

## *Chinatown Chronicles*

At Eastern Art Gallery between January 18 and March 09, 2023 and on-line infinitely.

*Chinatown Chronicles* takes its inspiration from the novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu. The book sets the dissonance between the American Dream and the dystopian experiences of immigrants within the iconic architecture of a Chinatown SRO, with its poverty and close quarters, and the equally iconic “International Golden Palace” restaurant, with its familiar exploited and undocumented labor force. Yu constantly reminds us that our Chinatowns are microcosms of their respective cities. The perils common to immigrant communities – historical trauma, displacement, gentrification, and commercialization of traditional culture – are the focus of *Chinatown Chronicles*. The exhibition reveals the tensions between belonging and estrangement endemic in immigrant communities, through paintings, sculptures, and documentary films grounded in exemplary storytelling and archival research.

There are over 50 Chinatowns in America dotted by familiar landmarks: The Golden Gate, The Golden Dragon Restaurant and its variations, pagoda-shaped temples and shops filled with Chinese tchotchkes. Similar ethnic iconography is found wherever Asian-American communities (e.g., Little Tokyo, Koreatown) serve as tourist destinations, despite their reinforcing the stereotypes that denigrate the inhabitants and their contributions to the political, social and economic success of our cities.

Since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, these cities-within-cities provided refuge for the racially discriminated. They were deemed filthy, rotten, "depraved colonies of prostitutes and gamblers."<sup>1</sup> But the refuge was fragile; their inhabitants were regularly lynched or driven from their homes. Anti-Asian structural racism quickly produced the same level of brutality as that inflicted on African-Americans.<sup>2</sup> Today, these same ethnic districts are exotic destinations for “Orientalism lite.” For this very reason Yu uses Chinatown as a stage for dissecting the perils of Asian American identity. According to the poet Cathy Park Hong, “Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: Not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we’re being used by whites to keep the black man down.”<sup>3</sup> The term “Asian American” heedlessly amalgamates North, South, East, West and Indigenous Asian communities. The very different historical, economic, and geopolitical factors that contributed to each wave of immigration are ignored, along with their unique cultures.

The mighty power of generalities transcends Asian immigrants. Every ethnicity has been “welcomed” to America with a prescribed set of stereotypical characteristics. As a Russian-American woman, I must frequently laugh off the notion that I am a mail order bride, which, even as a joke, is an unsettling micro-aggression. I am thankful to Yu for illuminating the SRO as social scaffold, which evoked for me the apartment blocks in Brighton Beach. As I read his book, I could not help but hear the same screams and arguments that crept into the hallways of the apartment block where I grew up. The human typology so aptly described in *Interior*

*Chinatown*, spoke to what stills dwells deep inside me and many other Russians: our wretched, imperial arrogance combined with subservience to the West.

Similarly, the artists in *Chinatown Chronicles* help us make sense of the many personal denials and ruptures—social, political, and ecological—that plague our cities. The artists mourn the hate crimes against Asians that exploded during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this crisis has also provoked an upwelling of energy and self-reliance. The exhibit explores how, during the pandemic, Chinatown businesses, non-profits, and individuals provided free meals to people in need and organized volunteers to patrol the neighborhoods amid the rise of violence.<sup>5</sup> **Susan Chen** documents societal and urban changes in NYC Chinatown. Her painting, “Chinatown Block Watch,” portrays the iconic corner occupied by Nom Wah Tea Parlor. Volunteers are depicted on community patrol protecting against rising hate crimes during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Chen, who graduated from Columbia University, would have been inspired by her professor Aliza Nisenbaum, who painted a series of intimate, rich, candy-toned portraits of undocumented Mexican immigrants. Nisenbaum, in turn, was inspired by her work with Tania Bruguera’s Immigrant Movement International (IMI), illustrating the many matching links in the chain of immigrant narratives.

The documentaries by **Law Chan**, *Delivered*, and **Gopika Adjay**, *To The Plate*, narrate the courageous stories of front line workers in Chinatown. **Nina Kuo** chronicles the fast-disappearing, iconic Chinatown storefronts of the shops dispensing traditional medicines. **Sally J. Han** creates a meditative portrait of a young girl dressed in traditional Korean garb walking through the snow past shopfronts in NYC’s East Village. **Shanzhai Lyric** is an artistic duo, and a research collective that takes its inspiration from the English mistranslations of shanzhai t-shirts made in China and proliferating across the globe. Shanzhai Lyric has amassed an ever-growing archive of poetry-garments, from which a selection are heaped in two piles in a corner of the gallery along with the poem MOSCHIN as wall text.

**Adam Chau**, and **Sin Ying Ho** work in traditional blue and white ceramics. These colors have pervaded commerce between China and Europe since 1700 and serve as one of the oldest illustrations of imperialism (1800s), ethnocentrism (1900s), and economic and cultural globalization (1980s). Ceramics is a flexible medium – equally accommodating, for these artists, to abstraction, sly criticism of mid-brow material culture, and old myths with a contemporary slant.

**Linda Sormin** hand-built a new, small-size sculpture, 乳, by glazing and firing together 3 kitschy ceramic rams that she found in Toronto’s Chinatown. Sormin crowned these with a cast of her own breast, gilded in gold leaf – a response to “Bol-Sein” the historic Sevres porcelain vessel said to have been cast from the breast of Marie Antoinette.<sup>7</sup> In this work, Sormin continues her creative trajectory of referencing untraveled journeys, “entwining stories and histories among those who define themselves through their separations.”<sup>8</sup>

Acclaimed pipa player, **Min Xiao Fen**, intertwines the motifs of Chinese opera with Western jazz in her soundtrack “White Lotus,” for Wu Yonggang's 1934 silent film *The Goddess*. Min plays the pipa, the four-stringed lute in a duet with guitarist Rez Abbasi.

**Yun-Fei Ji** critiques the rising tide of intolerance for anyone not representative of the dominant culture. His watercolor, *The Nativists and Immigrants*, depicts a continuing struggle fueled by American Anti-Asian racism. Ji’s deploys his mastery of classical Chinese art, its themes, calligraphy, and stylized brushstrokes to convey the risky immigrant journey.<sup>9</sup>

**XU ZHEN** freely manipulates Western expectations of Chinese art and commerce through his provocative sculptures, paintings and installations. His sculpture, *Eternity-Six Dynasties Period Painted Earthenware Dragon, Sleeping Muse (2017)*, combines references to both Western and Eastern classical traditions. The ancient earthenware dragon protects serene, sleeping muses in a noble, but simple composition. In the painting *Under Heaven – 20180422*, Zhen applies a thick layer of oil paint to the canvas and then forms delicate petals and flowers using cake decorating tools. The resulting impasto creates a striking relief that tempts the viewer to touch, or even taste!<sup>10</sup>

Together, these artworks resonate unexpectedly through their colors, composition, and themes. They engage in a visual dialog that both illuminates and honors the poignant themes of *Interior Chinatown*, and its incisive portrait of a vibrant community that has thrived despite two centuries of unrelenting stereotyping. Julia Wintner, 2023.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

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<sup>1</sup> For the genocide of Chinatowns, read Bonnie Tsui, *American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods*, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Park, “I thought of Asians through history being dragged against their will, driven or chased out of their native homes, out of their adopted homes, out of their nation country, out of their adopted country: ejected, evicted, exiled.” P.34 *Minor Feelings*.

<sup>3</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, 2019,

<sup>4</sup> Racism has defined the Hollywood film industry since its birth in the early 1900s," the sociologist Nancy Wang Yuen writes in her book, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*. Asian characters appeared in the form of racist cliches — either as mysterious, menacing villains or as laughable caricatures.

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the current war between Russia and Ukraine raised prejudices against Russians. The exposure of ethnic identities and their external and internal stereotypes is a central concern for artists in *Chinatown Chronicles*.

<sup>6</sup> Jasmine Liu, Asian Women and Nonbinary Artists Paint Their Major Feelings: A landmark show of 30 artists at Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New. June 23, 2022 <https://hyperallergic.com/739334/asian-women-and-nonbinary-artists-paint-their-major-feelings/>

<sup>7</sup> For the history of Bol-sein please visit <https://boutique.sevresciteceramique.fr/gb/historical-artefacts/21-bol-sein.html>

<sup>9</sup> Rehema C. Barber, 2020-2021: Art amidst Chaos, 2021 AICA's Magazine <https://aicausa.org/magazine/2020-2021-art-amidst-chaos>

<sup>10</sup> In 2009 Xu Zhen subsumed his individual artistic identity and transformed into Madeln – an “art creation company.” Subsequently in 2013, Madeln launched a brand – Xu Zhen, redundantly making Xu a product of his own corporation.

