



Curator stephanie mei huang igniting their altar offerings of moxa and joss paper on the opening night of *with her voice, penetrate earth's floor* (2022). Image courtesy of the artists and Eli Klein Gallery.

Existing is Resisting

AAPI Artists at Work

For Americans, the present feels like a period of prolonged and ceaseless mourning: over one million lost to Covid-19; 10 Black people killed in a hate crime shooting in Buffalo, New York; 19 children and two teachers, most of them Latinx, killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas; the end of the federal right to abortion, a decision that will disproportionately harm people of color.¹ Amidst this alarming cycle of senseless violence and incalculable loss, many communities are nursing these fresh wounds on top of—and as constant reminders of—the already-present traumas of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. For Asian Americans too, the moment we are living through is one of perpetual grief. More than a year after the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, which killed six Asian American women, violence against the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community has not subsided. As a biracial Asian American woman, I can hardly remember a time when potential and real violence against my body and those who share my heritage has been so painfully palpable; indeed, moving through the world has rarely felt so precarious.

In the wake of the brutal murders of Michelle Go, a recent NYU grad who was pushed in front of a subway car in Times Square in January; and Christina Yuna Lee, an arts worker living in New York City's Chinatown who was followed home and stabbed over 40 times in her bathtub in February, the hate and prejudice that motivates such atrocious acts of violence have not been quelled.² Each new attack seems to send the same message,

and push it deeper under our skin: you are not welcome here.

The violence inflicted on the Asian American community, a tangible residue of colonialism and its pervasive presence in the form of white supremacy, also seeps into daily life in myriad forms, be it microaggressions or hurtful stereotypes. These effects are felt across every field, not least the visual arts. Historic underrepresentation within the art community has been replaced by its Trojan horse cousin, tokenization—empty virtue-signaling bereft of the necessary structural change such gestures claim to stand for. Often typecast or taken for granted as the “model minority,” Asian Americans suffer from endemic invisibility—violence in and of itself. In grappling with the current and historical waves of violence, AAPI artists and curators turn to the tools they have: using their art and exhibitions as platforms to reclaim space to mourn, process, and resist the repercussions of these deep physical and psychic traumas. These acts make room for the communal shaping and expressing of AAPI subjectivities in a society that would render us invisible. If grief is a function of what it is to be human, the ability to mourn and process within our community is the first step toward envisioning new ways of existing outside of hegemonic structures. For a population plagued in this country by historic and continued invisibility, the act of being seen and heard, of taking up space, is itself a form of resistance. In particular, three recent shows—one in New York City and two in Los Angeles—offered diverse approaches to reclaiming the gallery space by transforming it into a site of mourning, processing, and resisting unspeakable acts of violence against our community. While art cannot enact new legislation, it does have the power to plant the seeds of change by way of a more open-ended form of inquiry, one that holds space not only for action but for the emotional reckoning that necessarily precedes it.

with her voice, penetrate earth's floor, an exhibition curated by Los Angeles-based artist and writer stephanie mei huang, took a radical and cathartic approach to exhibition-making. A memorial exhibition devised to honor the life and mourn the death of the aforementioned Lee, *with her voice* brought together the work of nine AAPI women artists, including Lee, and was held at Eli Klein Gallery in Manhattan, where Lee worked for over four years. The exhibition took its title from *Dictée* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a Korean American artist who was raped and murdered in Lower Manhattan 40 years ago, in 1982, a week after the novel was published. In the gallery, huang installed an altar below Lee's painting, *Golden Bridge For Eli Klein* (2014), that overflowed with offerings for Lee made by the artists in the show, transforming the gallery into a site of collective mourning. AAPI women were also offered joss paper as a takeaway, a type of paper traditionally used to hold offerings of earthly tokens, like money or clothing, that are burned and thereby sent to loved ones who have left this world.

Haena Yoo's contribution, two iterations of *I've gone to look for America* (*[Revolver]* and *[Pistol]*, both 2021), also uses paper in a commemorative gesture, in this case for the victims of the Atlanta spa shootings. Dyed in soy sauce and folded into the shape of guns via origami techniques, the works feature headlines from 2020 and 2021 newspaper articles that read with the impact of gunshots: "8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings, With Fears of Anti-Asian Bias," "The Cost of Being an 'Interchangeable' Asian." Nearby was Patty Chang's *List of Invocations* (2017), a letterpress print embossed with a series of written invocations. The piece is an inventory of affects that range from references to end-of-life rituals ("invocation of a feeding tube," "invocation of grief") to the humorous and quotidian ("invocation of inappropriate laughing or crying") to the metaphysical or aesthetic ("invocation of writing

with light," "invocation of evaporation"). These written acts recall Chang's 2020 video installation, *Milk Debt*, which consisted of videos of lactating women pumping their breast milk as they faced the camera and recited lists of fears. Here, Chang's work took inventory of the grieving process and brought the findings into a community context, allowing us to share the brunt of their weight. In the exhibition catalog, huang writes: "We have been robbed, as members of the diaspora in the West, from our grieving processes,"³ noting that Western culture pathologizes extended periods of grief, only pushing the mourner deeper into her bereaved isolation. Instead, *with her voice* sought to create a shared space for public mourning, one from which new forms of connectivity might begin to take form.

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Back in Los Angeles, two recent exhibitions took up other strategies of resistance, offering propositions for processing colonial histories in Asia and the U.S. The first, titled *Archival Intimacies: Queering South/East Asian Diasporas*, took place between ONE Archives at the USC Libraries and the USC Pacific Asia Museum. Both shows, individually titled *Stranger Intimacy I* and *II*, explored another model of resistance by reclaiming and reexamining colonial histories and their impact on Asian American diasporic movements and cultural formation. Both venues featured work by Prima Jalichandra-Sakuntabhai and Vinhay Keo, whose artworks process the historical trauma of their migrant predecessors, who fled oppressive regimes in Southeast Asia to settle in the West.

Jalichandra-Sakuntabhai's video installation in *Stranger Intimacy II* at ONE Archives, titled *Appendix A: Ocean Gazing* (2022), charted the migratory patterns of their great-grand uncle, Pridi Banomyong, who fled Thailand's monarchy in the 1900s—going first to China, then to France—after attempting to form a democracy there. The artist's voiceover in the video draws a parallel between Asian and



Top: Haena Yoo, *I've gone to look for America (Pistol I)* (2021). Rice paper dyed in soy sauce, 10 × 7 × 1.25 inches. © Haena Yoo. Image courtesy of the artist, Murmurs Gallery, and Eli Klein Gallery.



Bottom: Kelly Akashi, *August 4-6* (2020). Bronze, 4.5 × 13 × 8.5 inches. © Kelly Akashi. Image courtesy of the artist, François Ghebaly, and Eli Klein Gallery.

American ports, layering a poetic narration over maps of Banomyong's migratory route. In the film, these biographical details are coupled with sun-drenched images of the Southern Californian littoral—the sea and shipping containers that hug its coastline. The work parallels opposite ends of the Pacific, whose watery byway both connects the U.S. and Asia and forms a barrier between East and West. Guided by contextualizing details provided by the voiceover, the video also mines the lasting colonial residues of language and architecture, particularly amongst the military paraphernalia along the San Pedro coast.

Keo's works in *Stranger Intimacies II* utilized the traditional Cambodian garment of the sampot, unpacking its material and colonial histories through a series of hanging works. One patterned red cotton sampot took the shape of the familiar pink California doughnut box—infusing Cambodian tradition with the SoCal lore of the Cambodian American community, who dominate the local doughnut industry.⁴ Another more traditional iteration of the sampot in embroidered silk and cotton with fraying edges was suspended from the ceiling by a wooden rod, backlit by a lightbulb in a reference to Felix Gonzales-Torres' use of light in his explorations of queerness. The artist shared with me in an email exchange that his use of the sampot is intended to trace its gendered material history as a once unisex garment that was feminized under French colonial rule. The exhibition's material and filmic explorations of historical memory resonated at a time of ongoing reckoning around the colonial phantoms that still haunt Asian American communities, carving out a quiet place of processing across two venues that champion the AAPI and queer communities, respectively.

At Bel Ami in L.A.'s Chinatown, the artist collective CFGNY, which comprises Daniel Chew, Ten Izu, Kirsten Kilponen, and Tin Nguyen, also explored the colonial histories of materials, transforming them by way of unexpected associations. Titled *Import Imprint*, the

exhibition (their first solo U.S. presentation) featured sculptural manipulations in porcelain, metal, and cardboard that highlighted the role of porcelain as a globalized Asian export. The clay body, which came to symbolize both wealth and exoticism in the era of U.S. mercantilism, was used decoratively and in the aptly-named chinaware beginning in the 17th century. Porcelain goods became signifiers of wealth while remaining tinged with an "orientalist" mystique. In the exhibition, slip-cast porcelain forms with imprints of quaint architectural moldings were displayed at eye-level, suspended by welded floor-to-ceiling steel poles in several works. CFGNY also conjured the colonial domestic settings in which these prized appropriative vessels were displayed as insignia of success in U.S. households—fragments of ornate door trims and mantelpieces made of cardboard were installed throughout the space, providing flimsy physical support for the porcelain works. Here, the use of cardboard alluded perhaps to the fragility of the colonial mentalities at play in the global trade of the time, social statuses that hinged on the oppression of a marginalized "other." In *American Construction Study: Fragment IV with Four Vases (Chartreuse II)* (all works 2022), a block of green-tinted porcelain molded with the traces of an ornate pattern and supported with thin, bent metal rods, sits atop a portion of a floating cardboard mantelpiece. These eerie fragments of a bygone domestic imaginary built on the exploitative logic of colonialism (and by extension, globalization) reveal the underbelly of American consumer culture and its reliance on China for both its foreign mystique and the affordability of its labor.

CFGNY's use of cardboard is also suggestive of the material's role in global trade—its affordability, and thus prolificacy. Among the cardboard architectural fragments was *American Construction Study: Fragment I*, a cardboard door with fraying edges, its upper half printed with a digital reproduction of a bucolic landscape. The printed painting by Hudson River School



CFGNY, *Import Imprint* (installation view) (2022).
Image courtesy of the artists and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.
Photo: Josh Schaedel.



Vinhay Keo, *INDO · CTR · I · NATION* (2020).
Image courtesy of the artist.

artist Asher Brown Durand embodied the movement's vision of an American sublime—a pastoral fantasy that contrasted the lived experiences of so many, particularly those of immigrants. Like *Archival Intimacies*, *Import Imprint* sheds new light on histories of migration and diaspora, calling attention to the oft-invisible colonial narratives embedded in our architectural environments and allowing us to perceive the inequities that permeate our material realities so that we may process and mourn the violent antecedents they conceal.

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Let us briefly return to the real-world context in which these artworks exist. The wave of attacks against Asian Americans has been a wake-up call for many white Americans, in and outside of the art world. When I began this writing in May, it was AAPI Heritage Month (coinciding with Mental Health Awareness Month, not unfitting for a population plagued by acts of hate and their ensuing trauma), and my Instagram feed was temporarily aglow with galleries' and art institutions' messages of solidarity. Yet, the recognition of an entire ethnic group should not be limited to an arbitrary month, and unthinkable atrocities should not be the necessary forerunners of genuine visibility. To put it bluntly: why do Asian Americans have to die for a broader audience to begin to recognize our cultural contributions? In the wake of a string of brutal murders and amidst a context of unacceptable anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S., appreciating AAPI artists does not exclusively have to be a function of grief. As made evident from the sheer breadth of inquiry, form, and material strategies deployed by AAPI artists, in L.A. and beyond, as they come together to mourn, process, and resist, art can become a fruitful place to subvert attempts to classify or reduce via stereotype. Amidst a political, social, and cultural reality of physical and psychological violence in the U.S., and particularly in light of our community's historic invisibility in the West, it is a joy

to see these artists' work effectively *performing* their authors into being—through its articulate strategies of resistance, but also by dint of its presence. That is: for a population long condemned to silence or stereotype, perhaps existing on our own terms can itself be a form of resistance. These artists' work—at turns grief-ridden, poetic, and incisively intelligent—inherently resists effacement and invisibility, as if to proclaim: I am here, I contain multitudes, and cannot be hidden from view.

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1. "Roe v. Wade Overturned: Supreme Court Gives States the Right to Outlaw Abortion," Planned Parenthood, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/abortion/roe-v-wade>.

2. Sakshi Venkatraman, "Nowhere is Safe": Asian Women Reflect on Brutal New York City Killings," *NBC News*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/nowhere-safe-asian-women-reflect-brutal-new-york-city-killings-rcna16173>.

3. stephanie mei huang, "On Joss," in *With Her Voice, Penetrate Earth's Floor: A Group Exhibition in Memory of Christina Yuna Lee*, section IV, accessed June 10, 2022, <http://www.galleryek.com/attachment/en/559aad566aa72c9c3d07911a/Publication/6252040780801235a400375a>.

4. David Pierson, "Why are doughnut boxes pink? The answer could only come out of Southern California," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-pink-doughnut-boxes-20170525-htmlstory.html>.