

Understatements

MIKA AGARI

EMMY CATEDRAL

XINGJIAN DING

KIANI FERRIS

MEGAN MI-AI LEE

JEREMY YUTO NAKAMURA

SHARMISTHA RAY

YU-WEN WU

Lost & Found in Asian America



GODWIN-TERNBACH MUSEUM, QUEENS COLLEGE (CUNY)

Understatements

Lost & Found in Asian America

GODWIN-TERNBACH MUSEUM, QUEENS COLLEGE (CUNY)

9.28.2022 - 1.6.2023

Understatements: Lost & Found in Asian America is the inaugural exhibition made possible by The Thomas Chen Family/Crystal Windows \$1.1 Million Endowment to help establish the Queens College School of Arts and to support Asian contemporary visual art at the college. The exhibition, on view from September 28, 2022 – January 6, 2023, explores the evolving layers of identity represented by the term “Asian American.” Expressing themselves through such mediums as sculpture, painting, video, and paper, the eight artists in *Understatements*, encourage intimate, yet impactful interpretations of their work.

The exhibition is organized by Herb Tam, curator and director of exhibitions at Museum of Chinese in America.

Asian America started out as a rickety tent, a patchwork quilt of weather-worn, colorful fabrics dyed in the mud of motherlands from the great “East.” It was pitched and staked on the big lawn of revolutionary ferment of the late 1960s anti-imperialist and anti-racist political and social movements. In this tent, revolutionaries huddled together and dreamed up a new world order: the end of colonialism and war, solidarity with each other as Asians in America, and Asian American solidarity with Native, African, and Latino Americans. The tent was perfectly fine—providing both shelter and porousness, a sense of enclosure and openness—until the revolutionaries realized they needed walls and a foundation to make serious claims on the American consciousness and to tear down the monuments to Orientalism, not to mention having walls meant they could decorate, hang art and make loud music.

Thus, the institution of Asian America was constructed as a single-family home on the outskirts of the revolutionary lawn. With walls and paved floors, the tent became a house (let’s call it the House of Yellow Peril) for conversation and action, and a launching pad for activism and community organizing around housing, health and labor issues. It was a safe space to formulate, create and build political power for a new alliance of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Pacific Islanders, Filipino Americans and Indian Americans who before housed their identities in separate and detached shacks.

An artistic language simmered up from inside these walls. Songs from kitchen jam sessions: Folk and free jazz-driven ballads earnestly celebrating immigrant strivers. Passionate, autobiographical, experimental poetry from the House study room. From the garage and on the exterior walls, a community-driven art with a purpose: murals advancing the plight of laborers and racial harmony. All of it, equal parts emotional lament, memory as historical recovery, and storytelling for an experience of the invisible, marginal and powerless. Art and language in service of the revolutionary machine. In a time of people power, post-colonialism, and strikes against capitalism, Asian America identity became embodied, symbolized, and named through this art.

As immigration from Asia exploded after the 1970s, the House of Yellow Peril swelled to accommodate the strikingly different experiences of new arrivals fleeing war-torn Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and new waves of immigrants across East and South Asia, as well as those of a growing mixed race heritage. These new immigrants moved in and added their own rooms stuffed with the sounds, smells and tastes they brought with them. Newly constructed walls and hallways separated these rooms from the central living room where the architects of the House of Yellow Peril socialized and schemed. No longer a modest single-family home, the house became a sprawling labyrinth, complicated and confusing. Newly immigrated to America or born within its walls, the inheritors of the Asian American identity were inside its house, but lost from the beginning.

As an undergraduate in the late 90s at San Jose State University, a commuter school in the heart of northern California's Silicon Valley, I associated Asian American with college reading assignments: Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, and so on. But as much as I could understand why these stories were important, I couldn't truly feel what they wrote. Their stories imparted a sense of agency, assuredness and strength from cultural inheritances, that didn't jive with my own feelings of dissonance from my parents' story and from Chinese American history at-large. I equated being Asian American with much more unremarkable things like the trudging, boring work of the family dry cleaning business, knowing how to measure the right water level in a pot of rice, and having a cadre of Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese American friends who would passively-aggressively mock each other's cultures while sharing a mutual sense of outsidership to a perceived mainstream.

On San Jose State's palm tree-lined campus dotted with mismatched architecture, I had been studiously ingesting the Asian American literary canon while also devouring Black Power texts, dozing off at art history slide lectures, listening to East Coast rap music, and channeling all of that into angry autobiographical work: large oil paintings that hybridized photorealism, Francis Bacon's sudden, violently expressive brushwork, and commentary on my family history, Chinese American identity, and the comedic grotesque of American culture.

It felt like the right thing to be doing. In sleepy downtown San Jose, those paintings came off as radical and subversive. But when I got to graduate school at the School of Visual Arts in New York, I quickly learned that the kind of work I was making was considered conservative, politically correct, and unfashionable. It was derided for its Identity Politics,

for taking on narrow Asian American themes. It was propaganda, preaching a political idea, telling what the viewer to think. I was self-conscious about being pigeon-holed as an Asian American artist, so I decided to stop making it. I changed course and settled into making a kind of non-narrative, apolitical figurative art that emphasized and fetishized how we consume images and how images consume us.

During the multicultural era of the 80s and 90s, when racial diversity went mainstream, artists monumentalized biography, family history and identity politics in an urgent struggle to be visible and to define the contours and nuances of an Asian American experience. This kind of work defined what Asian American was, art historically: a multiculturalist naming and mapping of immigrant experiences and minority feelings; a way to make the House of Yellow Peril feel bigger and more personal, at the same time a way to broadcast its voices louder. The multiculturalists exposed themselves, their bodies, their faces, their family traumas to make art that occupied space coalescing the lessons of modernist masters through a racialized lens, excavating their subconscious into formalist explorations, ironically reworking pop cultural motifs to turn a mirror to America's racial contradictions, and taking the linguistic and conceptual turn towards Asian dialects and their translation. The multiculturalists targeted the grand stakes of art history books, a space of Asian exclusion, through a politics of representation, some might say.

In contrast, the artists included in *Understatements* propose a daily practice of intimate gestures to confront similar negotiations of the world. Experimenting in various media and processes, their work grows out of wandering, restless energies that coalesce in small-scaled objects and actions. They encourage close, slow readings—getting lost in order to find new ways out.

Mika Agari assembles surprising constellations that are suspended lightly or rest precariously on the ground, suggesting vulnerability. **Emmy Cathedral** draws inspiration from long walks through her Elmhurst, Queens neighborhood. In her video, *Dear Shirley*, Cathedral imagines a dialogue with Hong Kong actress Shirley Kwan, whose role was cut from Wong Kar Wai's film *Happy Together*, interwoven with scenes from a neighborhood walk to someone's idea of the center of New York. **Xingjian Ding** paints with deliberate, attentive slowness. In *Doom*, dabs and longer passages of muted blue, ranging from purple to sky, congeal to form the lower realms of an ice skater. **Kiani Ferris** transforms materials—rice grains as paint pixels, cast glass sculptures, and arrangements of kenzan, the spiked forms that keep flower arrangements in place—that nod to her personal history. **Megan Mi-Ai Lee** explores the symbolic possibilities of common objects such as house slippers nestled inside each other, subway seats and a story about ponytails, and star-bursting eyelashes in bronze. **Jeremy Yuto Nakamura's** postcard-size paintings of landscapes and cityscapes from daily journeys around New York focus on scenes that often go unnoticed. **Sharmistha Ray's** *Blindspot* series represents hours of writing piled upon itself, turning a daily meditative ritual into a mechanism for automatic drawing. **Yu-Wen Wu's** *Walking V* and *Walking VII* take the form of a hand scroll or accordion book, simultaneously documenting the act of walking and connecting it to storytelling and memory.



The Apple | Mika Agari

Mika Agari

Mika Agari is currently living in New York and was born and raised in Nashville, TN; Mika has slowly been making things since 1992. Recent exhibitions include a solo show at Electric Shed, a three-person show with Qian Cheng and WORKS at Dreams Comma Delta, and with Lauren Taylor at Bar 4000. Mika has also exhibited at Marvin Gardens in Ridgewood, NY and is part of the wear and wares collective Pear Wear.

Emmy Catedral

Emmy Catedral was born in Butuan City, Philippines and raised in Butuan, Iloilo, Queens, and East Harlem, New York City. She is interested in collaborative acts of acentering, and subaltern gestures trolling the ways of knowing imposed and sustained by the global north. Through multi-form installation, performance, and texts, She has shown work under institutional personas The Explorers Club of Enrique de Malacca, The Amateur Astronomers Society of Voorhees (AASV), and as herself. She has performed collaboratively as Y2K (with Jocelyn Spaar and Carlos Rigau), and with the theoretical engineer and musician Howard Huang.



Fallen Parts Trust (detail) | Emmy Catedral

Work has been presented at Queens Museum, The New-York Historical Society, LaMama Experimental Theater Club, Primetime, Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery and Department of Astronomy, Center for Book Arts, and Akron Art Museum. Readings and performances have been presented at Recess, 601 Artspace, Wendy's Subway, The Segue Reading Series, Present Co. and other sites without names. Emmy DJs as Pers Lab rooted in Cultural Anthropology, Asian-American Studies, Combined Media, and Sculpture.

Emmy teaches Intercultural Practice in the Curatorial Practice MFA Program at Maryland Institute College of Art. Emmy earned her MFA in Sculpture at Hunter College, Department of Art and Art History (2012).



Blue World | Xingjian Ding

Xingjian Ding

Xingjian Ding was born in 1995 in Shanghai, China and moved to California in 2005. After attending School of Visual Art (BFA Illustration) he continues to explore his visual language through painting. His works have been shown in group exhibitions including *Light-up Therapy Resort*, Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai (2017-2018); *Modern Expressions of Traditions* Metropolitan Pavilion, New York (2018); *Sidequest* (curator) The Living Gallery Outpost, New York (2018); *Backyard Dreams Keeps Me Awake* TuTu Gallery, New York (2020). Xingjian currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Kiani Ferris

Kiani Ferris is an artist and ceramicist based in Brooklyn, New York. She earned her BFA at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 2020 and studied at Kyoto Seika University in 2018. As a third-generation Japanese American, her work explores the complexities of cultural estrangement while simultaneously celebrating the joys of its perseverance. She acknowledges the shifting distance and proximity of living and deceased spirits while forming connections with them, honoring their histories within present forms. Ferris' work has been exhibited throughout New York and Japan.



Path | Kiani Ferris



Place for Two Ponytails to Touch | Megan Mi-Ai Lee

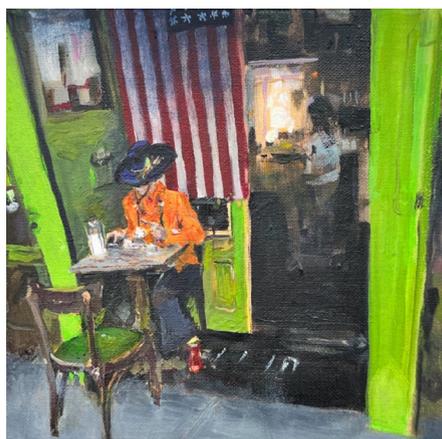
Megan Mi-Ai Lee

Megan Mi-Ai Lee was born in Los Angeles, CA and currently lives in Queens. She received her BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art, after which she was a Public Art Curatorial Fellow and Assistant Educator at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. She was a 2018 fellow at the Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, MI and a 2019 Shandaken Projects resident at the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, NY. Currently, she is an artist in residence at Smack Mellon and a New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellow. Her recent work considers persuasive architecture, stage magic, and municipal intimacies. She's looking forward to expanding upon these themes in the realm of ceramics.

Jeremy Yuto Nakamura

At Connecticut College Jeremy Yuto Nakamura received support and guidance from luminaries such as Timothy McDowell, Maureen McCabe, and Barkley Hendricks. After graduating while working various unrelated jobs, he kept up his practice through the Art Students League of New York where he studied with Terrence Coyle and Mary Beth Mckenzie.

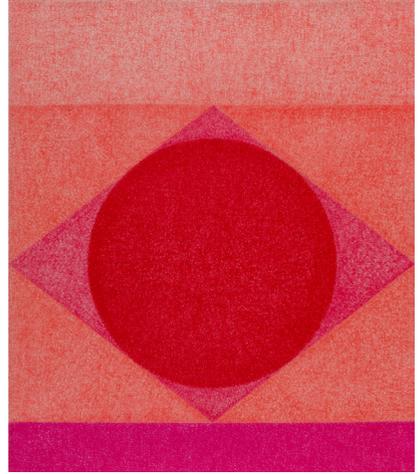
He has worked on a freelance basis as a designer for places like ASOS, MGM, Endeavor, Rumble Advertising, Tory Burch, Clarence Ruth, Tommy Hilfiger, and more, trying to carve out time to focus on painting.



Outdoor Seating Reggio | Jeremy Yuto Nakamura

SHARMISTHA RAY

Sharmistha Ray (they/them) is an artist and educator based in Brooklyn, NY. They use interdisciplinary methods to make paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations to explore themes of queer identity and migration. Solo exhibitions include the traveling exhibition, *we are all islands*, in Mumbai and Kochi (2016-2017); *Reflections & Transformations* at Aicon, New York (2013); and hidden geographies at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2012); among others. Their collaborative project, *ABSTRACT FUTURES TAROT*, with *Hilma's Ghost* – the feminist art collective they co-founded in 2021 – debuted at The Armory Show in Fall 2021. Ray is the recipient of notable awards including a TED Fellowship (2009) and Joan Mitchell MFA Grant (2004). They received their B.A. from Williams College and dual degree M.F.A. in Painting and M.S. in Theory, Criticism, and History of Art, Design, and Architecture from Pratt Institute.

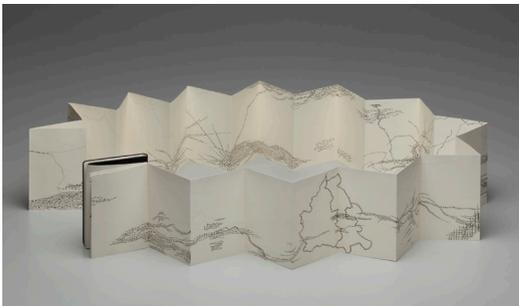


Cosmic Earth I | Sharmistha Ray

Yu-Wen Wu

Yu-Wen Wu is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Boston. Born in Taipei Taiwan, Wu's subjectivity as an immigrant is central to her artwork. Arriving at an early age, her experiences have shaped her work in areas of migration--examining issues of displacement, arrival, assimilation and the shape of identity in a new country. At the crossroads of art, science, politics and social issues, her wide range of projects include large-scale drawings, site-specific video installations, community engaged practices and public art.

Wu recently exhibited *Lantern Stories*, an outdoor public artwork commissioned by the Greenway Conservancy for Chin Park in Boston's Chinatown (2020). Her other large scale commissioned works include a 38' sculptural drawing for the Chao Center at Harvard Business School, Cambridge MA and two multichannel video projections for the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis MN. Most recently, she received the inaugural Prilla Smith Brackett Award 2019 (Davis Museum, Wellesley MA), a national grant from the Union of Concerned Scientist, and the Brother Thomas Award. She was a fellow at Yaddo in 2018 and the 2018-2019 Artist-in-Residence at the Pao Arts Center Boston.



Walking V | Yu-Wen Wu

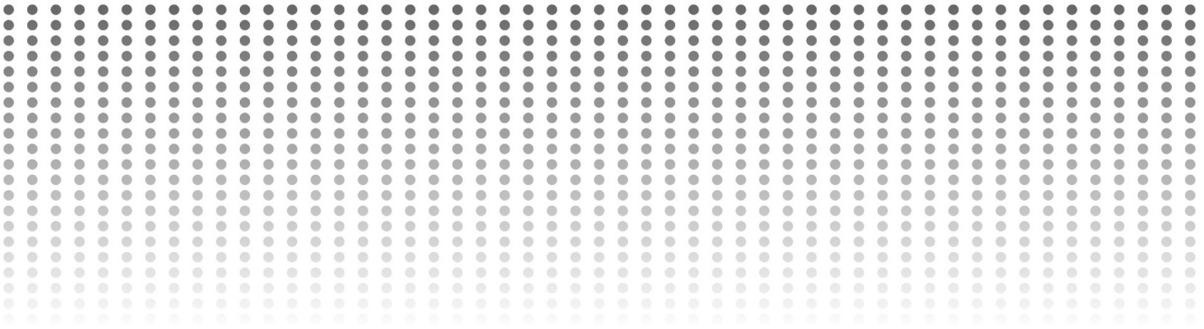
Engaging the community of Chinatown, the durational project *Leavings/Belongings* at Pao had its first major iteration and another iteration of this project is currently exhibited at SITE Santa Fe, NM. She is a 2020 cohort in Boston's Now and There Accelerator program. Wu's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She is in several private and public collections.

The Godwin-Ternbach Museum (GTM) is grateful to The Thomas Chen Family/Crystal Windows Endowment for the generous financial support given to the exhibition *Understatements: Lost & Found in Asian America*. Special thanks go to guest curator Herb Tam for his vision and enthusiasm, and to the eight artists represented in the exhibition for their creative contributions. We extend our thanks to members of our working group committee, Queens College President Frank Wu, Dean William McClure, Cathy Hung, Jeffrey Rosenstock, Julia Del Palacio, Sin-ying Ho, Michael Nelson and Kate Chang for their unwavering support and dedication throughout the planning. Lastly, we wish to thank Stephanie Lee, museum operations assistant, Natalia Viteri, website designer, Linda Jackson, Queens College art department, and Arnold Kanarvogel, preparator, for their work on the presentation of the exhibition.

Maria C. Pio and Louise Weinberg, *Godwin-Ternbach Museum co-directors*

When tasked with organizing an exhibition of contemporary Asian-American visual artists funded by The Thomas Chen Family/Crystal Windows Endowment to Queens College, I knew my own limitations in terms of time and energy. I was fortunate to work with Herb Tam at the Queens Museum where he was hired as Acting Associate Curator in 2006. Later on, Herb became the Associate Curator at Exit Art, and now is the curator and director of exhibitions at Museum of Chinese in America. Herb was the first person I considered when thinking about hiring a consulting curator to organize this exhibition for Godwin-Ternbach Museum. He has exceeded our expectations by choosing a multicultural, multigenerational group of eight artists in a thoughtful selection of works. Mid-career artists such as Sharmistha Ray and Yu-Wen Wu coexist with emerging artists such as Kiani Ferris and Jeremy Yuto Nakamura in a dialogue of sharing concerns and practices. His quiet enthusiasm, and passionate commitment to art and artists foremost, is evident. Herb has been a pleasure to work with and we look forward to future collaborations with him and Museum of Chinese in America.

Louise Weinberg, *co-director, director of exhibitions/collections, and curator*

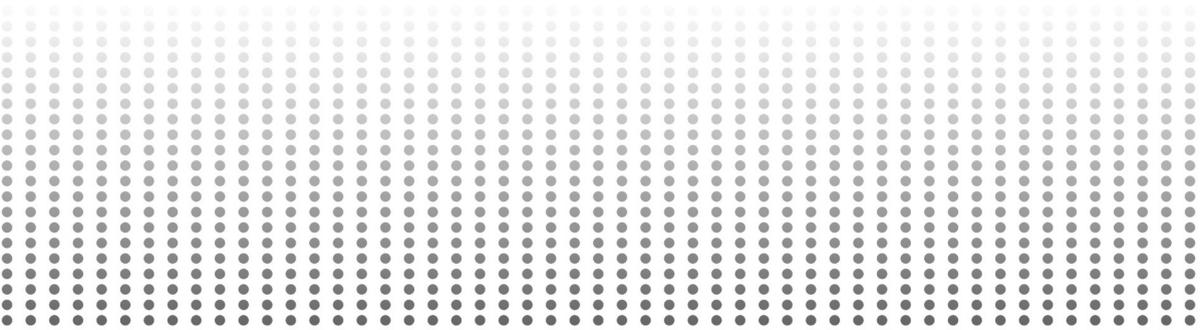


"We are deeply grateful to the Chen family for making this exhibition possible," says Queens College President **Frank H. Wu**.

"It blends the mission of the endowment with our mission as educators—to support art that inspires the viewer to consider diversity on a more complex level; to explore the nuances of culture and history that may exist beneath an umbrella term and forge new interpretations of the scope of diversity. It is the first in what we anticipate will be a continuing and productive series of events that explore Asian and Asian American talent and creativity."

"Bringing together many artists around a central theme the search for identity—is a powerful way to celebrate contemporary Asian American art," says **Thomas Chen**, Crystal Windows chairman and an entrepreneur and philanthropist, who emigrated to the United States from Taiwan in 1982.

"I am very excited that this inaugural exhibition supported by me, and my family will spur imaginations and dialogue within the community." Today, Chen is a major supporter of educational initiatives for immigrants.



About the Godwin-Ternbach Museum

The Godwin-Ternbach Museum, a part of Queens College's Kupferberg Center for the Visual and Performing Arts, presents contemporary and historical exhibitions and programs that provide exciting educational opportunities and aesthetic experiences to the college community and residents of Queens, Manhattan, and Long Island. As the only museum in the CUNY system, and the only encyclopedic collection of art and artifacts in the borough housing over 7,000 global objects that date from ancient to modern times, the museum introduces visitors to works they might not otherwise encounter. Virtual and in-person programs complement and interpret the art on view to serve the needs and interests of local and international communities. All exhibitions and programs are free.

About Thomas Chen

Entrepreneur Thomas Chen is a true American success story. Speaking no English and with little money, he immigrated from rural Taiwan to the US in 1982 and worked several menial jobs. Soon however, his drive and ambition led him in 1990 to launch his own very modest manufacturing company, Crystal Window & Door Systems in Queens. Through his hard work and leadership, the company grew, expanded numerous times, and prospered. Today as Chairman, Thomas continues to lead the Crystal family of companies, providing vision and strategic guidance. His business acumen and accomplishments have been spotlighted over the years by national business publications, television news shows, and industry media and organizations. Thomas remains a strong and prominent role model in the Asian-American business community.

About Crystal Window and Door Systems

Crystal Window & Door Systems has grown from 10 employees in a small Queens commercial garage to one of the top window and door manufacturers in North America. Crystal has nearly one million square feet of production space at five major facilities in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Riverside (CA), and Scranton (PA). The company produces over 500,000 vinyl and aluminum products annually with a workforce of 750 employees across the country. Thomas' son Steve, President of Crystal, has now taken the reins of the national organization, and directs daily operations.

Chen Family Philanthropy

Early on in his business career, Thomas believed it was important to share the fruits of his company's success with the community and established The Crystal Foundation for his charitable activities. The Chen Family is supportive of many not-for-profit organizations, with an emphasis primarily on celebrating and preserving Asian culture and art, and educational initiatives for immigrants to the US. Thomas is a founding member of the Taiwanese American Arts Council, which collaborates with the Queens Museum, and supports Asian artists for exhibits there and throughout New York City.

With a love of both art and nature, Thomas established Crystal Park, a 200-acre property in Dutchess County, NY, that is a private outdoor art park and nature preserve. Crystal Park sponsors local and international contemporary artists and exhibits their works along wooded trails for guests and local visitors to enjoy. The latest installation at Crystal Park is a life-size bronze statue in honor of former Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, a long-time mentor and friend to Thomas, Steve, and Crystal Windows.



www.gtmuseum.org | 718.997.4747 | gtmuseum@qc.cuny.edu
Queens College, 405 Klapper Hall, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY 11367