams towards the bottom shelf. A short shelf covered in blue velvet holds a solid orange jackfruit, two mangos with stars painted on them, and a small juicelike box of Lucky Dog Sake. Sitting below, another shelf covered in blue velvet holds many ceramic objects. In the corner, two mangos lean against a blue jackfruit. One mango features layers of experimental glazes, but is covered mostly with a light blue crackled glaze. The other mango is sprayed with a gradient of blue and red, as if permanently featuring a shadow that is fixed in space. The shelf is dominated by several slip casted bud vases, each one enhanced in layers of rich colors and textures. The vases serve as a means of playing with the alchemical properties of ceramics, each one holding similar qualities to those around it yet yielding vastly different results. Each vase features a gradient of two-three colors, and several layers of colorful, experimental glazes that cascade, puff, froth, gloop, and crackle.

Hanging from this shelf and obscuring a portion of the arrangement below, a clear plastic sheet holds the impression of a flowering orchid. Sitting behind this is an actual orchid in a black planter. The orchid sits behind a few mangos that have also been used as alchemical experiments. They sit on a sheet of reflective mylar, mirroring their images imperfectly. Next to them sits a pile of ceramic mangos airbrushed with intense yellow and red glazes. Unlike all the other mangos throughout the installation, these are the only ones that are close to lifelike and almost believably mango fruit. While some of the warm spotlight reveals their true colors, a blue light bathes them. Their reflection shows an extension of a pile of mangos, continuing the illusion of the stack but allowing some of the light to bounce back to the surface of the mangos. The mylar bounces some of the warm spotlight and blue light to parts of the wooden structure, as if reflecting rippling water.



The term "alchemy" originated in Ancient Greece and signified something like "metal casting." During the Middle Ages, alchemy was referred to as "Ars Magna" in Europe. Not surprisingly therefore, the "great art" was also seen as serving artistic endeavors. The mysterious stories surrounding alchemists portray them either as cranky and crazy, or as wise and omniscient.

Long shrouded in secrecy, alchemy is now recognized as the ancestor of modern chemistry. Alchemists were notorious for attempting to make synthetic gold, but their goals were far more ambitious: to transform and bend nature to the will of an industrious human imagination. For scientists, philosophers, and artists alike, alchemy seemed to hold the key to unlocking the secrets of creation. Alchemists' efforts to discover the way the world is made have had an enduring impact on artistic practice and expression around the globe. Inventions born from alchemical laboratories include metal alloys for sculpture and ornament, oil paints, effects in glassmaking, and even the chemical baths of photography. The mysterious art of alchemy transformed visual culture from antiquity to the Industrial Age, and its legacy still permeates the worlds we make today.

In relation to my work, we can define it more simply as a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination. Previously, I have been preoccupied with the alchemy of oil painting— the manipulation, creation, and disintegration of paint. Historically, painters have been considering the alchemy of their materials since the Renaissance, but I believe modernist painters increased the trajectory of this exploration as it relates to materiality, physicality, and performance of paint itself. That alchemy is easily translated into ceramics and glazes, and in both realms of painting and ceramics, alchemic processes are closely bound to color and surface. I have been developing and altering glaze recipes in an attempt to mimic the alchemical processes I previously explored in painting and their overall impact on objecthood.



James Elkins once claimed that “water and stones” were the two ingredients involved in painting (referring to oils and dry pigments).¹⁵ This idea also rings true to ceramic works, where just like paint many of the materials are derived from nature. The clay body and glazes are also comprised largely of “water and stones,” but instead of oils and dry pigments, it’s more like actual water and earth. With the clay body, I can feel the tactility of the object as I form it. The medium gives me feedback with each impression of my hands and has a certain consciousness of its own. In sculpting the forms, there’s a lot of room for play. There’s also a certain play that can happen with glazing, but also a rigor. While many recipes for paints and glazes require a certain precision to garner consistent results, the nature of intuitive cooking complicates this. Sometimes the urge to add more magnesium carbonate or silicon carbide to a glaze just to see what happens can promote either triumph or tragedy. However, just like many other realms of alchemy the process of experimentation is how we form unexpected results that promote the experience of discovery.

The labor of clay enforces the meaning; working with clay becomes a collaboration between the artist, material, and environment. The artist becomes submissive to the material and the environment, and with tenacity and a bit of luck the result will be a victory. How can I access the ancestral realm and find my way on the other side? Perhaps clay is the conduit, the vehicle that transports me and gives me information and answers. Could I create a space that harmonizes between the living world and ancestral plane?

Recently someone told me that in Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, there is a massive mountain-sized mound of broken pottery shards, evidence of a centuries-long tradition of breaking pottery as a gesture of mourning.¹⁶ There is power contained in the creation of a ceramic vessel, and in the ritual of the vessel, whether that be utilitarian, breaking, mending, or

¹⁵ James Elkins, *What Painting Is*, (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 1999) 2.

¹⁶ H. Wolcott Toll, “Making and Breaking Pots in the Chaco World.” *American Antiquity*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (January 2001), 64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2694318>

honoring. While many offerings are meant to evaporate, decompose, and/or rot, I believe in the labor of crafting my offerings and the power of devotion instilled into the objects.



The origins of ceramic materials are mostly geological— mineral deposits are discovered, they are mined, we grind them, and alter them to use as material. In the end they become a reincarnation of what they were in the beginning. In essence, the nature of the material finds its way back to its place of origin.

As with painting, my material investigation in ceramics manifested through abstraction. While my sculptures take some inspiration from reality (my recent work taking inspiration from the various landscapes of the Philippines), their forms are largely dependent upon the (slightly) unpredictable nature of their materials. Through experimentation and a well-kept record akin to a recipe book, I can predict how some glazes will act upon being fired in the kiln. However, several factors are at play: the amount of glaze, the glazes underneath that glaze, the various minerals mixed to promote a textural, surface effect within a glaze, the shapes and slopes of the clay body, firing temperature, and the off chance that the kiln malfunctions. With some factors remaining out of my control, it becomes imperative to “trust in the process.”

My ceramic work undergoes a process that alters it forever. In one state, the material is malleable and holds infinite possibilities. Through a seemingly magical, transformative process, the work becomes rigid and may last for hundreds or thousands of years. I’ve always felt the same was true about my own transness. Altering my own body through hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries feels mythical in its own ways, and that served as my own entry point into ceramics. Transness is alchemy and trans bodies can be altered at will (as long as we have access to the proper resources). Through alchemical processes and conceptual layering, my studio practice allows me to meditate on my mother’s migrations across the ocean as it parallels my migration across genders.



Adaptation to limitations— could I become iridescent?





Fig. 61: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* installation shot, frame six.



Fig. 62: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame six.

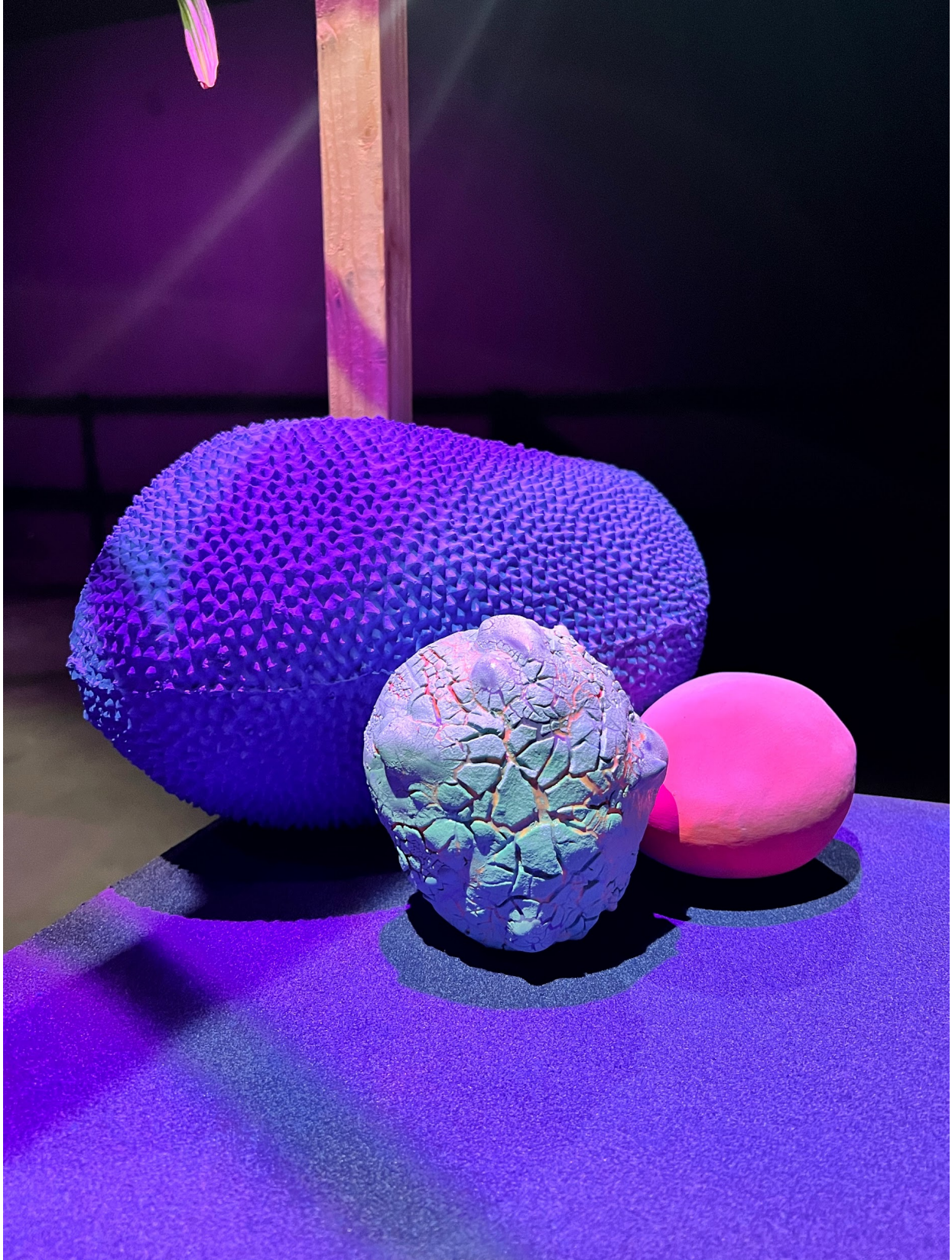


Fig. 63: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame six.



Fig. 64: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame six.



Fig. 65: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame six.



Fig. 66: a grain of rice embedded in my chest detail shot, frame six.

Dynasty Jasmine Rice

Within the act of installing, there was a moment where I hefted a bag of jasmine rice with the neon yellow sticker that read “H-MART: PAID.” It was as if I was carrying the rice in after grocery shopping with my mom, only back then the 20 pounds felt heavier. I cut an opening carefully, so as not to obscure the name DYNASTY or the two blue dragons that marked the brand. As I poured rice into mounds, the cascade of grains echoed and transported me to two places simultaneously.

One was just weeks ago at Torrey Pines State Beach, when Quinn and I decided we would go watch the sunset and read. As we walked toward the beach I heard the crash of the waves, and something else that followed. When the shore came into view, I was astonished; I had never seen so many rocks here. Did someone somehow drop them off here, or are these stones carried from the depths of the ocean to the beach? The stones ranged from rocks that were larger than my hands to humble pebbles. The waves whisked them back into the water, only to be followed by another crashing wave that brought back twice as many. Sitting and listening, the chatter of the rocks tumbling over themselves reminded me of something familiar yet far away.

The second was years ago. I am a child in my family home, watching my mom cook dinner— sinigang, or maybe adobo? The aroma of spices smelt elaborate, and yet she was always able to make dinner quick. She tells me to start the rice cooker. I approach our rice dispenser, a large, beige box that towers over me, with three buttons: 1, 2, and 3. I push the 3 a couple times, and the box spills three cups of rice each time. The sound of the rice hits the metal bowl like a million tiny rocks clattering and reverberating. A faint cloud of starchy dust rises like a ghost leaving a body. This is the first ritual I learned.

Back on the beach, the sonic rumble of the rocks hit me like a million grains of rice. I close my eyes and imagine the reverberations traveling through the air and into my body. They penetrate my skin and muscles, into the scar that cuts across my entire torso, and settle deep in my chest. I remember something from Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings*, where she

describes the feeling of a thorn in her chest that makes her wince whenever she moves. I've felt this thorn too, only now it feels less like a thorn and more like a grain of rice. A grain of rice embedded in my chest. A flash of pain releases from my chest sending ripples through my body, and suddenly I'm filled with comfort.



Fig. 67: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* installation shot.



Fig. 68: *a grain of rice embedded in my chest* installation shot.



Fig. 69: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot.



Fig. 70: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot.



Fig. 71: a grain of rice embedded in my chest installation shot.

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