

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Meiguo

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/48c578vb>

Author

Hom, Kirstyn

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Meiguo

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

in

Visual Arts

by

Kirstyn Hom

Committee in charge:

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair
Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Page duBois
Professor Janelle Iglesias

2021

Copyright
Kirstyn Hom, 2021
All rights reserved.

The Thesis of Kirstyn Hom is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm electronically.

University of California San Diego

2021

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sheu Ping Low Quock, whose memory is a generative seed and compass to the work that I carry as an ancestor today. Her story fills me with deep humility and connection to first generation, working class immigrants who continue to shape and transform my understanding of America.

To my aunts and uncle, Jennie Doo, Dorothy Ong, and Robert Leong who have provided pieces to my origin story through their collective storytelling and familial wisdom. Their efforts in filling the gaps of our history gives me both pride and joy to be part of the AAPI community.

And lastly, to my mother and father, Susan Quock and Robert Hom. Their roles as teachers and parents have fostered my understanding of creating with integrity and care. Their unconditional love and sacrifices makes my courage to imagine possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Abstract of the Thesis.....	ix
Introduction.....	2
Meiguo.....	2
A Chinese Apple.....	4
Lost Object Memories.....	13
Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite.....	19
Chair Tear.....	21
Passed Down By Her Hands.....	23
Let the Spirit Out.....	30
Speaking In-Between.....	31
sau pin glow.....	44
Erotic Kernels and Illegible Eruptions.....	47
rootless yet.....	56
Meiguo Thesis Exhibition Photos.....	60
References.....	82

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig.1: Pomegranate Tree.....	5
Fig.2: Family Phonebook.....	10
Fig.3: Handmade Quilt	16
Fig.4: Patty Chang, “In Love”	18
Fig.5: Reupholstered Kitchen Chairs.....	20
Fig.6: Mona Hatoum, “Remains (Chair) I”	22
Fig.7: Sonya Clark, “Hair Chair”	22
Fig.8: Slashed Curtains.....	27
Fig.9. Poh poh’s hospital shirt	28
Fig.10: Close up of writing on shirt.....	28
Fig.11: Handwritten Luk Tung Kuen Directions.....	35
Fig.12 Luk Tung Kuen google translation from 6/6/20.....	38
Fig.13: Luk Tung Kuen google translation from 7/11/20.....	39
Fig.14: Luk Tung Kuen google translation from 8/13/20.....	40
Fig.15: Anni Albers, “Typewriter study to create textile effect”	42
Fig.16: Low Sau Ping Drawing.....	43
Fig.17: “Sau” character embroidery translation.....	43
Fig.18: Video still of poh poh reciting the Luk Tung Kuen directions.....	46
Fig.19: Pearl C. Hsiung, “Themses”	50
Fig. 20: Translation of Low Sau Ping.....	54
Fig.21: Poem exchange with Ava Sayaka Rosen, Spring 2020.....	55
Fig.22: poh poh’s bedroom	59

Fig.23: Meiguo installation shot	60
Fig.24: Meiguo installation shot	61
Fig.25: Meiguo installation shot	62
Fig.26: Meiguo installation shot	63
Fig.27: Meiguo.....	64
Fig.28: Meiguo side view	65
Fig.29: Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite	66
Fig.30: Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite detail	67
Fig.31: Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite underside	67
Fig.32: Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite close up	68
Fig.33: Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite installation shot.....	68
Fig.34: Chair Tear front view	69
Fig.35: Chair Tear side view	70
Fig.36: Chair Tear detail	71
Fig.37: Let the Spirit Out.....	72
Fig.38: Let the Spirit Out Detail #1.....	73
Fig.39: Let the Spirit Out Detail #2.....	73
Fig.40: Let the Spirit Out Close Up.....	74
Fig.41: sau pin glow	75
Fig.42: sau pin glow close up side	76
Fig.43: still of home video in wooden box	76
Fig.44: sau pin glow close up front.....	77
Fig.45: sau pin glow close up of screen printed fabric runner.....	77

Fig.46: rootless yet.....	78
Fig.47: rootless yet close up #1.....	79
Fig.48: rootless yet close up #2.....	79
Fig.49: rootless yet close up #3.....	80
Fig.50: rootless yet close up #4.....	80
Fig.51: rootless yet close up #5.....	81
Fig.52: rootless yet close up #6.....	81

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Meiguo

by

Kirstyn Hom

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

"Meiguo " is an installation consisting of sculptures and textiles based on memories from my grandmother's archive. Attempts to grasp the past becomes a departure for new sensibilities of (be)longing. My conceptual framing is informed by racial melancholia theory, craft methods, Asian American literature and poetry. By blurring relationships between inside and outside, I hope to frame the in-between spaces that I occupy within culture, time, and place. Fabrics soaked with pomegranates, onion skins, lemon juice, and rice are joined through long durational sewing methods. Building up the textile with repetition and pattern engages with practices of writing, erasure, and remembering. I question how joining threads locates what cannot be easily translated in words yet acutely felt in the body.

“The body is the ultimate witness to love. And I learned that right away. We don’t say, ‘I love you.’ If we do, we say it in English as a sort of goodbye.”¹

Ocean Vuong

¹ On Being with Krista Tippett, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, April 20, 2020, <https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-a-life-worthy-of-our-breath/>

Introduction

In imagining the space between memories of a family home and my shifting relationship to this country, I begin staring at the ceiling. I can't help but feel a sense of lightness as I arch my chin to the sky. I'm reminded of moments when I'd stare at the clouds to piece together pillowy shapes to form new figures. Turning my gaze downwards, the expansion of the ceiling shifts to the linoleum grid below my feet. The flooring in my studio often acts as a larger ruler for me to measure and work on larger scales. How might I relate to space differently if the grid is raised above my head? From a birds eye view, I can envision the grid forming the warp and weft of a fabric. I relate to this structure as the fabric's skeleton, where I can weave in different people, objects, and places floating in my mind. This foundation traces back to a larger history in which joining threads "communicated messages at different moments, in different places, but did so only because of their flexibility, their ability to adapt to new modes, new functional contexts."² How can this structure give me markers for unravelling parts of my family history, and weaving in new ways of existing?

Meiguo

"Meiguo " is a tufted carpet with wool yarn in the dimensions, and orientation of a welcome mat to demarcate a point of entry into the gallery. This piece is based on Monica Youn's poem, "Detail of the Rice Chest," in which she analyzes the 2015 Korean Film, *The Throne*, to retrace words used to objectify and other Asian immigrants. The word "Meiguo," directly translates to "beautiful country" in Chinese, and is the name for America. In turn, Youn points out how the name for America tethers the speaker to a romanticized ideal. While commentators speculate on the origin of the word to either phonetic approximation or the work of American missionaries, I question if Chinese people literally believe America to be a beautiful country. In embedding this word in the welcome mat design, I want to play with the irony of

² T'ai Smith and Grant Watson, "The Event of a Thread," in *Textiles Open Letter*, ed. Herausgegeben von (Wien, Austria: Generali Foundation, 2015), pp. 76-88, 78.

having to “call America beautiful in order to speak its name.”³ I wonder how one relates to the sculpture as it loses the functionality of a surface to clean one’s feet before entering. What does it mean to be “welcomed” by this word? Does one walk over it, or around it to preserve a state of cleanliness? Whose home are we passing through?

³ Monica Youn, “Detail of the Rice Chest,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 31, 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/02/detail-of-the-rice-chest-monica-youn/>.

A Chinese Apple



Fig.1. Pomegranate tree

When I was little, my parents often dropped me off at my maternal grandmother's house after school while they worked. As my brother, Kevan, and I patiently waited outside in the cold, poh poh⁴ swung the wooden door open and greeted us with a high pitch "ahhhh," disappearing into a sigh. I picked up on these inflections, and the way she handed me chocolate kisses because we could not communicate with words. I often wondered why she never learned English, and why my parents never taught me Cantonese. This language barrier prevented me from asking the big question, "how did I get here?" I fantasized about all of the stories she carried and left behind, and wondered if these memories could take me closer to a place of belonging than what I saw in the media.

Kevan and I normally watched power rangers on the television while poh poh sat on the corner couch and read Chinese newspapers. Her eyes peered, unbothered, as she methodically skimmed the folded paper in cascading columns. On the far side of the living room, our eyes were glued inches away from the screen. We comfortably sprawled on our bellies, propped our chins with bent elbows, digging holes into the scratchy brown carpet. It was a treat to watch power rangers because our parents didn't approve of the violent content. I would fixate on the two girl power rangers, and would imagine which one I would be. I always wanted to be the pink power ranger because she seemed to be "the girliest." The "yellow ranger" was one of the few Asian female characters I encountered as a kid, but I wondered, why yellow? Couldn't she be my next favorite color after pink, which was purple? In my mind, I associated yellow with the stains you'd see on white clothes, the color fruit turns as it begins to rot, something sickly and bodily. The yellow power ranger continued to haunt me in elementary school because my friends always picked me to be her during playground games. We would gather in a circle to hit our sparkly slappable bracelets in unison to "power up and transform!" In that moment, I didn't

⁴ poh poh: maternal grandmother, I pronounce this word similar to saying a warm, and fuzzy "paw."

disappear into an imaginary world with them. I felt my feet pounding furiously against the hot pavement and tried to perform the feeling of flying.

Poh poh's kitchen was the brightest part in her home due to the skylight. During lunch time, we sat at the square table and ate silently. Sometimes she would serve a plate of fruit, which was often an apple. I always found the offering to be a bit strange because all of the red skins were carefully peeled off. The naked slices resembled faint smiles with brown stains at the edges. When I bit into the juicy fruit, I never felt the sharp rinds scraping against my mouth. I was only left with a rich sweetness melting away.

Last winter I started collecting pomegranates because I learned that certain fruit skins produce colored dyes. As I sliced the pomegranate, I wondered what color these ruby red scraps would produce. Plucking the crimson seeds, I recalled the greek myth of Persephone who was taken away from her mother by Hades into the underworld after eating the forbidden seeds. In some ways, I found parallels with this myth to the love story I held as a child of the diaspora. I experienced periods of being separated by time, culture, and language. Saving these pomegranate skins to use in the spring reminded me of the time Persephone returned back to her mother.

In order to unravel poh poh's story, I turned to my mom. Since she did not read nor write in Chinese, her translations happened orally by listening closely to poh poh's voice, and through her siblings' memories. My Aunt Jennie was the eldest and only child, who grew up with poh poh in the "Fah Yuen" village, which is now in the Guangdong province in Southern China. Jennie was born in 1937 during the second Sino Japanese occupation. Airplanes flew close to the village and alerted families of Japanese soldiers approaching so they could flee. Poh poh's husband (my gung gung⁵) was already living in America working as a butcher and trying to send money home to the family. For over ten years of their separation, poh poh lived the life of a single mother. Jennie recalled poh poh preparing to hide at different villages. She took all the

⁵ grandfather

belongings she could fit in the lining of her clothing, and carried Jennie on her back to run. They stayed with the Hakka people⁶ and attempted to relocate to Hong Kong multiple times.

Since gung gung served as a cook for the US Army, he was qualified to bring his family over in 1948. He did not have the funds so it was the generosity of our relative, Hop Yee Dai, who was able to pay the immigration fees. Poh poh immigrated first, but eleven-year old Jennie had to travel at a later date due to complications with her U.S. citizenship. She remembered saying goodbye to my great grandfather, Tai Gung, and his heavy heart in seeing her take the voyage alone. This was the last moment Jennie shared with him.

When poh poh arrived, she immediately started picking up seamstress work. I wondered if her roles in juggling childrearing and working did not give her the luxury to learn English. However, she was one of the few women who could read and write because Tai Gung was a school principal in the village. Many of my family members praised her ability to write beautiful characters. One of the few remnants of her writing is in a phonebook that she deconstructed and repurposed to record her neighborhood correspondences. I held the book covered in brown cardboard paper, and noticed the age of the corners becoming soft over time. I was surprised to see a little slit in the cover, where she slipped her savings into. Leafed inside the printed ink pages of advertisements, a double strand string wove her set of pages. I skimmed through a sequence of neat columns and numbers scrawled in Chinese characters, phone numbers, and expired area codes. Holding this object tenderly, I saw it as a tool of survival; an archive of all the people that created a community for her in Gum Saan⁷.

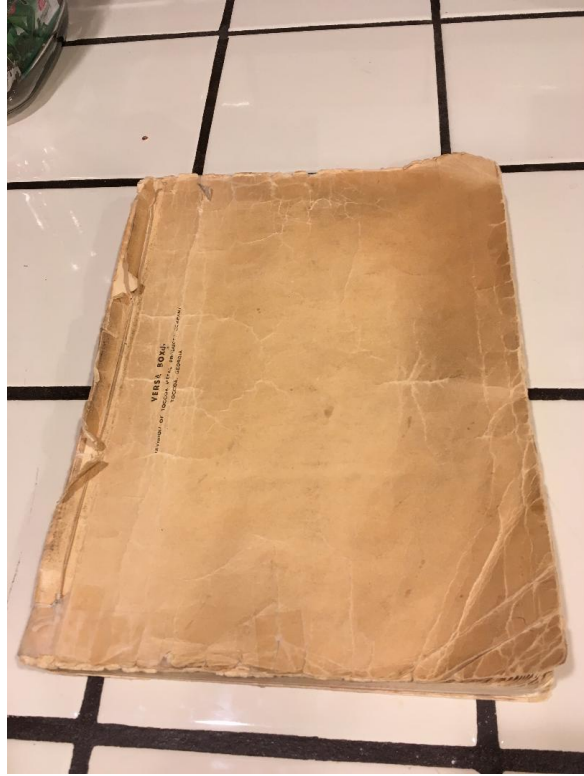
Although Chinatown cultivated strong networks for job opportunities within the community, it was simultaneously designed to keep these communities in isolation. Tim Creswall

⁶ A ethnic sub-group of Han Chinese. They are sometimes referred to as “mountain people,” or “guest people,” due to their migration to Southern China from the Huang He (Yellow River) Valley in the 4th and 13th century.

⁷ Older generations of immigrants from China referred to San Francisco as “Gum Saan,” which translates to “Golden Mountain”

discusses how Chinatown cannot be read as “symbols of essential Chineseness,”⁸ but rather a place of difference constructed by ideologies. Creswall focuses on the Chinatown in Vancouver, Canada to point to how Chinese immigrants were regarded as inferior to “White elites,” and how this process of othering led to a lack of resources in water, sewage, and diseases in the neighborhood. Chinatown is not “infectious,” but the social structures that inscribe values on these places and racial groups are contagious. One can argue that San Francisco’s Chinatown is now cleaned up with renovated streets, colorful souvenir shops and pleasantly lit alleyways. However, this commercialized space has now mutated from the “vilified other” into the “exotic other,” in hopes of boosting tourism. I never visited Chinatown with my parents in my youth because the restaurants and stores they grew up with no longer exist. Looking back at poh poh’s phonebook, I wonder if all her contacts have moved away from the neighborhood as well.

⁸ Tim Creswall, *Place: An Introduction* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd , 2015), 28.



5103	421-4196	391-5833	776-1768
5103	421-4508	397-2566	520 776-9129
5103	437-3245	474-1575	花縣會館 982-2327
5103	986-0516	391-1124	玉紅 285-2055
		炬崇 421-8935	蘇 982-3843
		王燦 775-5183	387-2383
		潘大 397-0141	傅輝 501-7253
		彩玉 672-6074	左 392-6176
		474-5324	恩聰 826-1995
		珍 433-7029	劉針 775-7093
		周姆 863-4163	三隆 982-2196
		江培 392-9185	706 3515
		律二 392-0143	劉興 982-5685
		相尤 362-4020	江瑞蘭 776-4838
		桂英 EV6-2738	梅玉李 382-3174
		馬笑 EX2-2385	986-0604
		長老會陳太 864-6470	多桂 648-2107
		傅李福 982-0140	主樂素 221-2727
		421-6118	聞源 386-4526
		秀 885-6922	順興 626-1833
		二 362-8652	秋雲 474-5222

Fig. 2. Family Phonebook

Frances Chung's book of poetry, "Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple," helps me not only dream about my family's experience living in a Chinatown, but also how these neighborhoods can hold transcultural relationships. Chung opens the poem with, "Yo vivo en el barrio chino de Nueva York,"⁹ to push the crossover between Chinese and Spanish in her interlingual landscape. By understanding her identity as "radically relational" to other cultures, her poems offer an entry point to destabilizing English. Words not only provide layers to place making, but also the circulation of objects in her poems. Chung does not handle objects as commodities, but rather as vessels that carry human touch and sentiment. In her poem, "the great American yellow poem," her understanding of color is conveyed across different cultures, "she cut herself on a Hawaiian pineapple," "she stepped around yellow piss in the snow."¹⁰ Chung informs my investigation on the fluid nature of objects, and their ability to carry different meanings.

After I read Chung's poem, I was curious what a "Chinese Apple" was. I found out that due to trade along the silk road the pomegranate was often referred to as a "Chinese Apple" in British English. When I began preparing the pomegranates to dye, some of the fruit was already rotten. The tough skin loosened to a wrinkly texture, and was soft enough for me to dig my fingers and rip open. A pungent smell of vinegar filled the air, as I inspected how the cavities had decayed. What was once jewel toned had turned into a murky sludge. I placed the newly cleaned skins so they could simmer in the pot. Patiently waiting, I saw silhouettes of curled spines caressing and tumbling across the water's surface. I dipped a small scrap of white fabric and lifted to see a warm yellow crawling to my fingertips.

⁹ Frances Chung, *Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116

“Sheu-Ping was educated; her father was a schoolmaster; and her feet were not bound”¹¹

¹¹ Pamela Joelson, “Information Compiled and Researched on Dorothy Leong Quock’s ancestors ,” n.d.

Lost Object Memories

When poh poh passed away at the age of one hundred and two years old in January 2018, I grieved but the feeling of loss never left me. I lost a family member who not only helped raise me, but also held pieces to my origin story. David L. Eng and Shinhee Han state the melancholic, “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him,”¹² With poh poh’s departure, the “lost object” grew within me and my questions about family, home, and belonging became more palpable. I wondered why my grandparents’ immigration stories came out in disjointed pieces, why my other Asian-American friends were met with silence when they gained the courage to ask, and why my education did not give me the tools to fill in these gaps?

Eng and Han define racial melancholia as unresolved grief and depression due to the processes of assimilation, immigration, and racialization. In contrast to Freud’s theory which equates this psychological condition as a pathology, Eng and Han frame this theory as a “structure of feeling” that develops from experiences of racial exclusion and discrimination. While mourning is a process of gradual 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.”¹³ In reflecting on my experiences of “otherness,” there is a tendency to initially put the blame on myself, family members, or other strangers. Yet, Eng and Han argue that this condition doesn’t happen within a single person, but rather is dependent on a “collective social transaction,”¹⁴ Specifically in how various structures in the United States have racialized Asian immigrants as a monolithic group of “foreigners.”

I turn to Merle Woo’s *Letter to Ma*, to understand the history of erasure and silencing for

¹² David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smqsk.5.>, 38

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38

Asian American immigrants, and her struggles as a second generation Chinese-American woman navigating racism, sexism, and homophobia. In the letter, Woo contemplates the depression she feels around her mother. I sense her guilt and shame because she doesn't understand how she could experience melancholia while being with her mother, who has sacrificed all parts of her identity for her daughter's survival. Eng and Han write about inheriting fear and silence between mothers and daughters, "the daughters' bodies and voices become substitutes for those of the mothers—not just the mother's bodies, and voices but something that is unconsciously lost in them."¹⁵

Woo is frustrated because she can't speak out, and her mother censors the conversation by actively not listening. This break in communication occurs because her mother reacts to the "lost object" passed down to her daughter, Woo writes, "Maybe you can't listen—because maybe when you look in my eyes, you will as you've always done, sense more than what we're actually saying, and that makes you fearful. Do you see your repressed anger manifested in me?"¹⁶ In Woo's eyes, in order to affirm both her mother and herself, she needs to expose all of the struggles both of them have endured. Although Woo wants to make these hardships visible to the wider public, her goal is not to represent the "Yellow Woman" as a source of oppression. Instead, her belief is that Asian American women "have always been fighting for more than mere survival,"¹⁷ which is reflected in the work they've dedicated within the community that remains "invisible" to the public eye yet has never been "inaccessible."

¹⁵ Ibid., 51

¹⁶ Merle Woo, "Letter to Ma," in *His Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981), pp. 138-146, 140.

¹⁷Ibid., 143



Fig. 3. Handmade quilt

One of the objects my poh poh made for each of her children was a quilt. My mom told me this form of quilt making was a Chinese tradition that poh poh grew up with. When children either leave home or marry, the quilt acts as a blessing. My mom showed me her quilt which had a pink background with a blue floral design. Encased within the fabric cover was cotton batting. Poh poh dispersed tiny hand sewn knots with heavy white thread to secure all of the layers.

I sought not only to recreate this quilt, but also reimagine how my version would exist. I remember my dad would tell me while I was growing up, "You can't taste the sweet until you taste the bitter." This phrase was spoken when I was sitting in the backseat and riding home from school while my bottom lip caught salty tears running down my cheeks. Or, as I clenched my fists in frustration during long kung fu practices in the living room drenched in bitter sweat. I'm reminded of Patty Chang's video piece, "In Love," in which she performs a gesture of eating an onion with her mother and father. The video plays in reverse to give the illusion that they begin kissing and crying to form a full onion in the end. I interpret this work as the discomfort and pain that Chang navigates in her family relationships. The labor of persisting through the shared tears visually builds back the onion's layers. I draw parallels between this gesture and processing intergenerational trauma. These traumas are not openly spoken, but rather carried on, passed down, and suppressed.



Fig. 4. Chang, Patty, *In Love*, 2001, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/10728>. Accessed 5 May 2021

Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite

Towards the back corner of the room, there is a sculpture in the form of a quilt that hovers at bed height. The outer layer is a sheer cotton polyester fabric dyed in yellow onion skins and lemon juice to create a peachy hue. In the center of the quilt are prints of sliced apples, which reminds me of mouths pursed open. I use a devoré solution to dip the apple halves so the natural fibers on the fabric disintegrate. Since I'm using a polyester cotton blend fabric, the white apple print is the remaining artificial fiber left behind. Each apple print preserves the ghost image of my hand pressing the fruit back into the ground. At the same time, I follow the tradition of poh poh's knotting technique to secure the centers of the apples and extend the threads into the ceiling to create a moment of levitation.

I wonder how the body is made inaccessible? Specifically, how the cultural representation of Asian American women as commodity functions, and creates a barrier. Anne Anlin Cheng discusses how the perception of "Yellow Women," is a haunting that does not live in organic flesh, but rather within aesthetic objects. Ornamentalism is a lens to see the intimate space between being a person and a thing. Cheng uses an Alexander McQueen's gown from the exhibit, "China: Through the Looking Glass," to examine the illusion of the organic in the inorganic; the fluffy feathers are signified by shredded organza and the shards of porcelain act as broken skin. In this process of reassembling materials, Cheng points to how "this image of the flexible yet brittle body reminds us that this aesthetic discourse is fastened to a fractured history of craft, labor, and bodies in transit,"¹⁸ These processes of production are made invisible as the consumer regards these objects as people, specifically by inscribing racial meanings. If the yellow woman is embodied and erased through ornamental objects, how does the object live after this form of devastation? How does one live while living as a thing?

¹⁸ Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsd/detail.action?docID=5611121>, 92.



Fig. 5. Reupholstered Kitchen Chairs

Chair Tear

In the corner is “Chair Tear,” which is a sculpture that deconstructs the utilitarian use of a chair. This sculpture is influenced by a series of white chairs that my poh poh reupholstered. The chairs are covered with a thick white pleather fabric. I’m most intrigued by the way the fabric has softened and ripped over time. The bright blue peeking out of the center back cushion signifies time spent sitting in the kitchen over years of family gatherings. By taking out the chair seat, I want to call attention to the skeleton that can no longer hold the body. Mona Hatoum often works with domestic objects as a way to implicate viewers through their own bodily relationship. She uses charred wood and mesh in “Remains (Chair)” to strip away connections to leisure, but rather precarity and institutional surveillance. My intent is to work with the chair frame as a symbol of loss.

Since the wicker back already has holes forming, I decide to weave my hair to mend the empty space. The hair is from 2018 when poh poh passed away and I was processing personal heartbreak. Sonya Clark’s “Hair Craft Project,” draws parallels between hair and hairdressing as a form of fiber art. She collaborates with Black and African American hairdressers to highlight the craft involved in manipulating and mapping hair growth through braiding methods. Clark views these hairdressers’ work and textile artists’ methods as similar, “As a carrier of DNA, hair holds the essence of identity. Deep within each strand, the vestiges of our roots resound. In this work hair is formed into markers of chronology, wisdom, and adornment.”¹⁹ Similarly, I view my hair as a material that holds ancestral history and power. I place these loose strands to build back the spine of the chair.

¹⁹ “Sonya Clark,” Sonya Clark , accessed May 2, 2021, <http://sonyaclark.com/medium/hair/>.



Fig.6. Hatoum, Mona, *Remains (Chair) I*, 2017, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/70904/Mona-Hatoum-Remains-chair-I>. Accessed 5 May 2021



Fig.7. Clark, Sonya, *Hair Chair*, 2012, <http://sonyaclark.com/gallery/hair-chair/>, Accessed 5 May 2021

Passed Down By Her Hands

I often wonder about my obsession with clothing as a child, and start to remember poh poh's wardrobe. She made her own clothing with the leftover fabric she received from her seamstress work. Her uniform consisted of elastic waist straight legged trousers and button down blouses in jewel toned polyester fabrics. Perhaps her clothing influenced my desire to work my first job in retail as a teenager, which was at the Junior League's "Next-to-New Consignment Shop," in San Francisco's Pacific Heights neighborhood. I was excited to be surrounded by vintage designer clothes, such as St. John skirt suits, Chanel bags, Hermes scarfs, and old estate jewelry. My main job was working the cash register, which entailed an endless cycle of automated "hello's," "your total is," "cash or credit card?," "want a bag?," "have a nice day!" Pacific Heights was over an hour by bus from where I lived in the Excelsior district, and the streets were framed with fancy boutiques, upscale restaurants, and views of the bay nearby. In some ways I felt out of place, and would wear extra "nice" and "professional" clothing to try to blend in.

To my disappointment, I stood out quite clearly to a white male customer one day, who stepped up to the register and boomed "Ni Hao!" My lips tensed into a forced smile, as I replied "Hi, how are you?" The customer chuckled and said in a patronizing tone, "You speak *very* good English. Where are you from?" I was quickly bagging his items to end this transaction, and mumbled "I was born and raised here, in San Francisco." He looked at me quizzically and said in exasperation, "No, where are you *really* from?" I was just as confused and replied with much hesitation, "Well, my grandparents immigrated from China." My body shrank in discomfort, and my arm limply extended the bag in the direction of the doorway. He laughed, nodded, excited to cleanly check off the box next to his initial hypothesis. In his eyes, he got me caged into the correct category with a capital "C," "C" is for "Chinese." The door already slammed shut, but I wanted to run out and scream "I'm capital 'A' for American! Just as American as you!"

Eventually, I worked my way from schlepping clothes on the sales floor into designing for a corporate apparel company, "Byer California." I recall my mom's eyes widening after I told her

about my new job. She laughed and said that poh poh had sewed piece work for years with this company in the 1970s. To my surprise, this company still made samples in house with seamstresses and cutters working on the top floor. I walked through rows of women chattering away on their machines, and entered the cutting room filled with men rolling out long streams of fabric, and striking the edges with rulers to flatten unruly ripples. Without saying a word, the cutters turned their heads, and their mouths parted into beaming smiles. I was bombarded with a string of Cantonese oscillating between familiar tones to indecipherable warbled sounds. I quickly felt this swirling discomfort of giving them “the bad news.” This instance was a form of haunting that lingered in my daily life, such as shaking my head at a Chinese elder asking for directions at the bus stop or walking up to the pastry counter with the only words I knew, “char siu bao.”²⁰ My vocal chords always tightened into a rough knot as I confessed solemnly, “I can’t speak.” A deep pang of shame hit me in my stomach as if I disappointed a family member. Oftentimes I would receive an uncomfortable laugh, and sideways glance as the conversation halted abruptly.

However, the head cutter squinted at me intently through his circular silver frames, and said “oh! you have the face of the Canton people, this is your sister, this is your brother!” He pointed to two cutters eating their mid-day snack at the table, and we gave an awkward nod of acknowledgement. In that moment, my body was transported from being an office worker to a place where I’ve never been before. How could my face remind someone of home? How have these cutters become my distant relatives?

My mom remembers visiting the Emporium in downtown San Francisco with poh poh as a teenager in the 1970s. While mom was sifting through the racks of clothing, she noticed poh poh stopping to look at a single blouse hanging across the store. It was as if the blouse summoned her in a paralyzing shock. With an air of urgency, she marched towards the

²⁰ barbecue pork bun

polyester printed shirt, swaying back and forth. Pulling the inside seam into the light, she found the tag and yelled “sei la!”²¹ Mom held her breath, and tried to suppress the rolling laughter bubbling inside of her after hearing poh poh swear out loud. On the tag was poh poh's employee number stamped next to the exorbitant price. Did she curse the object because it erased her humanity, and casted her as a cog in the machine? Jean Baudrillard points to the disconnect between the consumer and laborer, “ ‘From the perspective of use value, the product is viewed as a function of the human labour that created it, as crystallized labour. On the contrary it is labour that seems as a function of the product, as appropriate for the satisfaction of a given need of the user.’ ”²² The garment industry's production line is a structure that swiftly translates work into an exchange value; poh poh's name, “Sheu Ping Low,” diminishes into numbers hidden within the inseam and brushes against the consumer's skin.

If labor structures work to erase the human touch involved in the making, what is the antithesis? In thinking about disrupting processes of historicity, Dipesh Chakrabarty theorizes a “subaltern” reality that cannot be easily archived or categorized. The subaltern acts as ruptures that disrupt secular time and labor structures. By blasting out the cracks of homogenous history, the subaltern becomes audible and forms “stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise evenly woven surface of the fabric.”²³ I remember during one of our family gatherings, I peeked into the caretaker's room next to poh poh's bedroom. I noticed jagged cuts on a transparent white curtain near the window, and watched the ghostly folds of the fabric gently swaying against the breeze. The deep black holes of the fabric were framed with tiny sunlit frayed fibers sprouting around the corners. Mom walked up behind me and laughed, “you want to know the story behind that one?” I nodded my head, and she began “the Chinese can be so

²¹ *sei la!*” is cantonese slang for “die now,” <https://www.cantonese.ca/swearing.php>

²² Jean Baudrillard, “The Artisan,” in *Craft*, ed. Tanya Harrod (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). 113.

²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princetown University Press, 2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rsx9>, 106.

ridiculous about their superstitions! One night the caretaker was sleeping and woke up and swore she saw a man at the foot of her bed. She thought it was gung gung's spirit to haunt her! She took some scissors and began cutting holes in the curtains to let his spirit out, and began sleeping with a knife under her bed." Mom rolled her eyes and shook her head, "Don't they look awful? We need to get rid of those curtains, and buy new ones soon."



Fig.8. Slashed curtains



Fig.9. poh poh's hospital shirt



Fig.10 Close up of writing on shirt

Before I left home in 2019, I took one of the last shirts she made from her closet. I was drawn to the sharpie writing on the back of the shirt. Oddly enough, the initials could have been my mom's in reverse, Susan Quock. My mom told me this was one of the last shirts she wore when she was visiting the hospital, and the initials were used to identify her belongings. I held the bright blue shirt in my hands, and studied the scraggly script near the collar. I imagined the letters were written in a rush to make sure the shirt found its home at the end of the day.

The shirt hung in my closet in San Diego while I figured what to do with it. The object both held a sense of preciousness, and heaviness in my mind. I was interested in transforming the shirt into a new gesture. Drawing from my years working in the industry and sewing clothes for pleasure, I approached the shirt in reverse. I began disassembling the shirt, and started to see the differences between delicate hand stitches and the smaller machine stitching in a white thread. As I reached the collar, I found her larger stay stitches in wider stark black threads. By deconstructing her work, I could witness the history of her lines travelling through the garment.

After I was left with a pile of oddly shaped pattern pieces, I wanted to both preserve the memory of her shirt and transform the object. When I laid the pieces on the floor, they began to form a series of symbols. The arm piece turned into a rounded arrow while the thin collar piece extended into a dash mark. The signs did not spell out a clear meaning, but rather grasped at a desire to communicate. Henri Michaux's 1979 book *Saisir*, translates to "Grasp." Michaux wrote his signs with ink, and laid them out in a grid form. The squiggly notations did not represent, but rather tended to the shadow of insect forms

"Signs, not for being complete
But for being faithful to the transitory
not for conjugating
but for regaining the gift of tongues
one's own at least, for, if not oneself, who will speak it?"²⁴

In working with a form of asemic writing for this piece, I'm interested in defying modes of direct

²⁴ Peter Schwenger, "Three Asemic Ancestors," in *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 29 <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72359/>.

translation to conjure “a sentence without words.”²⁵ How do the spaces around, in-between, or missing from our words create a new translation? I’m reminded of the silhouette of those slashed curtains, and begin to see a script forming within the dark holes.

Let the Spirit Out

Descending from the gridded ceiling are twenty-two pattern hooks that hang to create the space of a closet. The nylon cord is lengthened to rest at the level of hung clothes. Attached to each hook is a two by three foot piece of fabric. The fabrics are dyed with pomegranates and toned with lac extract to create a shade similar to old brown paper. Each piece of fabric holds a print of poh poh’s shirt pattern pieces. Since iron turns pomegranate dye into shades of green to grey, I soak the shirt pieces in this solution to make a shadow print. I stiffen the fabric with a rice glue solution so it holds its form while hanging. Pattern pieces traditionally signify a set of directions, and function to clothe the body properly. Since poh poh’s physical presence no longer exists with me, I wonder how this process gives a space for the spirit to travel through. Due to the fabrics’ translucency, I’m curious about the overlap and layering that happens with these hanging fabric prints. I want this stream of symbols to be read across a horizontal plane for the viewer to both interpret and read a line of language.

²⁵ Schwenger, 31

Speaking In-Between

"I have proposed a different understanding of melancholia...it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to various battles we must wage in their names, in our names."²⁶

José Esteban Muñoz

²⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

At times I question if poh poh's decision to reject English was an act of resistance, a way to reject her assimilation into American culture during the seventy years she lived in this country? My parents told me about their struggles speaking in between languages with their parents. While my mom spoke fluently, my father spoke a form of "Chinglish." My mom recounted how she rebelled in grade school, and announced her plans to quit the after school language program. Poh poh reluctantly nodded her head, and without words her eyes expressed, "you'll regret this one day." I believe part of my parent's reasoning was to give a better life to my brother and I through this process of assimilation. If I didn't have Cantonese twisting my tongue, I could focus on reading and writing English perfectly. Perhaps, I would not experience my family's pain of being disciplined for demonstrating "Bad English."

I would like to "speak nearby" ²⁷Cathy Park Hong's experience growing up in Los Angeles' Koreatown, and how she uses her "Bad English" to subvert, other, and challenge the master language. Hong writes, "to other English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out." ²⁸ Hong writes about reaching a fluency of English at six years old, and picking up broken phrases in church and from family and friends. Hong recalls gawking at a girl's "white ghost lips outlined in black eyeliner," who yelled at her, "Bitch what are you looking at? Are you a *lesbo*?"²⁹ She left empty-handed after failing to find "lesbo" in the dictionary. I can't speak for Hong's experience because I had the privilege of speaking fluent English growing up. I excelled in my Language Arts classes, and did not experience discrimination based on having an accent or trouble communicating in predominantly white institutions. However, I can speak nearby her belief that English cannot

²⁷ In an Artforum interview, Trinh T. Minh-ha defined "speaking nearby" in film and documentary as acknowledging 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. This strategy is a way to dismantle hierarchies of knowledge production.

²⁸ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: an Asian American Reckoning* (New York, NY: One World, 2020), 97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92

encapsulate the complex, muddy, disjointed feelings of growing up between cultures. In fact, I want to *yell* nearby Hong's urge to subvert her painful experiences with language into a source of empowerment and play, "Bad English is my heritage. I share a literary lineage with writers who make the unmasker of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, other it." ³⁰

I visited poh poh's home last winter and a sharp chill hit me as I stepped inside; I felt the tension of my body loosen into a dull ache as I processed signs of her absence. However, as I entered her bedroom, I was welcomed by a warm orb of light peeking through her curtains. I smiled to myself, thinking it could have been her spirit. Her bed was stripped of any sheets, but I saw family members' photos still perched on top of her ornate wooden drawers. I stared into the mirror to see the light kissing me, softening my dark profile into a hazy glow. Beside the mirror was a piece of paper pinned to the wall, which was marked by rows of her writing. I asked my mom what the characters meant, and she replied "Oh! I think those are exercise directions she wrote to herself, the exercise is called 'Luk Tung Kuen.'³¹ I started to imagine her rising each morning to the light, and moving rhythmically to the words on the paper.

³⁰ Ibid., 97

³¹ Luk Tung Kuen (LTK) directly translates to six (parts of the body), circulation, and fist. It consists of 36 movements to help blood flow, strengthen muscles, and improve memory. Master Ha Kinh is the creator and teaches group classes everyday in Shatin, Hong Kong. Most of the movements were passed down by her father, who studied acupuncture and Chinese medicine. After catching malaria at the age of sixteen, Master Ha Kinh practiced these moments and recovered quickly.
http://www.luktungkuen.org/ltk_hist.htm

第一式 手開門

雙手向後，用力伸直手指。要留意尾指全二指。拍向後臀部，由兩邊遠出，平起腔部咁高。手指交叉，手板向面，用膊之力遠出一陣，後又反手交叉，用牙齒力，平起腔部咁高，小小遠出遠入三次，後又反掌由腔口推坐十次，再滾膝，要企直，反掌向前，撼低，到腳部十次。

第二式 開門第二式

右腳向前，雙手交叉反掌，撼落五次，左腳向前，又撼落五次，後由雙手反掌，由腔部推坐十次。

第三式 十字手

一字 撞口
伸直~~雙~~手向前，躡高過頭部，右手板踏左手背，由撞邊落，做十次，後又左手踏右手，在中間落，做十次。

Fig.11 Handwritten Luk Tung Kuen Directions

I began copying her exercise directions everyday on a piece of printer paper, followed by a google translation in English on the other side. Initially, I thought I would receive a quick and direct translation with the application. However, slips of my hand quickly copying the blurry resolution of poh poh's writing resulted in cryptic, and poetic fragments, such as "finger meaning," "tooth force," "fishy sweets." The words were never constant, and began to transform each time I engaged in this daily ritual. I saw this as another way to speak "Bad English" because the English output could not be easily consumed. I halted the computer's ability to deliver smooth semantics with my finger tips awkwardly tracing the glass screen. I turned the Chinese characters into scratchy black scribbles before they quickly disappeared. With each iteration, the characters started connecting, becoming looser and loopier, and resembled a long knotted string, which deconstructed the English translation into sparser remnants.

Walter Benjamin describes translation as a vessel broken into fragments; fragments of a greater language.³² The purpose of translation is neither to resemble the original source's meaning, nor carry the responsibility of giving answers to the reader. Instead, Benjamin argues that the translator must convey something that cannot be communicated. As I reflect on my daily translations, I find my diasporic language in the uneven and narrow space on the page that divides my Chinese and English recordings. I read this empty spine between the words as part of my language of loss, silence, uncertainty, and longing. At times my squiggly characters almost touch the shoulder of a letter, perhaps what Benjamin calls a kinship of languages. However, "kinship does not necessarily involve likeness,"³³ but rather the ability for these languages to grow in their wayward paths until the end of their time. What makes this process eternal for me is seeing this cultural divide as a generative space to both honor my ancestors and imagine new ways of belonging. José Esteban Muñoz writes, "Melancholia is the process of

³² Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969), http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/guest/Benjamin_W/Benjamin_W1.htm.

³³ Ibid

dealing with all catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, gay men. I have proposed a different understanding of melancholia...it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to various battles we must wage in their names, in our names."³⁴ Poh poh left me with fragments that I will never completely understand, but the gaps between these puzzle pieces fill me with a sense of urgency and curiosity to simply keep on going. Her memory becomes inexhaustible.

³⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

又手何了矣。
 1用方手系直寺捐
 西畲竟月指全指
 拍何返骨
 田~~田~~之~~之~~出
 平昂月皇部高
 寺捐效
 扶反何向
 何回曹~~之~~反~~之~~出~~之~~平
 1用牙~~之~~力
 平表明~~之~~部~~之~~明~~之~~高
 小小~~之~~出~~之~~入~~之~~。
 之~~之~~反~~之~~明~~之~~出~~之~~
 厚~~之~~月~~之~~汉~~之~~人~~之~~
 反掌何前
 寺~~之~~出
 前~~之~~月~~之~~出~~之~~汉

how much is 99 hands 6/6/20

donate

to stay the same

shoot

tan xie out

flat month high

finger meaning

where is the hand behind the wood

ask about ~~the~~ ticket strength

tooth force

plain writing

enter three times after going out

after Huan 4th, Lian Tianyue first appeared on the hill

full moon inflammation

whats behind

buckle

200 moons of Ergubu

Fig.12. Luk Tung Kuen google translation from 6/6/20

8/13/20

learn to refute

flutter against Ningri

shows gathering?

tree tamer pecking

step out

lovelike

10 national porridge

to be place

banned

arm lonely

Fig.14. Luk Tung Kuen google translation from 8/13/20

I wondered if my connection to the Chinese language could be done through the practice of writing and remembering poh poh's name. I began writing both the Chinese traditional characters and the pinyin spelling of her name, "Low Sau Ping." I wrote her name in repetitive rows across pieces of paper not only to gain muscle memory of the characters, but to also notice how the intricate web of writing transformed her name into patterns.

This method of creating through structures of text emerged from studying Anni Albers typewriter series. Albers experimented with typing a succession of singular letters on her typewriter to build up a visual texture, which was designed to be touched by the eyes. These drawings drew parallels to her philosophy of creating meaning through the handling of materials. She was not concerned with articulating her work through words,³⁵ but rather creating new forms of knowledge through the joining and structure of threads. Albers advocated for the study of surface appearance, *matiere*. This was not an "intellectual" endeavor, but rather connecting back to our "acute sensitivity to tactile articulation."³⁶ T'ai Smith states, " 'techniques that connect certain materials, processes, and patterns of thought into a texture--a material yet also conceptual rhythm.' "³⁷

³⁵ Victoria Mitchell, "Text, Textiles, and Techne," in *Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Tanya Harrod (Crafts Council, 1998), pp. 324-332, https://www.academia.edu/18461740/Textiles_Text_and_Techne.

³⁶ Anni Albers et al., *On Weaving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 45.

³⁷ Briony Fer and Maria Muller-Schareck, "The Language of Threads," in *Anni Albers*, ed. Ann Coxon (London, United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 137-140, 137.

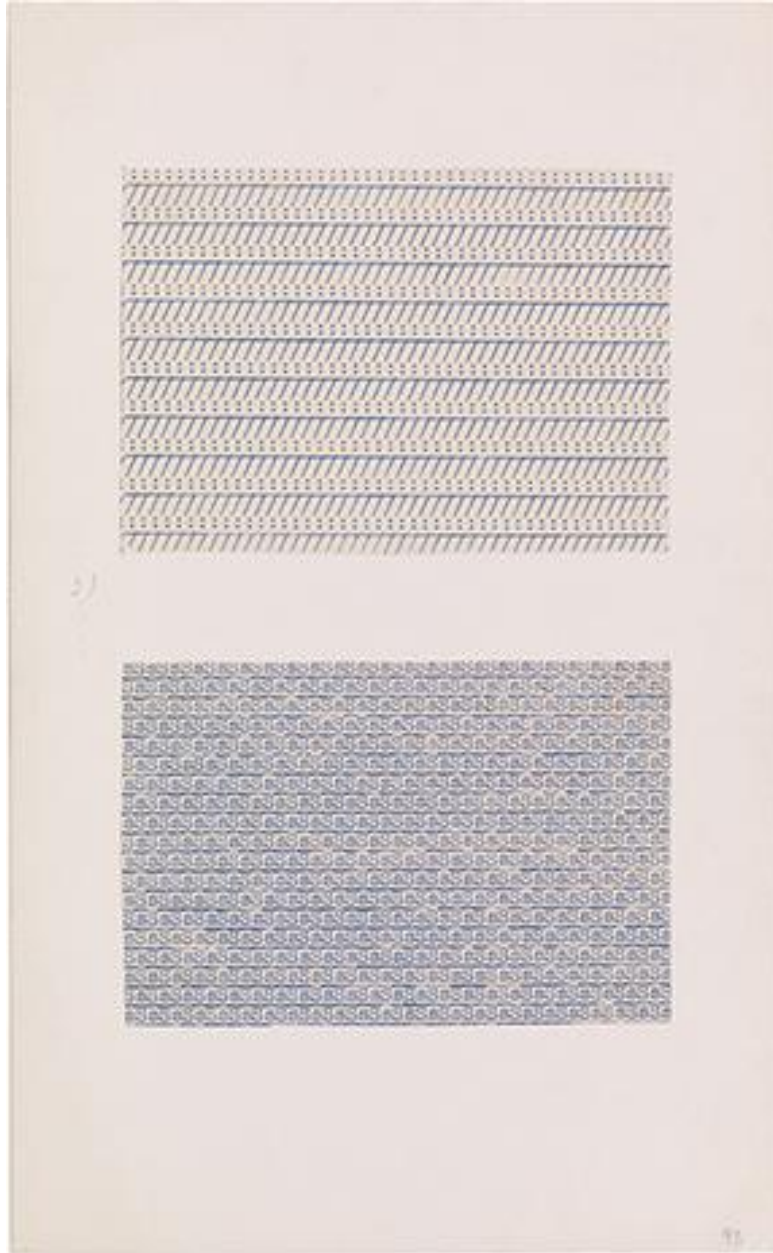


Fig.15. Albers, Anni, Typewriter study to create textile effect, n.d., <https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/introduction/#slide13>, Accessed 7 May 2021

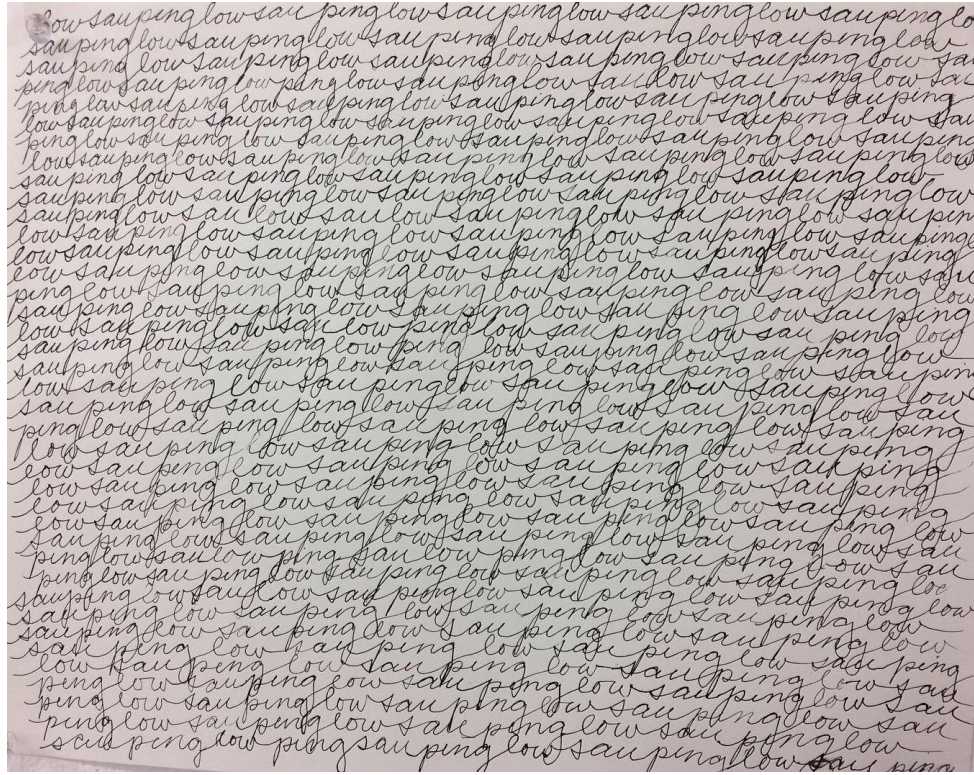


Fig.16. Low Sau Ping Drawing

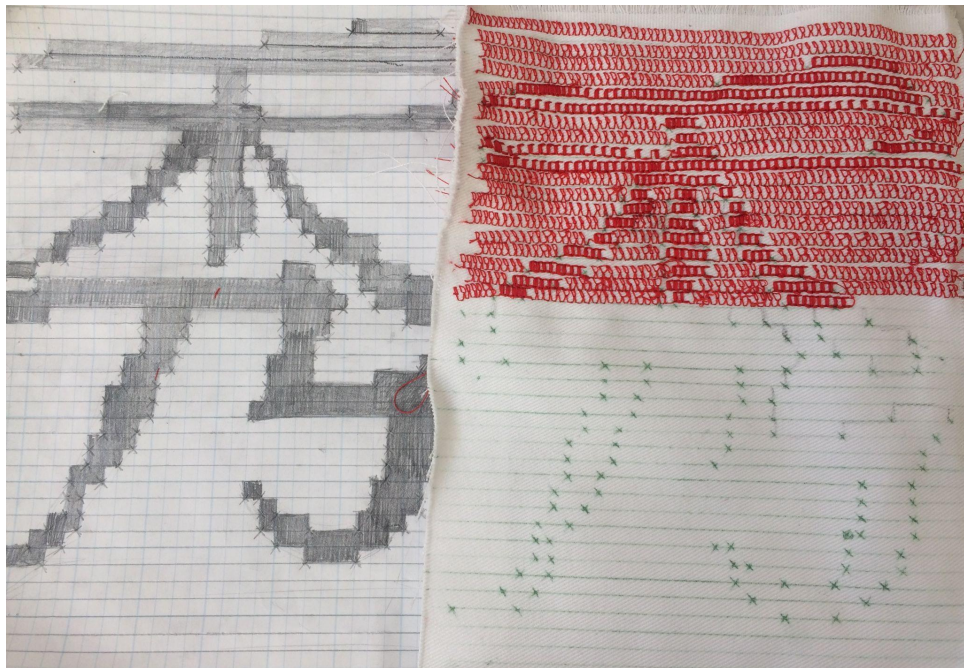


Fig.17 "Sau" character embroidery translation

sau pin glow

Near the front part of the room is a wooden peephole box covered in traditional wax dressmaking paper. There is a subtle wrinkly texture on the paper because there is writing underneath. Using a metal tip ink pen, I dig into the surface to leave a scar. As the lights shine on the box, the Chinese characters of poh poh's name emerge. Similar to Albers' work with material language, I'm not concerned with the viewer being able to read or understand the characters. Instead, I want people to engage with the labor of my hand not only working the paper, but also searching to remember her name.

Paralleling the ghostly traces of the inscriptions, the wooden peephole box contains a small monitor that plays a video recording on loop. The recording is of my poh poh reciting the Luk Tung Kuen exercise directions written on a piece of paper. My mom is filming because you can hear her voice loudly as she mumbles "mmhmm." My aunt is cut off in the corner as she speaks on the phone; she lists off poh poh's eating habits and failure to finish her jook³⁸. Poh poh occasionally looks up at the camera as her caretaker laughs intermittently, which I gather is the joy of seeing her read at such an old age. The video's audio plays openly in the gallery space to draw one closer to hear her voice. I provide neither subtitles, nor translations because I want to communicate my relationship growing up with her, which was feeling the grain of her voice.

By using this archival footage, I call into question using home video as a form of media to capture desire. Herve Guibert describes looking through his family's home videos to the relationship between "aging lovers." Figures of the past no longer age, but rather transcend into ghostly images that stay with us, "We love them so much that, by a kind of inverse magic, we want to enter the image and embrace it, returning with it to the past."³⁹ I find myself watching the video repeatedly, and I'm intrigued by the context of her reciting body movements at the cusp of

³⁸ porridge

³⁹ Guibert Hervé and Robert Bononno, *Ghost Image* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 49.

her departure. I wonder if her final message to me is one of wellness, healing, and bodily release while the entire world enters waves of sickness, death, and isolation.

The peephole box sits on a shelf that holds a long piece of fabric cascading to the ground. The form of the fabric is similar to table runners used for decoration. The fabric is dyed with lac extract, which comes from a scale insect (*kerria lacca*) that populates trees in Southeast Asia, India, and China. I was initially interested in using this dye both for the deep crimson color it produces, and how it can be used to tone pomegranate dye. However, I see connections to the dye production of these insects to a form of familial bonding. Female insects invade the trees and protect themselves and their young by secreting a red resin. The resin forms a cocoon around the insects, and contains the dye to be harvested.⁴⁰

On the dyed fabric, a running line of text repeats and shifts in each row to create a lace pattern that is centered on the fabric. While the peephole box inscription works to convey the texture of text, the cloth runner plays with repetition and orientation of words to create patterns. How can spacing and the density of my writing build into a type of drawing? In a printing process that could be highly manufactured through the monotony of reproduction, I want to retain the small irregularities of my handwriting in this print. I view the organic application of my ink pen creating a wavy lace curling around its edges and holes.

I'm influenced by artists who use the repetition of text to embed political agendas. While artists, such as Jasper Johns, in the abstract expressionist movements use abstracted text to create an "anonymous, mechanized, analytical anti-aesthetic art"⁴¹, Glenn Ligon's stencilled texts seek to expose narratives of oppression through his positionality as a Black, gay artist. In using waxy crayons, he builds layers of illegibility over time to express issues of being heard in the white box gallery and museum spaces. Although my use of text is clear upon closer

⁴⁰ Judy Newland, "Natural Dyes: Lac," clothroads.com, September 7AD, <https://www.clothroads.com/natural-dyes-lac/>.

⁴¹ Simon Morley, "A Heap of Language: Conceptual Words II," in *Writing on the Wall* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 153-169.

inspection, I play with the illusion of the text fading into lacework at a distance. In a design that is seemingly discrete and delicate, can I assert both the power and sentiment of poh poh's words within the space? The text reads, "stretching slow the blossom of resistance grows."



Fig.18 Video still of poh poh reciting the Luk Tung Kuen directions

**Erotic Kernels
and
Illegible Eruptions**

*“As writers and artists...we have to free ourselves in order to imagine it. And we need to imagine the humane being, so that we can put that archetype out there, so that we can become it.”*⁴²

Maxine Hong Kingston

⁴² March 4, 1990, <https://billmoyers.com/content/maxine-hong-kingston-part-2/>.

During the summer of 2020 amidst the Coronavirus pandemic and the collective reckoning of systemic racism in the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Toni Mcdade, Breonna Taylor, and many more, a panel called “Hyper(in)visibility” was convened by stephanie mei huang in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. The talk featured six Asian women artists, who are Pearl C Hsiung, Maia Ruth Lee, Astria Suparak, Stephanie Syuco, Hong-An Truong, and Christine Tien Wang, who spoke about how Asian American womens’ bodies have been historically rendered as either invisible, or commodified as an object. I tuned in to learn about how these artists were handling institutional racism and tokenism within the art world. How does the yellow woman handle the “hyper visibility,” specifically in the xenophobic targeting of yellow bodies carrying the “kung flu?” How does the yellow woman break free from the “hyper invisibility” in being used as a silent work force to protect white supremacy?

“Hyper(in)Visibility” was originally hosted by Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), but huang and the panel of artists decided to cancel due to the local controversy in appointing a white man to VAG’s CEO and director position despite the lack of Black representation on their board. The panelists hosted the talk independently over zoom because they did not want to support an institution failing to address the board’s existing racism, and they did not want to be tokenized yet again in fulfilling the gallery’s quota for representing “diversity.” I view the panelists’ cancellation as a way to not only assert the artist’s agency in their representation, but also a way to imagine collective gathering beyond the support of the institution.

In discussing how the artists have been navigating a condition of both visibility and invisibility, they spoke about working with illegibility to trouble identity politics. By placing the viewers in a place of discomfort, they must change their disposition to understand the other. Can they see themselves in the piece, or not? In this space of mis-recognition, the binary between the self and other begins to blur. One of the panelists, Pearl C Hsiung, created liminal spaces in her landscape paintings that merge natural phenomena with speculative possibility. In “Themses” (2019) the line between subject, object, sky, and ground collapse as slabs of blue

toned paint chips curve inward on a shaped wood panel. The painting installation leads the viewer into a thin threshold of plexiglass. Hsiung describes these paintings as “seeing through the armpits and crotches of spaces,”⁴³ to enter liberation, a state of complete release. This space breaks open the object hood of the “yellow women,” and puts her into the pleasures of acute doing, which hovers between the recognition of herself and the chaos of her strongest feeling.



Fig.19. Hsiung, Pearl C., “Themses,” 2019, Accessed 7 May 2021

⁴³ *Hyper(in) Visibility*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kF8toDMNd8>.

After learning and remembering poh poh's name, I began dissecting her name to imagine what form it could take in a poem. I looked at a page from a book, which listed her characters followed by an English meaning. Ping was defined as, "Duckweed. wandering, traveling." The duckweed plant is a tiny green rootless weed that flowers and drifts along the surface of large bodies of water. I participated in a poem exchange with my friend, Ava Sayaka Rosen, and started drafting a poem about duckweed. As I described both the growth and precarity of this plant, I saw connections to the paradox of many immigrant narratives. Ava echoed one part of my poem, "uprooted and flowering, rootless and thriving." I held on to this phrase because it sutured the dichotomies in poh poh's stories, but I couldn't stomach the word "thriving" over time. The word didn't match my feelings of grief while witnessing the rise of Anti-Asian sentiment and attacks early this year.

When I heard about the death of Vicha Ratanapakdee followed by many other attacks on Asian elders around the country, I wondered why these attacks were happening amongst the most vulnerable. I couldn't get past the eerie realization that their faces resembled my own grandparents, who faced class, cultural, and language barriers in their lifetimes. Cathy Park Hong speculates, "I think they're targeted in a sense because they're the easiest targets, but they're also the least assimilated-looking. Especially in times of economic scarcity, when other people see someone different, they want to destroy them because they're enraged and they want a scapegoat."⁴⁴ I wonder if the way I spoke and dressed helped me pass as more American. Was this truly keeping me safe?

Waves of grief turned into rage once I heard about the Atlanta, Georgia shooting of eight people at a massage parlor, six of the victims were Asian women. Their names are Delaina Ashley Yaun Gonzalez, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Yong Ae Yue. I saw my grandparents' stories entwined in these

⁴⁴ Alexa Lee, "'We'Re Both the Comfortable and the Afflicted': What Gets Overlooked When We Talk about Anti-Asian Racism," *Vox*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22334188/cathy-park-hong-minor-feelings-anti-asian-racism>.

women, who were pushed into acts of service for the public in order to provide for their families. I felt the resurgence of my own traumas in being fetishized as an Asian women after the media conveyed this attack was based on a “sex addiction.” I took a shower at the end of the day to wash away the weight of the tragedy, and was struck by what the body remembers.

As the water poured across my field of vision I closed my eyes and saw the boy pointing at me in a dark club, yelling to his friend “Lets see what it’s like to kiss a Chinese!” Walking home late at night was marked by a group of boys surrounding me in a suffocating circle, shouting “ching chong bing bong.” My head was bent down, staring at my lap as I patiently waited for the train to arrive home. A hand waved to get my attention, and I looked up to see a man mouthing words. My face curled in disgust once I realized his hand was taunting me with dollar bills. These memories were ten years old and came back to haunt me as I scrolled through my phone and read similar incidents from friends, acquaintances, and many others in the AAPI community. However, I understood my experience did not compare to women who occupied the margins. As I read through the names of the women who worked at the spa, my heart ached to know the stories behind their names.

The collective rage and mourning that persisted after the shooting made me wonder if we were all screaming into the void? I spoke to friends on the phone who were struggling to not only find the language to speak about their identity, but also to acknowledge this deep rooted pain they carried. As I entered the classroom, I heard voices of women students of color who were frightened to walk around campus alone. I felt the overwhelming silence of the institution, and wondered if I was the only one having these conversations in a class filled with AAPI students. Anne Anlin Cheng asks “The central, though often unspoken, question underlying all of this: Are Asian-Americans injured, or injured enough, to deserve our national attention?”⁴⁵ How has violence become the answer to the recognition of our race?

⁴⁵ Anne Anlin Cheng, “What This Wave of Anti-Asian Violence Reveals About America,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/21/opinion/anti-asian-violence.html>.

Cheng begins to answer these questions by examining how the country's solution in shoring up racial categories and checking off grievances keeps us in silos. She imagines how we may grieve together by understanding our "racial entanglements." This work is not identifying with people sharing similar interests or abandoning our needs, but rather "learning to see your self-interest as profoundly and inevitably entwined with the interests of others."⁴⁶ How may we reckon with the work of the oppressor and the experiences of the oppressed as deeply relational in order to transform? How do we delve into the complexity of occupying both roles depending how we wield and yield power?

In revisiting the text "uprooted but flowering, rootless..." I started searching for a word that could both end and begin a new phrase. Writing down a combination of words, "yet" emerged. I perceived this word not only as settling a way to hold possibility, but also unsettling the phrase to come undone. What may follow could be a variety of outcomes, and I wanted to give the reader space to finish the phrase.

⁴⁶ Ibid

popo's Name

LOW 劉 A battle-axe. To kill.
To destroy. A surname.

SAU 秀 Grain in the ear. Flowering, luxuriant.

PING 萍 Duckweed. Wandering, travelling.

Fig.20. Translation of Low Sau Ping

April 12th

At the root of it, I'm a cluster of **duckweed**, green pixelations floating on still waters. **Slow moving flow causes green glitch**. Peering into the reflective pool, only to see a refracted image looking back. How does this green growth deconstruct my shell into a broken mirror, yet makes me see my insides on a cellular level? Green glow bouncing around in slow dance reverberations. **Duckweed, a rootless flowering plant, taken from a fragment of my grandmother's name, Ping.** **Uprooted**, I wonder if she was tired of wandering around a new land? Did she miss her family far away? I hold on to this small part of herstory, the same way I meditate on one microscopic leaf. **Both getting lost, and finding home.**

April 13th

What you never knew was behind that guarded gaze, lightness simmered underneath her eyelids. Fluttering to the pulsating sun, her eye opened to the orb levitating on the translucent curtain. **Like tinkerbelle** floating around the room, something else was telling her, "Hello." Rising to the resonance of the echo called, Morning. She emerged from the cocoon cloth cradling her, beginning once again.

April 14th

What is, "our back?" Our collective histories playing in the background, like the allegory of the cave. What does it mean to face the unknown, staring into an abyss? What if we laid on the ground and let our bodies sink into the soil? Our backs connected to the roots, passages to the underground. Our pancake of a body, just a thin membrane between earth and sky.






-  **Ava Sayaka Rosen**
Apr 13, 2020 ✓
nice language
-  **Ava Sayaka Rosen**
Apr 13, 2020 ✓
I'd love to see you actually do this in the poem.
-  **Ava Sayaka Rosen**
Apr 13, 2020 ✓
duckweed! I know them too!
-  **Ava Sayaka Rosen**
Apr 13, 2020 ✓
nice sounds here
-  **Ava Sayaka Rosen**
Apr 13, 2020 ✓
rootless but flowering, uprooted but thriving

Fig.21. Poem exchange with Ava Sayaka Rosen, Spring 2020

rootless yet

What divides the room is a series of seventeen panels that descend to the corner of the room. The panels measure two feet wide by ten feet tall, and hang on the gridded ceiling to echo the form of a curtain. Horizontal lines of sewing fill the center of each panel. This piece explores how the machine becomes a medium between myself and the cloth. In using the machine in the similar way of drawing a pen across the page, I'm interested in how the result still retains my touch. While machine stitching is often viewed as highly manufactured and designed for precision, I record lapses in my attention that result in slightly curving lines or irregular knots that form. I choose the programmed decorative stitches on the machine based on density and texture, and alternate the sequence in shifting patterns. While I map out the raised text, the background stitches are organized in a random flow. I approach this embroidery as a mode of scribbling to pass time.

I'm informed by Hanne Darboven's process of engaging in the rhythmic action of writing and structuring time. In "Seven Panels and Index" she writes an illegible script across copies of book pages. She critiques the book page's ability to hold cultural meaning by not only leaving traces of these performed gestures, but also taking semantics out of her writing.⁴⁷ Although my stitches build into clear letters, I see my labor and time built into the structure of this text. Similar to Darboven's work in the 1970s feminist art movement, I examine how I can play with language's gestural, somatic, rhythmical mark making to take on "lived forms,"

There is a slight overlap with the panels to not only highlight the transparency of the lightweight cotton voile fabric, but also to fragment the text. Scale becomes important for shifting the initial encounter of this piece from a hazy blurry shading into the granular structure of the embroidery. Viewers cannot stand at a distance to read the full text, but they must walk closely beside the panels to slowly connect the words. The necessity to occupy these in-between

⁴⁷ Simon Morley, "A Heap of Language: Conceptual Words II," in *Writing on the Wall* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 153-169, 167.

spaces activates the viewer in a gesture of sewing. I perceive the viewer's slow pace of walking and shifting gaze that connects the rows of stitches as building an invisible thread.

This piece is part of my overarching exploration of the multiple forms a line can take. While the line plays a formal element to connect disparate parts, I'm interested in how lines reflect a history of notation. The line serves as both a tool for remembering, and moving forward in space. Webs, nervous systems, and root networks are examples of how networks of threads can both extend out of the center, and enter from the periphery. The lack of beginnings and endings to threads is freeing, yet I also find agency in the destruction caused by the drawing of threads, "it is revealing that we use the same verb, to *draw*, to refer to the activity of the hand both in the manipulation of threads and in the inscription of traces."⁴⁸ The fraying that is left after the moment of inscription marks my ephemeral encounter.

The embroidery consists of shades of red that shift from dark purple burgundy, rusty red, and a bright scarlet red. This color palette references juicy seeds inside of the pomegranate, and occupies the middle of panels to mirror an incision within the fruit's center. I apply red threads to bring dual meanings of both violence and vitality. I pull from my memories of visiting my grandparents grave. Red ink is used to fill the characters of the spouse who is still living on the tombstone.

Dyeing these panels with the pomegranate dye's warm yellow hues is a way for me to reclaim negative connotations of the color that I held as a child. How can I subvert the racialization of this color into a space of hope? In letting this color expand and take up space, I'm reminded of Audre Lorde's vision of "the Erotic." She describes in great detail and care, the process of opening a sealed plastic packet of white margarine with an "intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz."⁴⁹ Lorde pinched the little pellet until it released into a "rich

⁴⁸ Tim Ingold, "Traces, Threads, and Surfaces," in *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41-73, 45

⁴⁹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007),

yellowness,” and kneaded the packet until the color spread to its fullest extent. I often return to this vivid passage to locate the “erotic kernels” in my life. While I acknowledge the labor poh poh endured as a first generation Chinese-American seamstress, her story cannot end there. Our story should not be subjugated only to the struggles of victimization, but one of overlapping love and resistance. I listen to Audre Lorde speak of the erotic as, “an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”⁵⁰

I close my eyes and imagine poh poh waking up to exercise Luk Tung Kuen. In my bedroom, the golden light shines through my inner eyelids and transports me inside a pink glowing womb. The repetition of movements builds into a muscle memory, and I indulge in the full expansion of my limbs. Space opens as my arms carve into circular movements and draw lines into the air. The circles narrow into my finger tips that gently trace the edges of my eye sockets. My face flushes with initial discomfort once my hands reach my hips. The hips are a controversial body part oftentimes for women; it has the ability to hold sensual energy. My hips begin to swirl, wind up tension, sending heat in reverberating ripples. I reach a point where I erupt in laughter. This form of release fills the air with a sonic rumble, vibrating the depths of my body, giving me deep sensations of pain and joy. Was I crying, laughing, or both?

⁵⁰ Ibid



Fig. 22 poh poh's bedroom

Meiguo Thesis Exhibition Photos

Visual Arts Facility, Main Gallery, May 19-May 21st, 2021



Fig.23 *Meiguo* Installation Shot



Fig.24 *Meiguo* Installation Shot



Fig.25 *Meiguo* Installation Shot



Fig.26 *Meiguo* Installation Shot



Fig.27 *Meiguo*
Wool yarn, acrylic yarn
2 ft x 3 ft



Fig.28 *Meiguo* side view



Fig.29 *Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite*

Cotton polyester voile, cotton batting, lemon juice, onion skins, polyester thread
5 ft x 6 ft



Fig.30 *Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite* detail



Fig.31 *Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite* underside



Fig.32 *Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite* close up



Fig.33 *Sour Mouth, Crimson Bite* installation shot



Fig.34 *Chair Tear* front view
Wooden chair, hair
17 ³/₄ in. x 17 ¹/₂ in. x 32"



Fig.35 *Chair Tear* side view

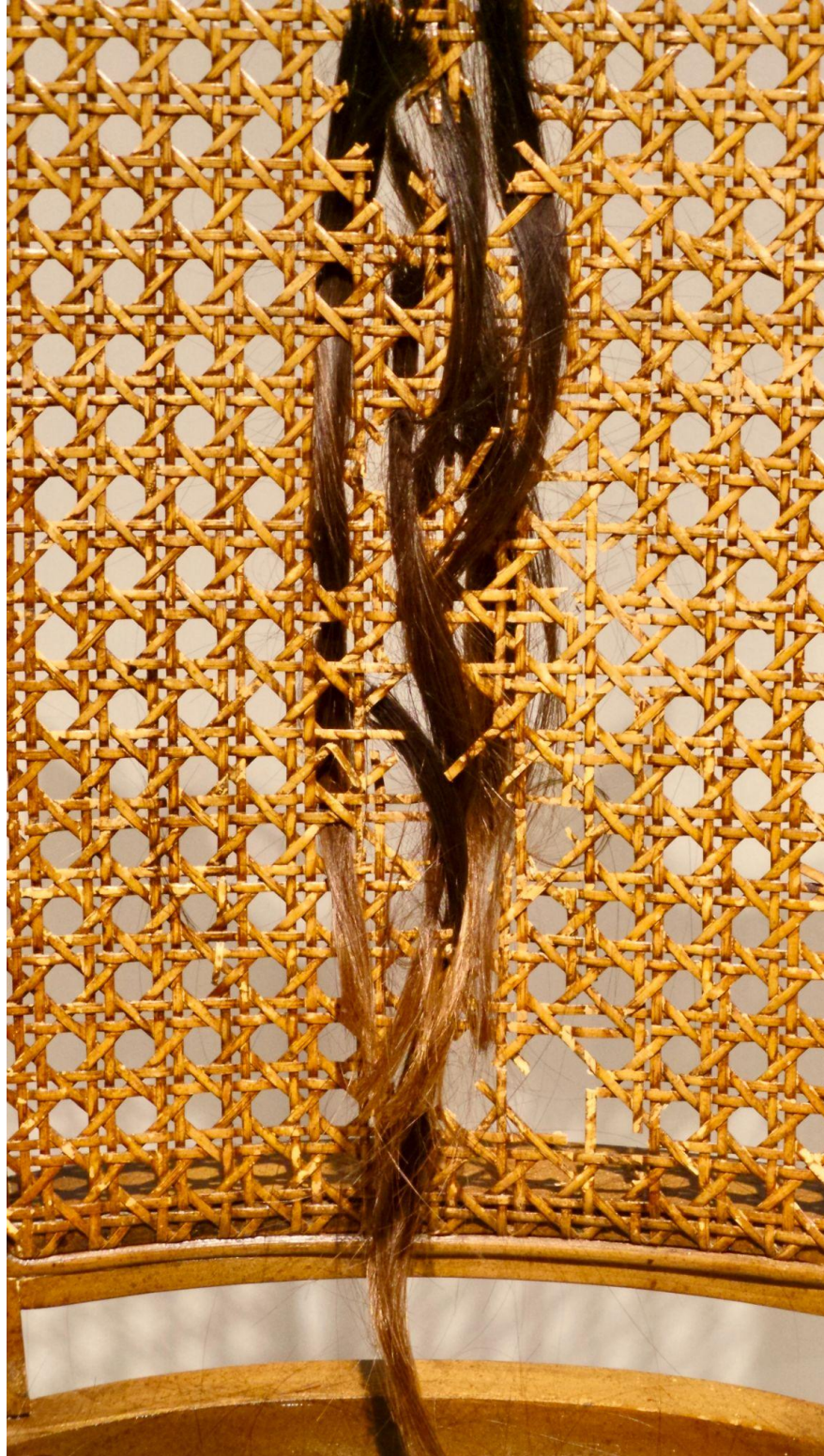


Fig.36 *Chair Tear detail*

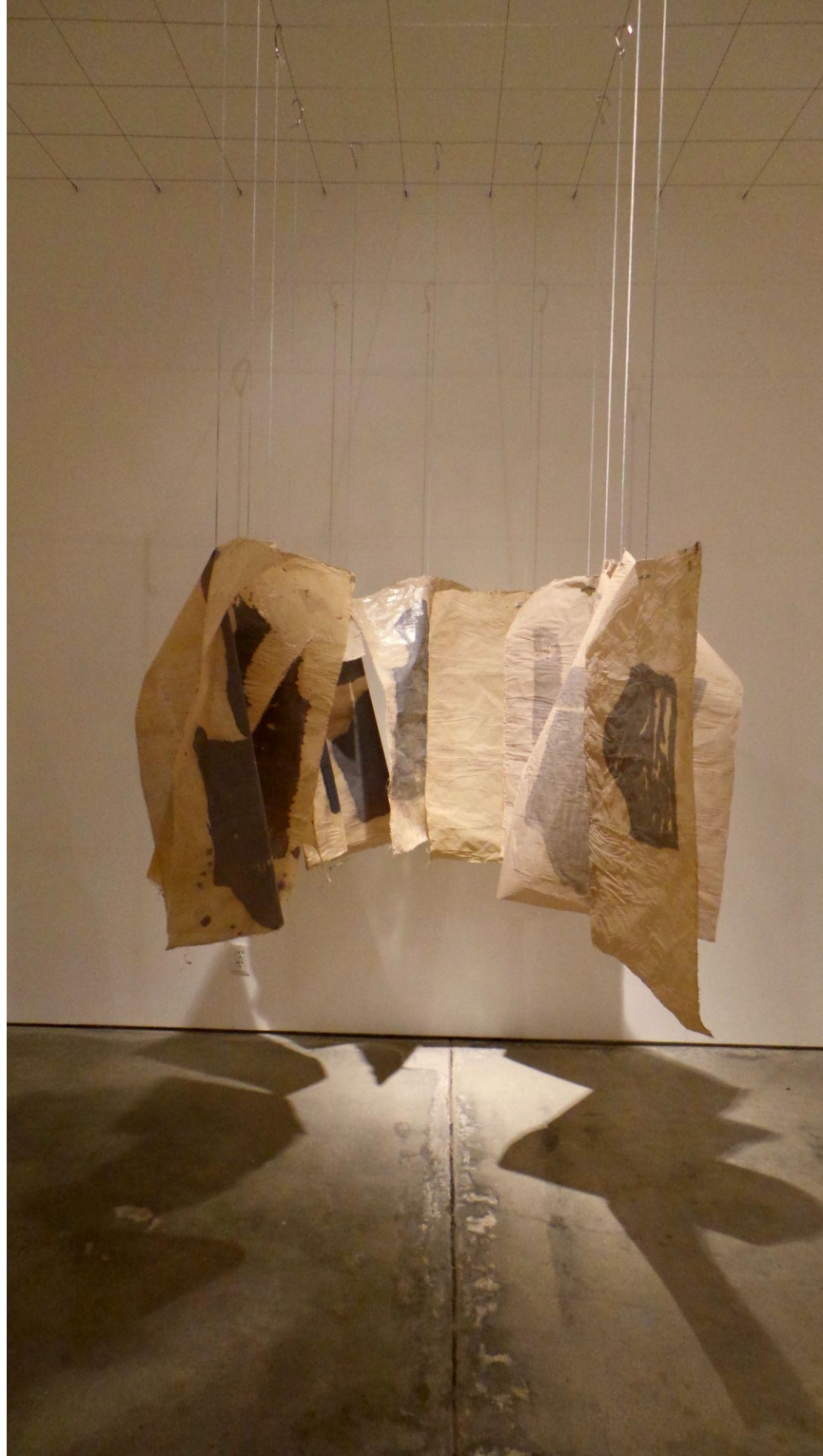


Fig.37 *Let the Spirit Out*

Cotton polyester voile, combed cotton voile, iron, lac, pattern hooks, pomegranate,
rice glue

4 ft x 3 ft x 10 ½ ft



Fig.38 *Let the Spirit Out* Detail #1

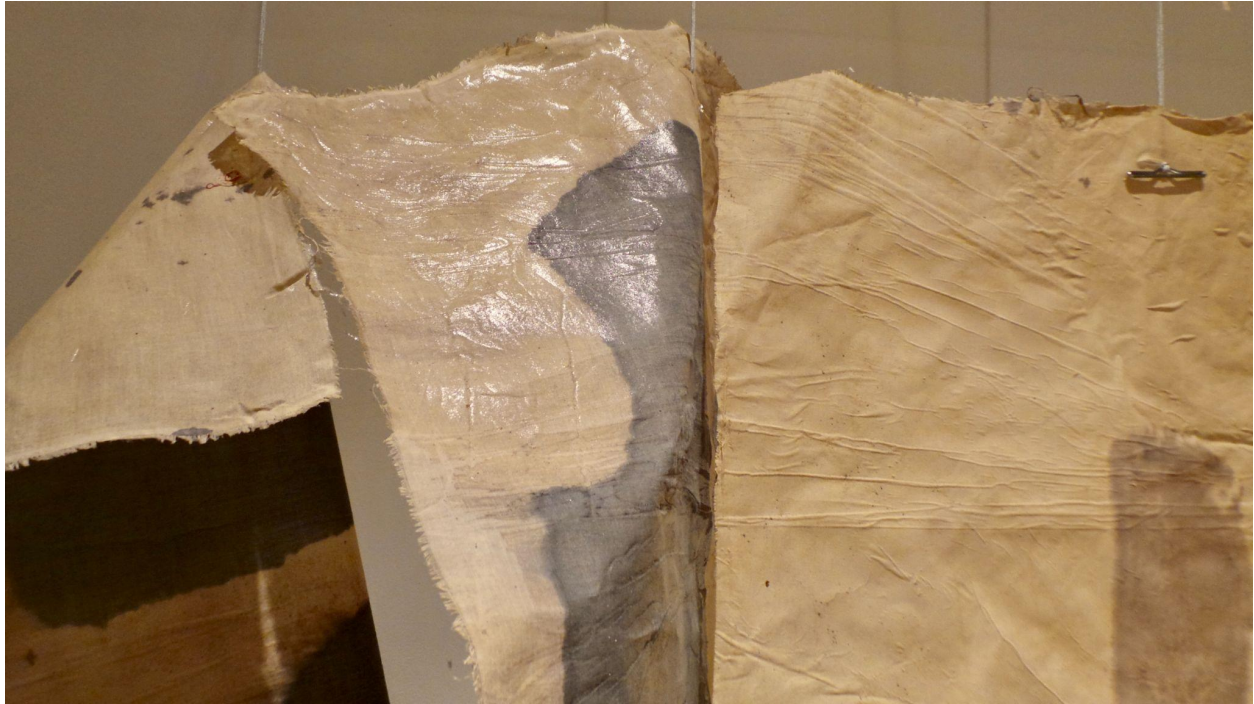


Fig.39 *Let the Spirit Out* Detail #2



Fig.40 *Let the Spirit Out* Close Up



Fig.41 *sau pin glow*
Dressmaking wax paper, linen, lac, home video, wooden box
1 ½ ft x 2 ft x 5 ft

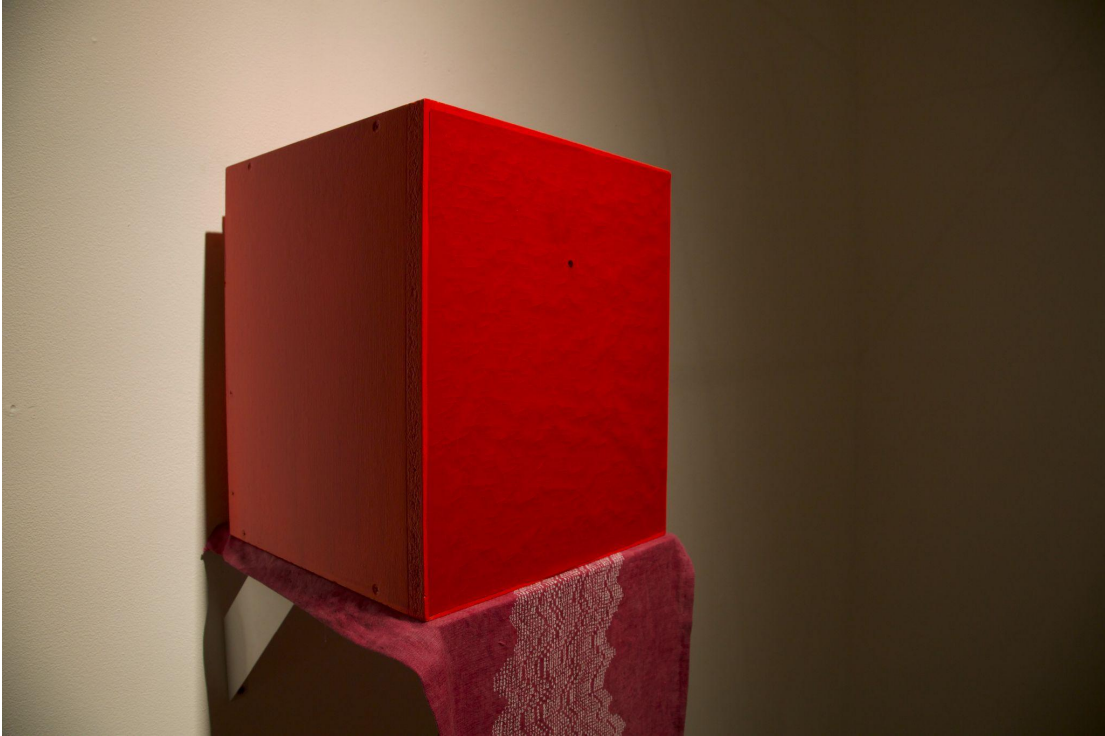


Fig.42 *sau pin glow* close up side



Fig.43 still of home video in wooden box



Fig.44 sau pin glow close up front

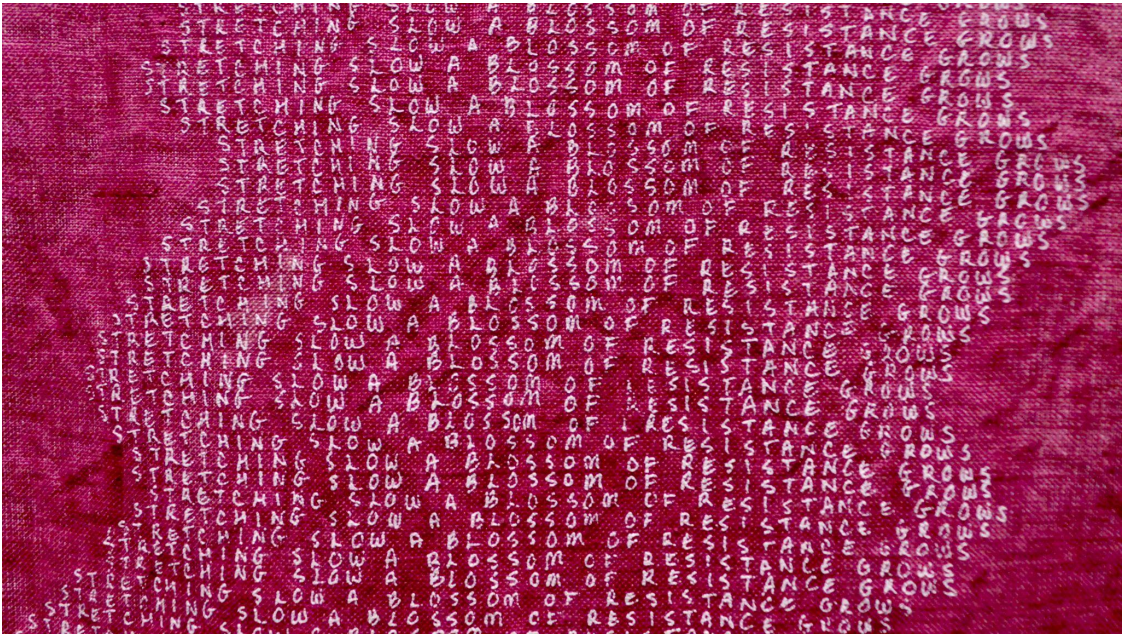


Fig.45 sau pin glow close up of screen printed fabric runner



Fig.46 *rootless yet*

Combed cotton voile, pomegranate, polyester thread

Dimensions variable

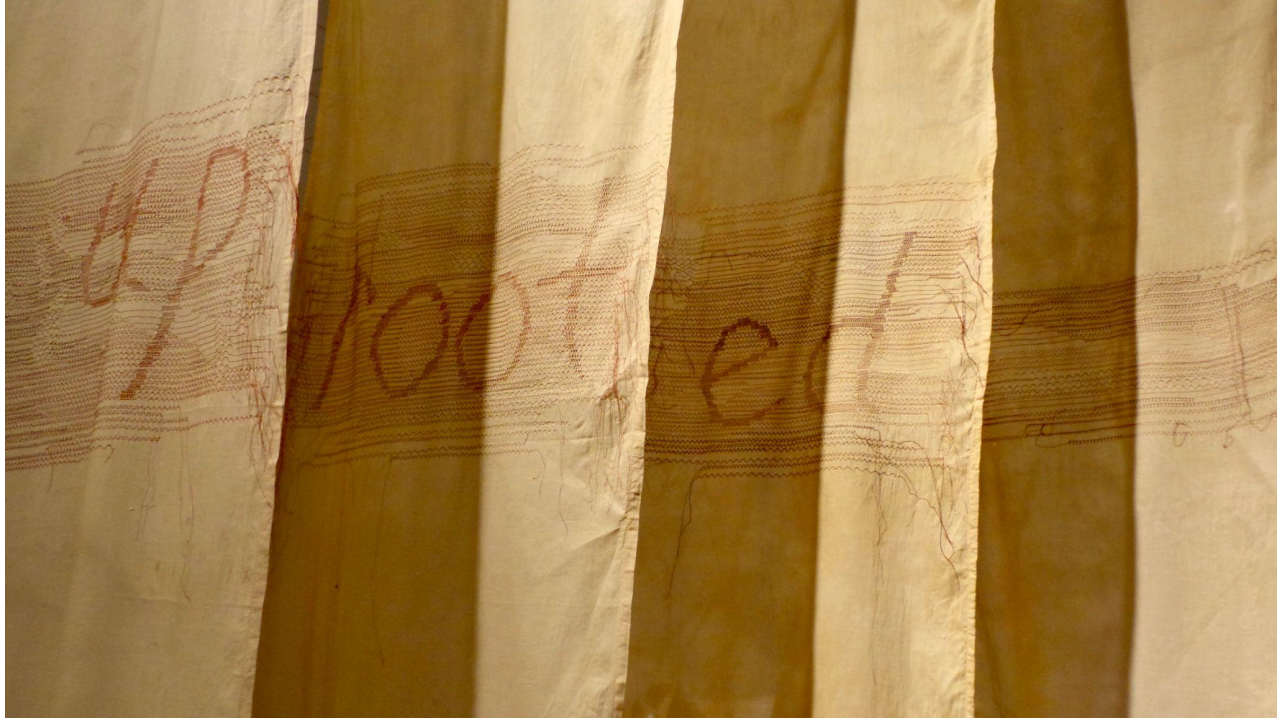


Fig.47 *rootless yet close up #1*

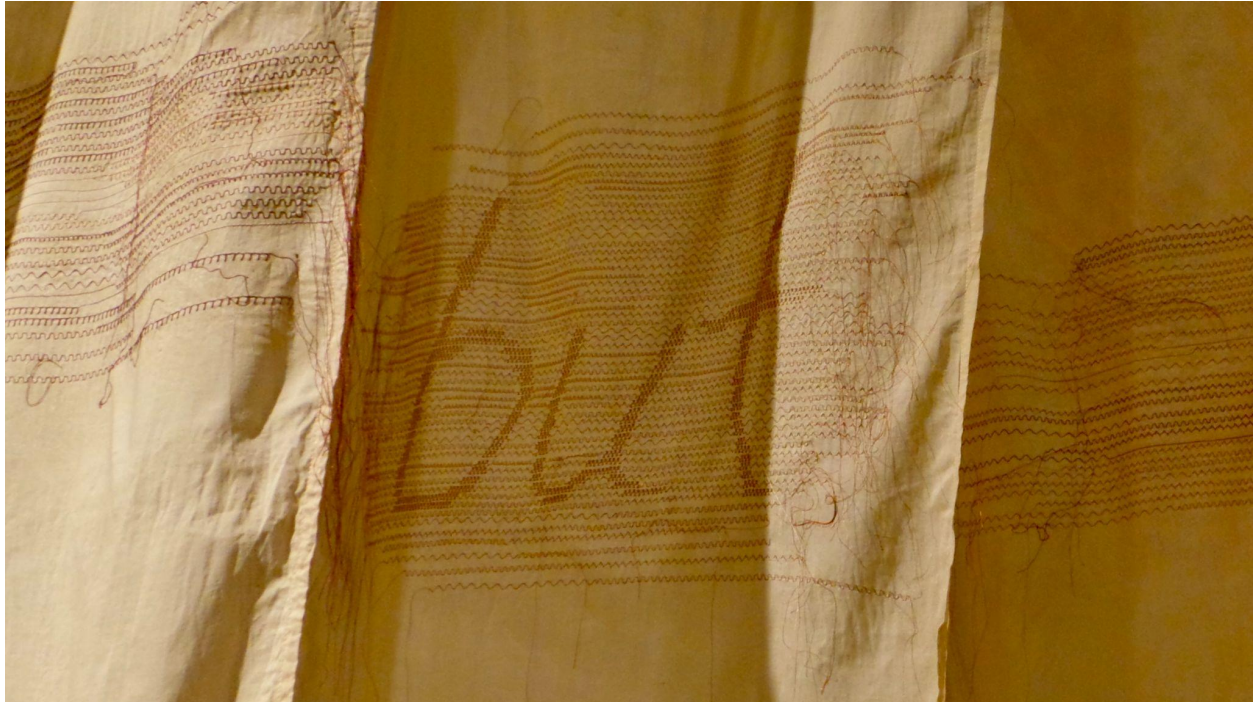


Fig.48 *rootless yet close up #2*

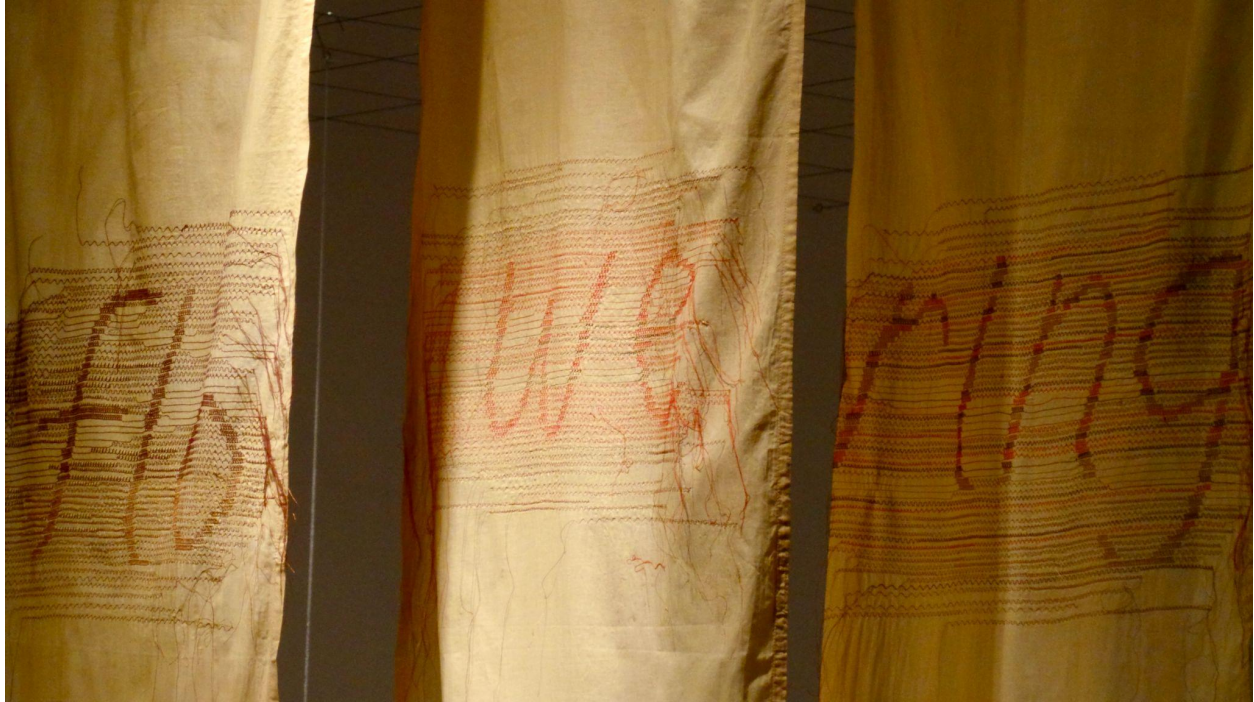


Fig.49 *rootless yet close up #3*



Fig.50 *rootless yet close up #4*



Fig.51 *rootless yet close up #5*



Fig.52 *rootless yet close up #6*

References

- Baudrillard, Jean. "The Artisan." Essay. In *Craft*, edited by Tanya Harrod. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018.
- Benjamin, Walter, and Harry Zohn. "The Task of the Translator." Essay. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969. http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/guest/Benjamin_W/Benjamin_W1.htm.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Ornamentalism. Proquest*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsd/detail.action?docID=5611121>.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. "What This Wave of Anti-Asian Violence Reveals About America." *The New York Times*, February 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/21/opinion/anti-asian-violence.html>.
- Chung, Frances, and Walter K. Lew. *Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple*. Hanouver, NH: University Press of New England, 2000.
- Creswall, Tim. *Place: An Introduction*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (New Edition)*. Princeton University Press, 2000. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rsx9. Accessed 10 May 2021.
- Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han. "Racial Melancholia: Model Minorities, Depression, and Suicide." In *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, 33-65. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smqsk.5>.
- Fer, Briony, and Maria Muller-Schareck. "The Language of Threads." Essay. In *Anni Albers*, edited by Ann Coxon, 137-40. London, United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Guibert Hervé, and Robert Bononno. *Ghost Image*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings: an Asian American Reckoning*. New York, NY: One World, 2020.
- Huang, Stephanie Mei. "Hyper(in)visibility." *Youtube*, uploaded by stephanie mei huang, 15 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kF8toDMNd8>
- Ingold, Tim. "Traces, Threads, and Surfaces." Essay. In *Lines: A Brief History*, 41-73. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Joelson, Pamela. "Ancestors of Dorothy Leong Quock," n.d.

- Lee, Alexa. "We're both the comfortable and the afflicted": What gets overlooked when we talk about anti-Asian racism. Other. *Vox*, March 17, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/22334188/cathy-park-hong-minor-feelings-anti-asian-racism>.
- Audre Lorde. 2007. *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press Feminist Series. Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=739170&site=ehost-live>.
- Mitchell, Victoria. "Text, Textiles, and Techne ." Essay. In *Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Tanya Harrod , 324–32. Crafts Council, 1998. https://www.academia.edu/18461740/Textiles_Text_and_Techne.
- Morley, Simon. "A Heap of Language: Conceptual Words II." Essay. In *Writing on the Wall*, 153–69. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Moyers, Bill. Maxine Hong Kingston on Imagination and Writing (Part Two). Other, March 4, 1990. <https://billmoyers.com/content/maxine-hong-kingston-part-2/>.
- Muñoz José Esteban. *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Newland, Judy. "Natural Dyes: Lac." *clothroads.com*, 9AD. <https://www.clothroads.com/natural-dyes-lac/>.
- Schwenger, Peter. "Three Asemic Ancestors." Essay. In *Asemic: The Art of Writing*, 19–60. Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72359/>.
- "Sonya Clark." Sonya Clark . Accessed May 2, 2021. <http://sonyaclark.com/medium/hair/>.
- Tippett, Krista. A Life Worthy of Our Breath. Other. *On Being with Krista Tippett*, April 20, 2020. <https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-a-life-worthy-of-our-breath/>.
- Smith, T'ai, Rike Frank, and Grant Watson. "The Event of a Thread." Essay. In *Textiles Open Letter*, edited by Herausgegeben von, 76–88. Wien, Austria: Generali Foundation, 2015.
- Weber, Nicholas Fox, Manuel Cirauqui, and T'ai Smith. *On Weaving: New Expanded Edition*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. Accessed May 1, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctvc772j6.
- Woo, Merle, and Cherrie Moraga. "Letter to Ma." Essay. In *His Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldua, 138–46. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981.
- Youn, Monica. "Detail of the Rice Chest." *Harper's Magazine*, January 31, 2021. <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/02/detail-of-the-rice-chest-monica-youn/>.