The Negotiation Table

Artists' Labor, Cultural Power, and Institutional Accountability

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A thesis support paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Emily Carr University of Art + Design 2023

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PROLOGUE

Holding is not easy. Holding requires tension in one's fingers,
joints, body, and emotions. Every strain creates weakness.

Water does not hold. It is held. Free from withholding,
water's power overcomes rock, fire, and most elements.

Yet water cannot play its role without vessels and channels.
Even this essential ingredient of life needs to be held.

Water is a necessary life infrastructure. But when polluted with toxins,
that which sustains us simultaneously poisons us.

Colonization is like poison in the water.

Is it possible to cleanse these currents?

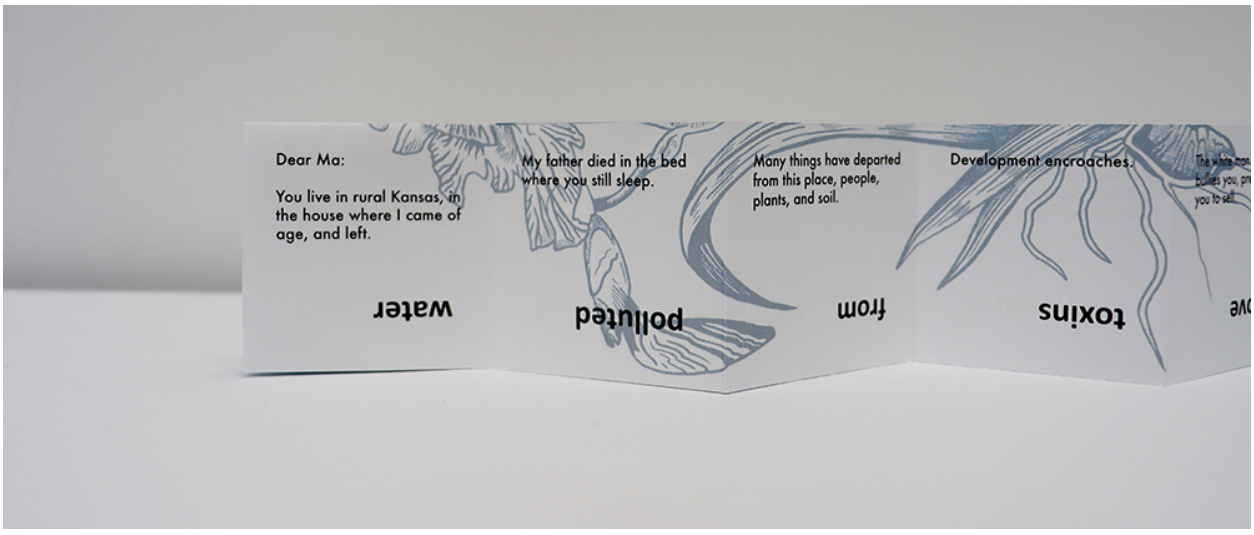
It is not easy to be a root. Roots hold earth together, resisting erosion.
Roots channel sustenance into the body of the plant.

A root is not as powerful as water. Nor does it need to be.
It is a remarkable quality to be breakable, yet choose to hold ground.

To be weaker than the dominant infrastructure and still hold on,
to remove harm while providing nourishment.

This is an ethic.

-poem from Jenie Gao's artist's book, *Dear Ma | Ethic*



Since fall of 2014, I have run a full-time anti-gentrification arts business, creating public artworks, prints, and social practice projects, while also consulting for cultural organizations and the public sector on equity and ethics in the arts.

Before relocating to Vancouver, British Columbia, on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh, I operated a 1,700 square foot studio in Teejop (Madison, Wisconsin, USA) on the land of the Ho-Chunk. I benefited from rent control, and the rent from my brick-and-mortar directly subsidized affordable housing in the surrounding neighborhoods; it was a microcosm of what was possible even if property managers do not try to maximize profits. I ran an apprenticeship program, hired and mentored 25 paid interns and apprentices, and allied with local organizations fighting for racial, gender, and economic equity in the city. When I left Wisconsin, I negotiated with the landlord to ensure the space could remain an artist's studio, so that my vacancy would not result in a reduction in the number of art spaces in a city notorious for its drought of studios.

I have spent years working between the arts sector and community organizing, and could have continued the fight in a region where I have become deeply rooted and have been able to demonstrate what even a small business can do when centered on fair treatment of artists, labor rights, and accessibility. Yet as I saw similar scenarios in different contexts repeat, I felt compelled to take a step back. I was troubled, not simply by the rising inequities of a gentrifying city, but by the mechanisms that made it possible to weaponize the arts and people's identities for harm and displacement, despite the progressive values that those in the arts purport. I was aggravated by the social pressures on women, femmes, and queers of color to bear the labor and risks of advocacy, all while building our own practices and creating for our own fulfillment. As a Taiwanese-Chinese American and woman of color with a public-facing practice, I also longed for a shift in my relationship with community labor. So I entered my Master of Fine Arts as a self-assigned sabbatical. If I am to do this work, then let it not be because it has always fallen on the marginalized. Let it be a calling, a path to transformation and excellence, for community and for myself.

Here is the crux of the tension. Each facet of the arts industry, which encompasses both "high art" (e.g. fine artists, museums, art dealers) and more commercial work (e.g. artisans, commercial artists, fabricators), is designed to exclude and extract from people (IBISWorld). This is exemplified by how few women, femmes, and queers of color, who are doubly marginalized by race and gender, are recognized by the arts industry. In the US and Canada, women of color make up less than half of one percent of artists exhibited and collected by museums, galleries, and arts institutions (Topaz). Meanwhile, there are no available statistics on queer and non-cis-hetero-normative representation.

Additionally, only 1% of professional artists make a full-time income from their art, and only 2.3% make a significant living from their art, with average wages of $17,248.97 USD (IBISWorld), compared to the national average wage of $60,575.07 USD (Social Security). Every level of the industry—art schools, galleries, museums, and city infrastructure—structurally relies on unpaid and underpaid artists' labor. This creates a catch-22. First, women and queers of color are more likely than white women to be breadwinners in their households who need to earn a living wage, and therefore have a harder time working for

an industry that relies on volunteer labor (Callaci, Goldin). Second, even if they do gain opportunities, the arts industry is designed to weaponize them to further concentrate access to resources and wealth. But the answer cannot be for women and queers of color—who often constitute their communities' backbones—to disengage entirely from the arts field. This would be a loss beyond measure.

Poster by Jenie Gao on arts representation in 2021, providing a status update since the 1989 Guerrilla Girls poster.

Guerilla Girls, Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum?, poster, 1989.

As a public artist and printmaker, I approach each medium from a shared understanding and philosophy. Printmaking and public art can be used to democratize space and information. They can also be weaponized to spread misinformation and monumentalize harm. So I enter my work with the questions: **whom will this work benefit, and what role will it play in the surrounding ecosystem?** Underlying this question is another inquiry: how can individual changes inform collective action, and how can collective action lead to institutional accountability and transformation?

I entered this research to clear my head and purpose for doing this work. While our experiences differ, I hope this tome can offer some clarity for you, the readers, too.

POSITIONALITY: Personal

Loss and the Long Memory of Justice

In 2010, I graduated into a recession, one year after my dad passed away from pancreatic cancer. After helping my mom pay off his medical bills, I couldn't afford graduate school, so I moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ready to plant roots in a new community.

Picture this—an immense freeway system that arcs past tall buildings and a breathtaking view of endless blue water, the promise of a city that was poised to outgrow New York City in the early 1900s. Then you take an exit ramp, into neighborhoods fractured by the legacy of racism. This was my first view of the city, repeated on my commute for years to follow.

I was hired as an arts program specialist for a public school that had gone without art, gym, and music for seven years. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the United States. I was immersed in all that came with this legacy, from intergenerational trauma to the fact that my students, who were predominantly Black and Brown, had never traveled the 15-minute distance to Lake Michigan or Milwaukee Art Museum, two cultural cornerstones of the city.

In 2011, Governor Scott Walker implemented Act 10, the worst state-wide union cuts in Wisconsin's history. Act 10 slashed union bargaining rights and targeted public schools, particularly those in Milwaukee that were majority BIPOC (Johnson). Schools like mine lost half our staff; classes doubled to 50+ students per teacher. Teachers who lost their jobs had to empty their classrooms. Things got shoved wherever there was space. The following photos are of how I found my classroom the day before classes resumed after that summer.

Photos of my classroom in Milwaukee, August 2011.

Photos of my classroom in Milwaukee, August 2011, before and after I cleaned it up.

The only thing I could do back then was put my room back together and try to maintain stability for my students for at least one more day. But I took photos to keep a record of what had happened.

I have since shared these photos in many artist presentations in the past eleven years. This intentional documentation becomes an act of care, of keeping this history in the public's living memory. Accountability takes a long time to achieve. The function of oppression is to wear people down and make them forget so they cannot fight anymore. But by creating a record, remembering becomes a key function in achieving justice.

When I first took these photos, I could not have yet conceived just how long the table would function as a site of political resistance for me. In my classroom, the table was a place of passing knowledge to the next generation, and quite literally the physical, defensible space for why teaching art was important. In the longer arc of my career, the table has been a critical space to have access to—in the private hours in my studio, whom I have discourse with over a meal, and what I can advocate for in an office or conference room.

There was another cultural lesson embedded in the policy of Wisconsin's budget cuts. Walker targeted Milwaukee with the cuts, under the guise that the metropolis took disproportionate resources compared to rural areas, while conveniently sidestepping that Milwaukee is also home to Wisconsin's largest Black population—38.3% of the city's population is Black (US Census). Meanwhile, state, county, and city level regulations mandated that standardized testing be the primary metric that poorer [Blacker] Milwaukee schools would be measured by, and Government officials systematically cut arts and extracurricular funding at these schools. In other words, wealthy, white suburban schools maintained their arts funding even during recessions because for them, government officials saw art as a path to enlightenment. Funds were cut at Black and Brown schools, because art was seen as a path to poverty. This begets the question—who has a road to enlightenment versus poverty?

Views of Lake Michigan from South Shore Park in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that I took on July 2, 2011, shortly after the pinnacle of Act 10 Protests.

After my time as an educator, I worked in manufacturing, in my final role as a project manager of lean methodologies, looking at ways to reduce waste and improve job training and mobility within the company. I became familiar with the channels between school and industry, and who got the office and leadership roles versus plant jobs doing hard labor for lower pay, and how these divisions fell along lines of race, gender, and class. As one of the

only BIPOC with a white-collar position, I became a liaison between the plant and the office. This experience sharpened my understanding of visibility and cultural power. But my relationship with these issues started much earlier.

I grew up in semi-rural Kansas, the only child of immigrants. My childhood was a juxtaposition of the American Midwest's insular realities and my parents' extraordinary immigration stories. My dad was from China, with roots in Shanxi and Southern Mongolia. He survived the Great Leap Forward, Great Famine, and Cultural Revolution. My mom grew up in Taiwan under Martial Law. They were each brilliant in their own ways—my father street savvy and entrepreneurial, my mother cautious and analytical. Yet without a route to becoming scholars or more esteemed white-collar workers, they opened a small takeout restaurant. Though I spent my childhood there, it wasn't until 2019 that I realized our old restaurant was eight minutes from Kansas City's wealthy Country Club Plaza district and Nelson Atkins Art Museum. In my memory, the city's cultural cornerstones were far away and excluded families like ours.

I wasn't supposed to become an artist. Like many immigrants, my parents were wary of the stigmas of the "starving artist," and believed that if I could not be respected for my race or gender then at least I could be respected for my profession. But I am the last steward of my family's story. It sits heavily with me how working class immigrant families push their children towards practical careers for economic security at the cost of losing who we are. This is particularly pertinent given the high number of Asians who work in industries like technology, biochemistry, and pharmaceuticals that are complicit with the harms of the 21st century. I reflect on conversations with two peers my age, who dealt with similar pressures as I have for social mobility, and ended up working in tech and engineering for industries like fossil fuel. When I asked them how they made their career choices, they said, "The company gave me an offer I couldn't refuse," and also, "My degree limits the industries I can work in. But every day I succeed at my job, the world becomes a worse place."

Moreover, this fixation on the practical overlooks how US and European imperialism destabilized Asia. It omits European nations' fetishistic obsession with Asia, which paved the way for colonizing First Nations peoples as Europeans searched for a shorter route to Asia. It disregards how Europeans and Americans looted cultural belongings during the rise of orientalism and Century of Humiliation in China. It ignores internalized oppression. When schools closed during the Cultural Revolution, my father became a Red Guard, in a movement that galvanized youth as quickly as it abandoned them. Chinese people destroyed their own artifacts to eradicate tradition in favor of industrialization. But instead of progress, this destruction created a Lost Generation, untethered to their histories and futures. For descendants of this era, it is simply not enough to spend our lives earning back what colonizers stole. Returning to ourselves necessarily brings us to engage with the arts.

Learning How to Talk About Class & Privilege

Stories are powerful. They therefore require a great deal of care to tell and steward them responsibly. I opened this chapter with a reference to my father's terminal cancer. To tell

this and other stories well, I feel that it is important to identify both the privilege and disadvantage in this life detail.

Ever since I was young, teachers, classmates, and others around me have commented on my intellect. School work came easily in me. But what did it matter? I was a poor kid with an overworked, immigrant mom and a volatile, absent dad, from the outskirts of town in Kansas at a no-name, underfunded public high school. I had almost no extracurriculars, because I had no parent or guardian who could drive me to participate in them.

But what I *did* have were good grades and phenomenal standardized test scores. After I received a perfect score on the SAT, my family's mailbox flooded with letters from prestigious universities, and I ultimately got cherry picked to receive a full scholarship to the high-ranking Washington University in St. Louis (WashU). Back then, I earnestly believed that my hard work and merit were enough to overcome any disadvantage, and to a degree, I was right. Given access to the same classes and resources as wealthy kids, I did great at university. I was well on track to be the perfect, inspirational token tale.

The singular event of a family member getting sick is life altering, especially if you are low income. My dad didn't have health insurance. After his cancer diagnosis, he opted to die rather than get chemotherapy. But even the medical costs of dying are high. I used much of the earnings from my three part-time jobs to help pay those bills (and yes, even with a full scholarship, I still needed to work to cover living costs). Furthermore, schools like WashU are designed for the most economically privileged students—of the 11% of applicants WashU admits, 22% come from families in the economic top 1%, whereas only 6% of students come from the bottom 60% (Patel). Though there are certainly people working towards greater socioeconomic representation among student bodies, the larger structures sustain via the admission of only those students who are smart enough to uphold the myth of individual merit, but ideally not rebellious enough to demand systemic change.

Here is what that translates to at a prestigious university—as a student, your job above all else is to be excellent. When I think back to this time, though many people were sympathetic, not one professor or administrator offered to lighten my load or talked to me about deadline extensions, and as a 21-year-old, I didn't know to ask. While enduring the trauma of my father's illness, I only missed three days of school for my dad's cremation—no funereal ceremony—and I was back in class the following week. Simply put, I couldn't risk losing my scholarship by taking an academic leave, so I toughed it out. The only outward sign that I was falling apart was a slight dip in my grades junior year.

I have since learned to navigate the nuance of disadvantage and privilege in my experiences. It is impossible to erase the consequences and traumas of losing a parent early in my adult life. Even so, for the rest of my life, I will have WashU's name on my resume with no student loan debt, two great advantages in my career. While these privileges have their limits, combined with the fact that I am able-bodied enough, they positioned me for other key career breaks and made it possible for someone like me to become an anomaly in the caste system. This is an excellent position for challenging structures of power, if you are willing to reckon with what got you here.

Creating a Framework of Comprehension

In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism,* Lauren Fournier describes autotheory as "consciousness-raising," the "[practice] of disclosing lived experience as a means of becoming conscious of the ways in which so-called personal issues were, in fact, structural and systemic. The revolution of the everyday that took place in the 1960s led to a recognition of daily and domestic life as political…this continued through the third wave, with [bell] hooks grounding her antiracist feminist theory in the conviction that 'the enemy within must be transformed before we can confront the enemy outside'" (11).

Regarding the 1960s—that this was both the era of Civil Rights in the US and the Cultural Revolution in China is not lost on me. That my mother's homeland of Taiwan was in the process of becoming an ideological battleground—recently transferred from Japan to China at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, while receiving US foreign aid and intervention in the creation of neoliberal, capitalism-friendly policies—is also not lost on me.

The Chinese Exclusion Act in the US technically ended in 1943 with the passing of the Magnuson Act, but this policy limited the quota of Chinese immigrants to 105 visas per year. Meanwhile, Canada regulated Chinese immigrants via the Chinese Head Tax from 1885 to 1923, which by 1903 charged Chinese people an entry fee of $500 CAD [$500 CAD in 1903 has the equivalent purchasing power of $16,863.47 in 2023], more than the annual wages of a Chinese migrant worker at that time (McRae). The head tax was followed by an outright ban of new immigrants until 1947. It wasn't until the late 1970s, following the opening of the People's Republic of China in 1977, and a separate immigration quota for Taiwanese people via the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, that the United States saw an influx of new immigrants from these regions. This new wave of immigrants was conveniently timed with the end of the American Civil Rights movement.

Author Cathy Park Hong explains this in *Minor Feelings*, "The United States had a PR problem. If they were going to stamp out the tide of Communism in poor non-Western countries, they had to reboot their racist Jim Crow image and prove that their democracy was superior. The solution was allowing nonwhites into their country to see it for themselves. During this period, the model minority myth was popularized to keep Communists—and black people—in check. Asian American success was circulated to promote capitalism and to undermine the credibility of black civil rights: we were the 'good' ones since we were undemanding, diligent, and never asked for handouts from the government. There's no discrimination, they assured us, as long as you're compliant and hardworking" (22). In other words, the construction of the Asian American image became one of exploitation and weaponization, under the guise of promoting progressive ideals.
I share these details to provide a framework of comprehension, and to ground the theory that my work and research rest upon.

1. I enter my following research using autotheory—the connecting of personal, lived experience with larger sociopolitical systems.
2. I further couch autotheory in a cultural perspective, specifically a Taiwanese-Chinese American, feminine, and diasporic lens.

3. I reject the mindset of individualistic merit that upholds social caste systems and pits people against the work of collective wellbeing.

Connecting the personal and political in this way keeps me accountable to the work. It makes it possible to zoom in and out on various issues, to get hyperlocal and hyperglobal. It poises me to challenge existing frameworks in the arts, from the materiality of print to the politics of space. All of this is crucial for systemic change.

Photo from my visit to Kansas City in Dec 2019, outside Aloha Chopstix. This was my family's restaurant until 1995. It has since transitioned between at least two other Chinese families as their stepping stone to life in the US.

CONTEXT: Political

I am doing this work and research in the context of—and as a proactive response to—21st Century city planning and postmodernism. City planning and postmodernism reveal two things about the relationship between art and modern society. The first is that the arts are useful as a support to economic development. The second is that art is a way to satirize and comment on modern society. However, a problem emerges in the relationship between the two: postmodernism critiques, but also sells extremely well (e.g. Banksy), which means it often serves the same problematic system that it mocks.

PMA Union Pre-Strike Rally, July 2022. Photo by Tim Tiebout.

I am also doing this work in the context of a historic uprising of labor. Union activism has taken severe blows since the workers' rebellions of the 1960s, and plummeted after Ronald Reagan became US President in the 1980s. The labor strikes of 2022 represent the first spike in labor action in decades (Masters). Public support of unions has also grown, and the outcomes of organizing efforts are starting to reflect that positive sentiment. In 2022, Amazon workers in Staten Island, New York, won their election to create the first union organized Amazon warehouse in the US (Selyukh).

In the arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art's Union went on strike for 19 days following two years of negotiations. The PMA Union workers successfully pressured the museum's leadership to meet their agreement, despite the leadership previously stating that they

would not compromise on the terms (Velie). Organizations like Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) have also gained influence in the last decade. As of 2023, over 80 American institutions have committed to paying standardized artists' fees to maintain a W.A.G.E. certified status. Furthermore, there is already historic precedent for what W.A.G.E. seeks to achieve in the US. Just north of the border, the nonprofit Canadian Artists' Representation / Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) sets nationwide standards for artists' fees. Because of CARFAC's lobbying efforts, in 1975, Canada became the first country to require exhibition fees for artists, using CARFAC's recommended fees as the baseline for art galleries to be eligible to receive public funding. While there is always room to raise expectations for artists' compensation, the existence of a federally required minimum artists' wage in Canada for over half a century is something that people almost take for granted. Since arriving in Vancouver, I have often found myself in conversation with Canadian artists who want to know what it's like to exhibit in the US and are surprised to learn that there is no CARFAC equivalent that requires artists to be paid for showing their work. At least in terms of artists' fees, what would be revolutionary in the US is federally mandated in Canada.

PMA Union Pre-Strike Rally, July 2022. Photo by Tim Tiebout.

Wins in the arts feel particularly pertinent in the context of labor activism. This is a field that touts so much progressivism, yet resists seeing arts work as labor. Unlike other fields, there is no minimum wage in the arts. An inexperienced worker in any other industry can at least expect to be paid for their first day of training—whereas artists may spend years

building portfolios at their own expense with zero returns. The more physical or care-based the arts work is, the less likely it is to be well compensated. For example, at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, arts institutions predominantly laid off their lowest paid staff in education, security, and maintenance/facilities, which also tended to be their most racially diverse departments (Bishara). These layoffs happened *after* these institutions received forgivable loans from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) that were meant for retaining workforce staff. Additionally, while entities such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the US provided COVID-relief funding for arts *institutions*, individual working artists were largely left to fend for themselves or rely on smaller pockets of funding from local community efforts and mutual aid.

Gaining wealth in the art world generally depends on one's distance from the physical art making, and each step of removal increases the prospects for wealth. For instance, how many artists make an actual living from their artwork, versus an arts-related job, such as teaching? How much more likely is someone to earn a regular salary from their job as a curator or arts administrator, versus the artists vying for a handful of modestly paid gigs and grants that cultural gatekeepers oversee? While not all directors and upper administrators make high salaries, the chances of someone in the arts achieving low-to-high six figure salaries as dean, director, president, or other high titles are still better than someone in the previously mentioned roles. Finally, collectors who own art assets or underwrite institutions' budgets control the bulk of the wealth.

Meanwhile, artists and arts educators are gaslit with what a privilege it is to be in this field, and the strategy works. The concept of unionizing relies on people believing their labor has value and is worth protecting, which is antithetical to the archetype of artistic success: the solo, genius, cis-male artist whose singularity is a critique and foil of mindless, industrialized production. This archetype persists even with each decade's version of multiculturalism and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, because for all the clamor for change, institutions, their staff, and their collections largely look the same, and some have become even whiter since 2020. Among the minoritized artists who are able to sustain careers in this field, lateral violence is rampant as people compete for limited grants and jobs. But here's the deceit—behind "mindless" industry are actual people performing the labor that makes modern life possible. The solo artist isn't clever; he's disdainful of the laborer, and of being seen as one of them lest he loses the patron that feeds him. This begets the question—who stands to benefit from artists assimilating with institutional interests? How radically would the definitions of labor need to change, if the arts worker were aligned with proletariat interests, rather than institutional ones?

At the crux of the issues of labor is the question—who owns the wealth generated by the labor? For artists, are we finally at a place where arts workers are seen as a part of this question? In an episode of *Last Week Tonight* entitled "Museums," comedian John Oliver scrutinizes the subject of looted art in western museums, bringing museums and the repatriation of stolen cultural wealth into mainstream conversations. Critique in comedy alone would not indicate a cultural mindset shift—but combined with the growing number of arts labor strikes, it tells a compelling story. It speaks to a movement that has the mind to verbalize critique of power, *and also* a readiness to challenge that power.

Arts-Based Gentrification and Displacement

Gentrification isn't new or unique to the 21st century. What is new is the commodification and packaging of gentrification. Writer and urban theorist Richard Florida, also known as the champion of gentrification, quite literally created a "Bohemian-Gay Index" to measure a city's likelihood to see rising housing values and economic development based on their population of artists and queer people. In his article, *There Goes the Metro: How and Why Bohemians, Artists and Gays Affect Regional Housing Values*, Florida writes, "The location of bohemian and gay populations reflects low barriers to entry for human capital. Such locations will have advantages in attracting a broad range of talent across racial, ethnic and other lines, increasing the efficiency of human capital accumulation" (5). He goes on to conclude that "the Bohemian-Gay Index, a combination of two factors that qualitative literature on gentrification and inner-city revitalization indicates have an important effect on housing values" (18).

Florida wrote this article in 2010, which, like much of his critical writing, came shortly after the 2008 financial recession and housing crisis. There are numerous problems with Florida's findings, but the crux of it is this: he identified a social phenomenon—artists and queers move into an area with "low barriers to entry," then it gets expensive—and instead of questioning the conditions under which this pattern arises, he created a method to replicate and exploit it. Then he packaged and sold his findings for city planners and developers to profit off this pattern.

According to housing policy analyst Samuel Stein, "artists are on both sides of the gentrification fight, and can therefore be played by politicians seeking to beautify their luxury developments" (131). He quotes artist Shellyne Rodriguez, who describes the use of artists as a "trojan horse tactic. You place art events in the middle of the community and then this shit starts to happen" (82).

Artists are simultaneously marginalized, tokenized, and weaponized. We are marginalized via the chronic underfunding of the arts, the low compensation of limited opportunities, and the vicious cycle of a stigmatized "starving artist" career. As a result, it becomes almost too easy to tokenize artists for too little in return, when the bare minimum is better than nothing at all. Artists become weaponized to oppress and displace others—for instance, with an undercompensated, hip mural "opportunity" that promises artists recognition in exchange for the whole neighborhood. Stein writes, "many policymakers…were relieved to be dealing with artists demanding live-work spaces rather than impoverished tenants demanding livable conditions. In her book *Loft Living*, sociologist Sharon Zukin quotes a SoHo resident recalling a crucial public hearing on a proposed artists' district: "[T]here were lots of other groups giving testimony on other matters. Poor people from the South Bronx and Bed-Stuy complaining about rats, rent control, and things like that. The board just shelved those matters and moved right along. They didn't know how to proceed. Then they came to us. All the press secretaries were there, and the journalists. The klieg lights went on, and the cameras started to roll. And all these guys started making speeches about the importance of art to New York City" (Stein 65-66).

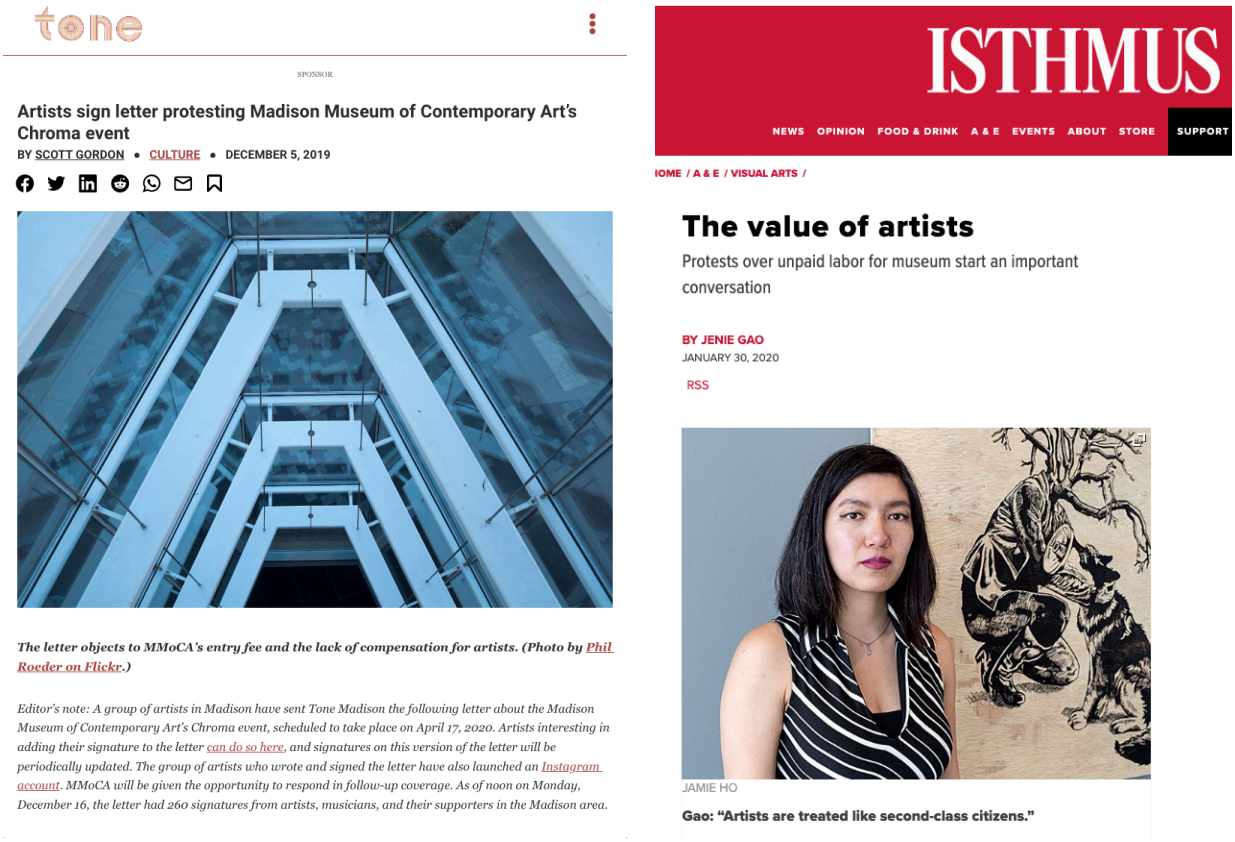
The problem of weaponizing artists becomes even messier in the context of current Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) campaigns, that tend to over-emphasize cultural identity [in its broadest, most generalized strokes] and under-emphasize changing the institutions that marginalized people are entering. What are the insidious implications of a nonprofit underpaying a BIPOC artist, say, to paint a mural in a community that will soon be developed over, thereby enforcing the next wave of colonial displacement via gentrification?

It is predicted that two thirds of the global population will live in cities by 2050. The city is a battleground for representation and influence. In the US and Canada, populations are becoming more diverse, but the leadership is not. Artists and cultural leaders also lack diversity—89% of arts professionals in the US and 92% in Canada are white, and less than half of one percent are women of color (Topaz). Meanwhile, arts-based gentrification disguised as "urban renewal" displaces up to 70% of BIPOC, often while appropriating BIPOC cultures. A gentrified city neighborhood is more likely to have symbolic diversity in its murals and cultural attractions than actual diversity among its residents and real estate investors. For example, developer-friendly policies in New York resulted in the closures of Black-owned small businesses in Harlem, while subsidizing the creation of a Harlem-themed shopping mall in their place (Stein 81).

As cultural institutions' leaders rush to put on the façade of ED&I and decolonization, who actually benefits from these campaigns? Do marginalized individuals benefit from becoming a part of a generative community? Or do they become even more vulnerable to extraction, especially if they are generous with their knowledge? Under what conditions can an artist share their ideas safely, and towards the purposes that they intend?

Arts Institutions, Decolonization, and Protest

In 2019, I co-led a protest called Equity for Artists alongside artists Jamie Ho and Jennifer Bastian, pressuring the Madison of Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA) to pay artists and change their terms for fundraising events. In an open letter, our group criticized MMoCA for relying on free artists' labor for an upcoming fundraiser for the museum: "The purpose of a nonprofit entity should be to help close social gaps. Closing social gaps is why nonprofits have fundraisers, grants, and major donors. Everyone understands that nonprofits have overhead to pay for. But when a nonprofit uses the population it is supposed to serve (in this case, artists) to fundraise to preserve the institution over the people, the nonprofit ceases to serve its public function. There is a reason that the 'starving artist' stereotype and the 'art is for the elite' stereotype exist in the same world. Their existence together sends a very clear message: artists (aka laborers) are valueless, and art (aka property/estate) is valuable. By relying on the free labor of artists, the art museum becomes not a place for artists, but rather an institution for the protection of property."



tone

SPONSOR

Artists sign letter protesting Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's Chroma event

BY SCOTT GORDON • CULTURE • DECEMBER 5, 2019

The letter objects to MMoCA's entry fee and the lack of compensation for artists. (Photo by Phil Roeder on Flickr.)

Editor's note: A group of artists in Madison have sent Tone Madison the following letter about the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's Chroma event, scheduled to take place on April 17, 2020. Artists interesting in adding their signature to the letter can do so here, and signatures on this version of the letter will be periodically updated. The group of artists who wrote and signed the letter have also launched an Instagram account. MMoCA will be given the opportunity to respond in follow-up coverage. As of noon on Monday, December 16, the letter had 260 signatures from artists, musicians, and their supporters in the Madison area.

ISTHMUS

NEWS OPINION FOOD & DRINK A & E EVENTS ABOUT STORE SUPPORT

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The value of artists

Protests over unpaid labor for museum start an important conversation

BY JENIE GAO

JANUARY 30, 2020

RSS

JAMIE HO

Gao: "Artists are treated like second-class citizens."

Left: *Screenshot of Equity for Artists' Open Letter to MMoCA,* December 2019;
Right: *Screenshot of Op-Ed by Jenie Gao,* January 2020.

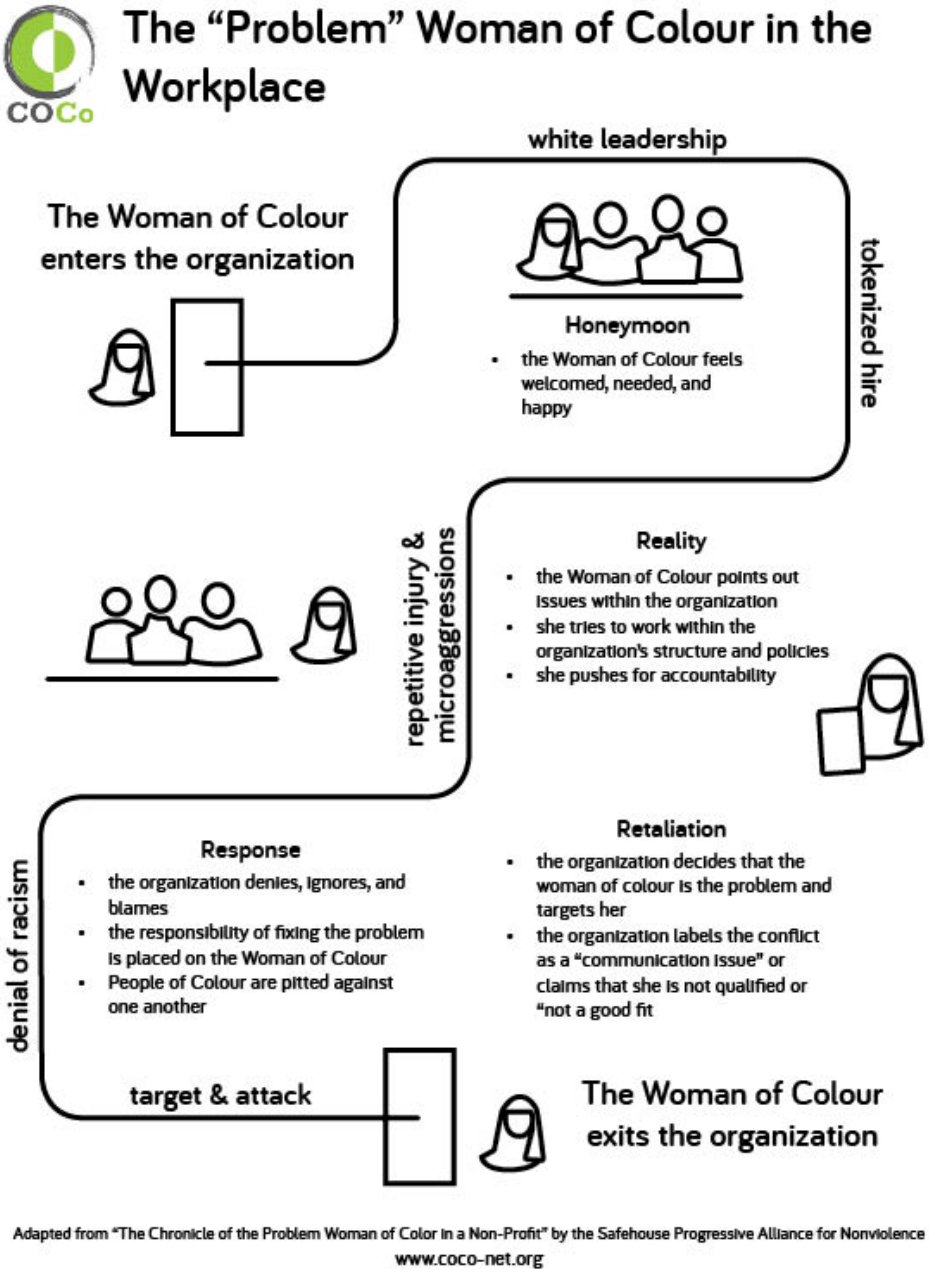
The protest succeeded in pressuring MMoCA to change their terms and the former Executive Director Stephen Fleischmann to release a public apology, though not without a personal cost. I was blacklisted from exhibiting at that museum, and by a number of the board members who held other influential roles in the community at large. This was in spite of museum representatives assuring that no artist participating in the protest would face repercussions.

In her analysis of institutional critique, Aruna D'Souza asks, "Is the goal to make institutions 'better,' more responsive to social concern, and as such, models for a just society? Is the goal dismantling institutions in general? In the end, does institutional critique even have a politics and theory of change?" For myself, the answer to these questions should be—yes.

Within the university setting, academics have referred to the work I'm doing as institutional critique. Perhaps it is. But too often, the messengers of institutional critique are forced to assume an adversarial position. The oppressed get framed as aggressors for requesting basic rights—and for identifying the very problems that hurt an institution's viability. I cannot help challenging the genre of institutional critique with my own question—is honesty always considered a threat?

While I burned some bridges by organizing the Equity for Artists protest of MMoCA, I also gained allyship with an organized block of arts professionals ready to tackle systemic

issues. My essays from this time period are still on university curricula and referenced by nonprofit boards. In response to my advocacy, the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) changed their annual art auction fundraiser from taking 100% of proceeds for the museum to splitting profits 50/50 with artists. These are tangible improvements that benefit both the artists and the institutions. How institutions like MOWA, for instance, responded to Equity for Artists became a litmus test for community trust. And while the subject of critique, MMoCA also earned trust when their former director formally apologized.



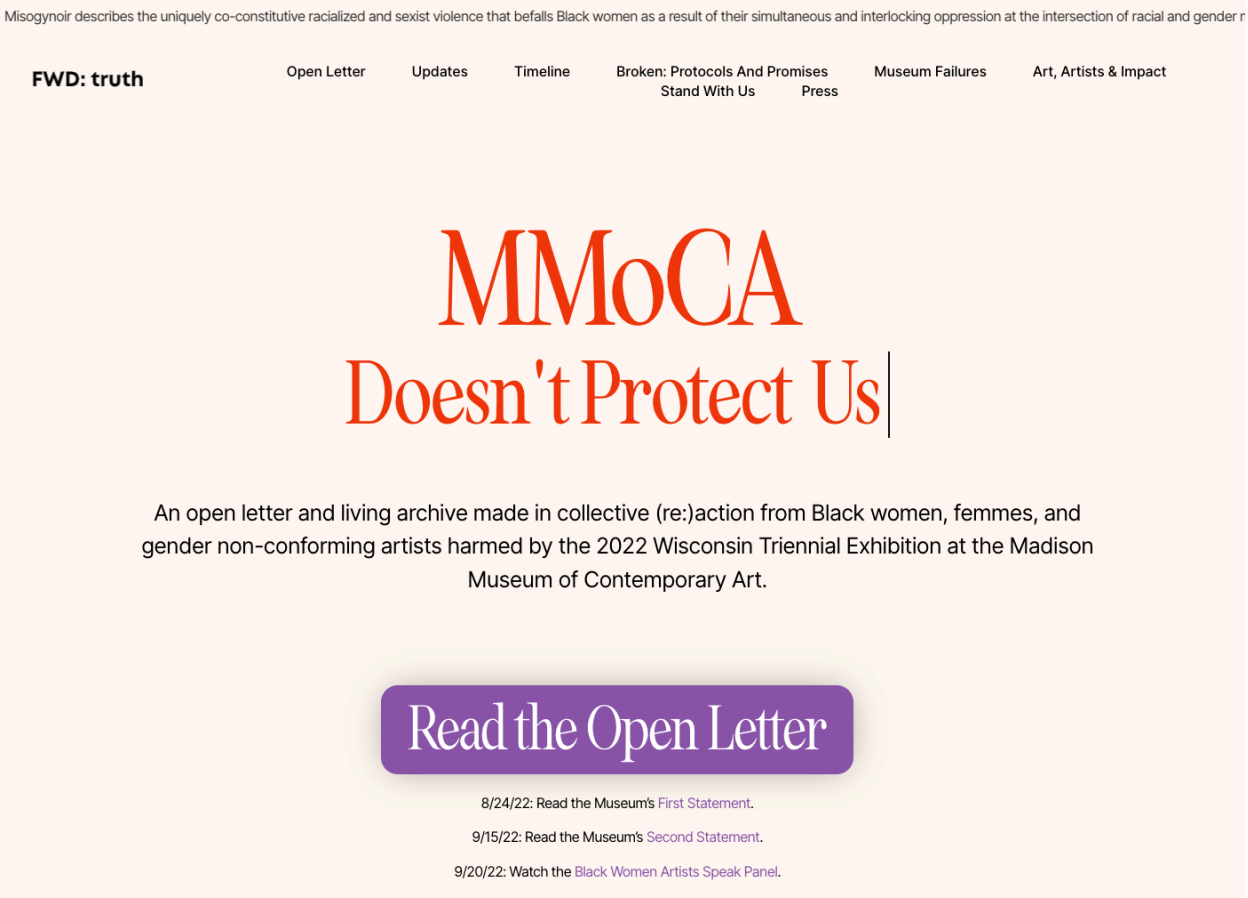
The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the Workplace Flowchart, by COCo.

Returning to the perceived threat that institutional leaders feel from public critique, let's take a moment to reflect on protests of the Whitney Museum. The high profile Whitney Biennial is frequently steeped in controversy, from the withdrawal of the Yams Collective in 2014 and of eight artists in 2019 (Vikram 43; Ulaby). In 2014, the Whitney Museum hired Michelle Grabner, who is white, to curate the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Grabner commissioned Joe Scanlan, a white man, to create a performance using his fictitious Black female persona, Donelle Woolford. In other words, Grabner paid a white man to parody the lack of representation of Black women in the Biennial instead of simply including more Black women in the exhibit that she herself curated. The work received public backlash and severe rebuke from the Yams Collective, a collective of nine Black queer artists who were a part of the Biennial.

So what were the outcomes and consequences of this controversy? The Whitney and Grabner never apologized for the offense. Dissatisfied with their response, the Yams Collective withdrew, and there is no information available online about who the nine individual artists are or where their careers have since taken them. Grabner continues to have an established, active curatorial practice, and continues to introduce herself as a curator of the Whitney Biennial among her accomplishments. Scanlan leveraged the Donelle Woolford performance into a teaching position at Princeton University, where he still teaches today.

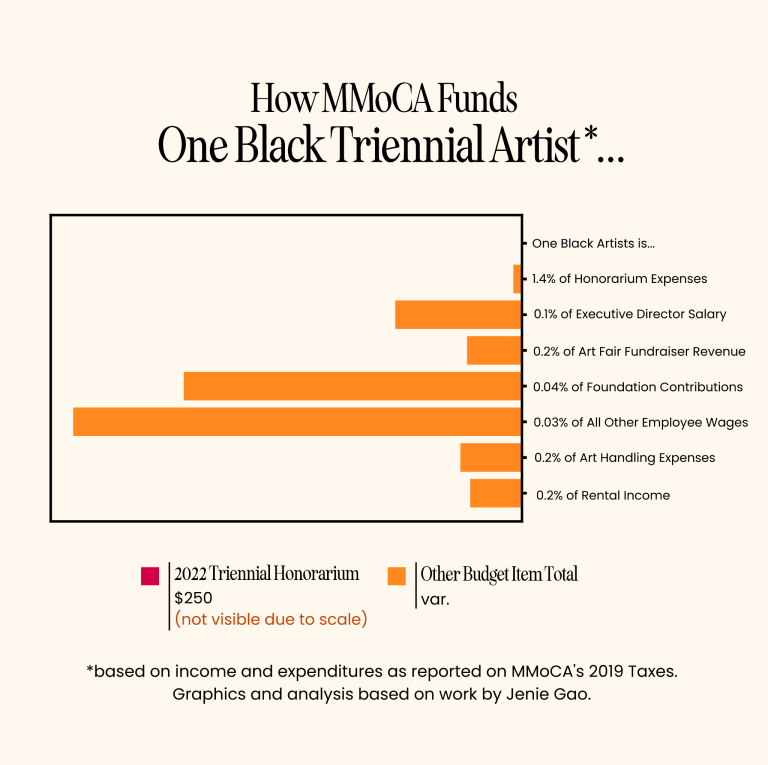
Finally, the high publicity of these controversies has yet to undo the Whitney Museum or tarnish its prestige. In other words, institutions can take the heat. People critique publicly because their desire for change outweighs their desire for personal comfort and safety. People critique because they believe that change is possible and worth the effort. At minimum, it would behoove institutions to give space for honesty. Even better—the demands of social justice are transforming this society, whether institutions are ready or not. Representatives of white dominant spaces have a choice—you can work with people like me in the present or scramble to embrace our legacies in the future.

In 2022, MMoCA—the same museum I protested in 2019—came under public fire again. FWD: Truth, a collective of Black women, femme, and gender nonconforming artists, led a several months-long protest of MMoCA for their repeated failures to keep the artists and their artwork safe during the Wisconsin Triennial 2022 exhibition. The 2022 Triennial, entitled *Ain't I A Woman?*, curated by guest curator Fatima Laster (artist and owner of 5 Points Gallery) and named for the works of Sojourner Truth and bell hooks, is the first museum exhibit in Wisconsin to showcase entirely Black women, femme, and gender nonconforming artists. But what should have been a historic celebration has been riddled with controversy. Incidents have included a white staff member assaulting a Black woman artist and damage and theft of artwork during the exhibition.

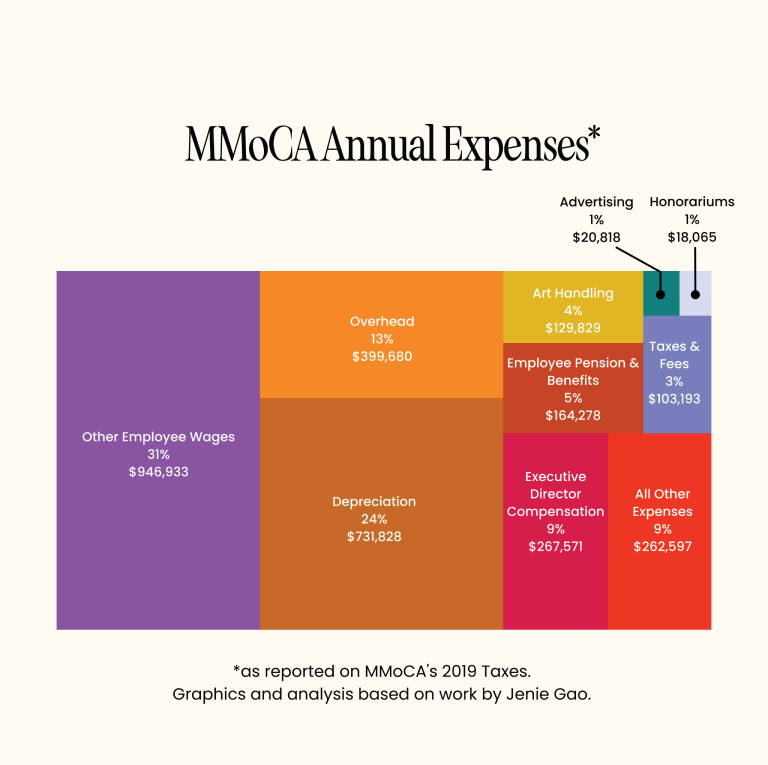


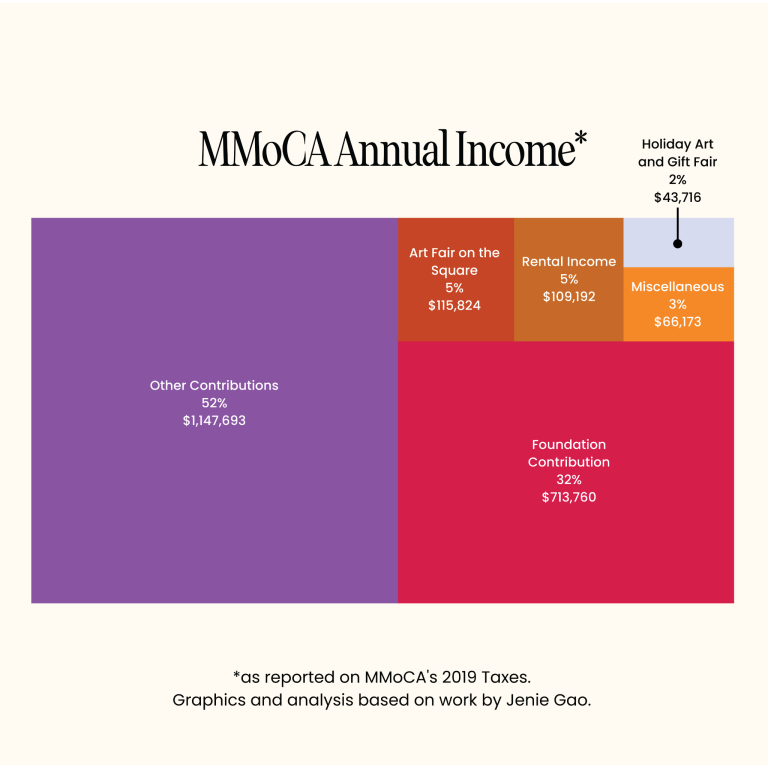
Screenshot from fwdtruth.com, created by artist Emily Leach, December 2022.

Following these incidents, instead of apologizing to the artists harmed, MMoCA leadership proceeded to cut Laster out of communications about the exhibit. Executive Director Christina Brungardt further sowed community discontent by vanishing behind the Board's Executive Committee to handle all communications for her. The lack of transparency and inaction pushed the FWD: Truth collective to go public with their demands. While MMoCA has continued to ignore protestors, the campaign has had an impact. Various nonprofits have joined the protest, releasing public statements in support of the artists. Artists, arts supporters, and nonprofit representatives joined a boycott of Gallery Night, one of MMoCA's largest fundraisers, in favor of an independently organized Artists' Night that aimed to elevate artists over institutions. Milwaukee-based artist Portia Cobb, who was a part of the Triennial, stated to Wisconsin State Journal, "When our show goes away, the problem shouldn't be forgotten…We want accountability, we want transparency and we want amends."

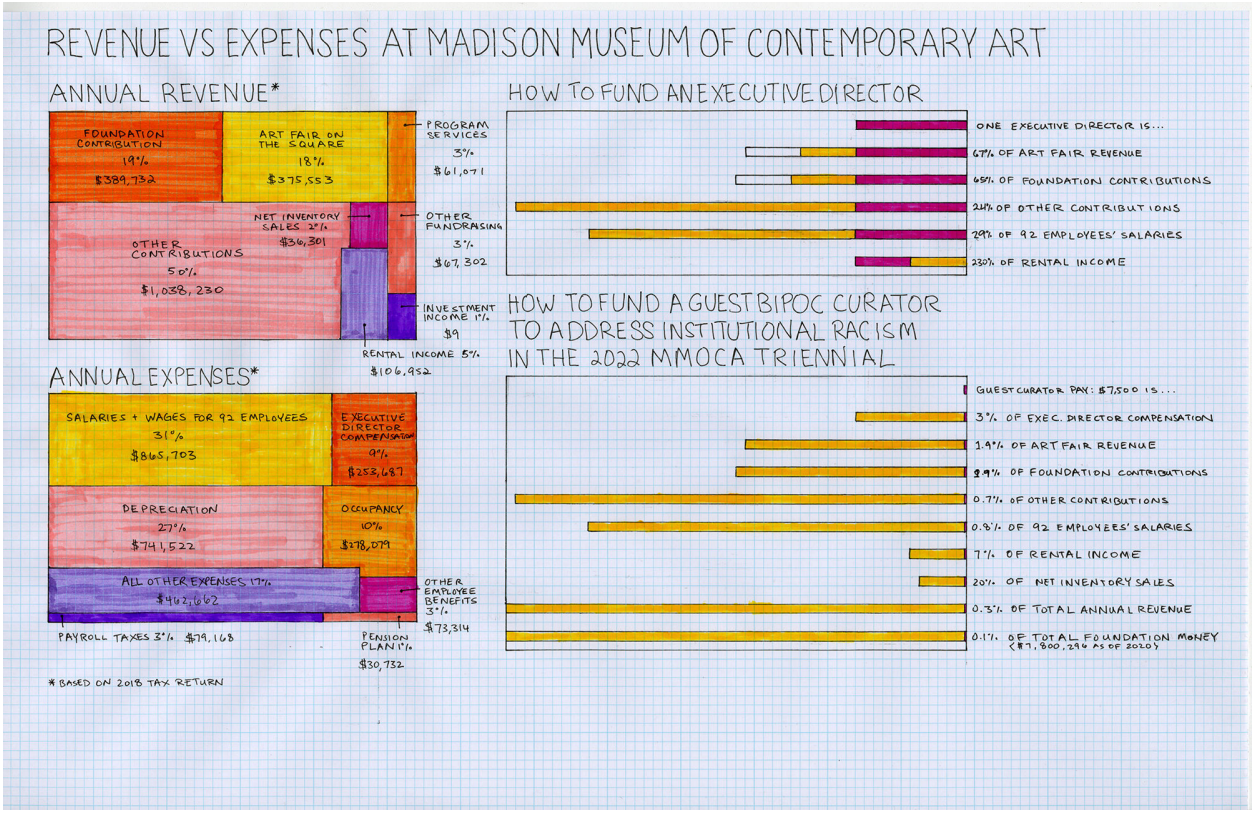


Graphics created by Emily Leach, based on Jenie Gao's original graphics and data analysis, August 2022.





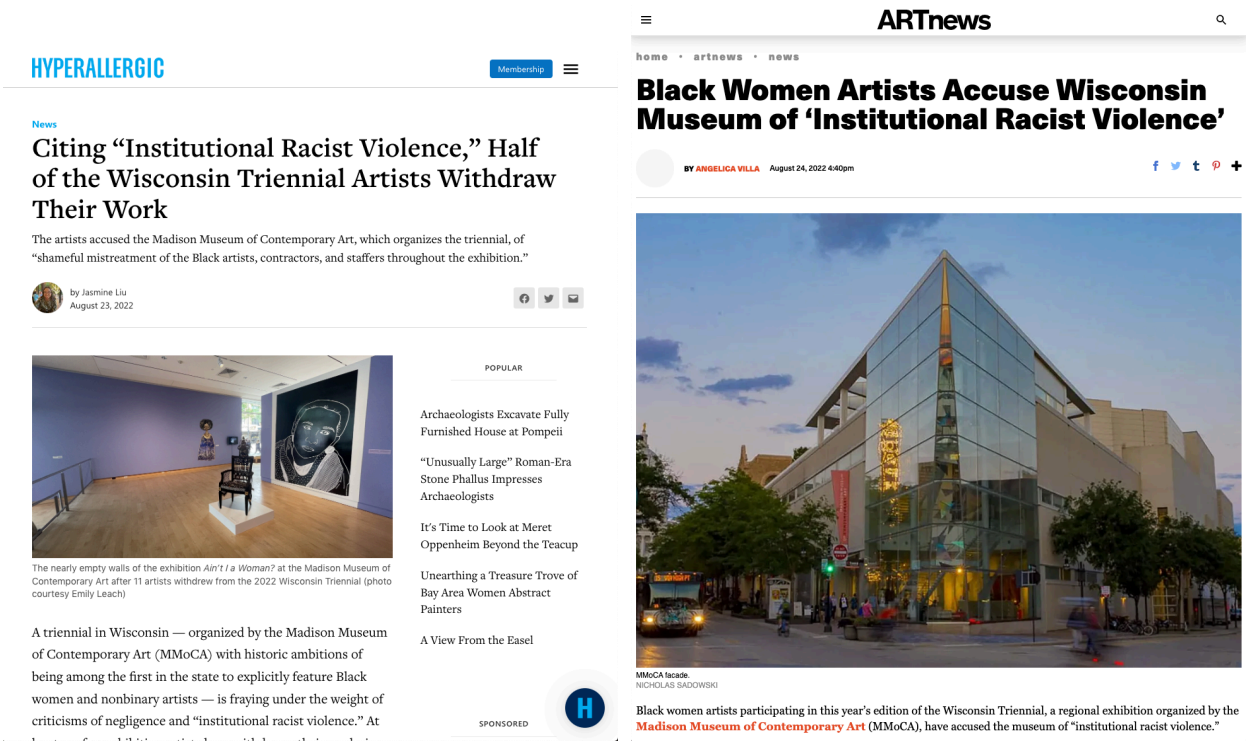
Graphics created by Emily Leach, based on Jenie Gao's original graphics and data analysis, August 2022.



Original graphic and data analysis by Jenie Gao, 2021.

The Triennial exhibition came to an end on October 9, 2022, and by then over half of the 23 artists had withdrawn their work. MMoCA never apologized and never promoted the exhibit again in the final four months of its display—despite the entire duration of the Triennial being only six months. Visitors to the museum during this time noted that the remaining artwork had been rearranged—spaced out to make it appear as though nothing was missing, and that if the show seemed sparse, that was on the guest curator, not the museum.

The museum's only press release on the matter expressed a desire to resolve the issues privately. But if MMoCA leadership had wished to gain the social currency of hosting an all Black women and femme Triennial in the public eye, then they also needed to be willing to look this public in the eye when they failed. While the museum will certainly survive this, their inability to fail gracefully and make amends has tarnished their reputation. The FWD: Truth collective's website continues to exist as a living archive of the events that transpired. A web search of MMoCA yields several national headlines including HyperAllergic and ArtNews. This event has inevitably become a part of MMoCA's history and legacy—and the community will remember, whether the museum leaders acknowledge it or not.



HYPERALLERGIC

Membership

News

Citing "Institutional Racist Violence," Half of the Wisconsin Triennial Artists Withdraw Their Work

The artists accused the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, which organizes the triennial, of "shameful mistreatment of the Black artists, contractors, and staffers throughout the exhibition."

by Jasmine Liu
August 23, 2022

The nearly empty walls of the exhibition *Ain't I a Woman?* at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art after 11 artists withdrew from the 2022 Wisconsin Triennial (photo courtesy Emily Leach)

A triennial in Wisconsin — organized by the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA) with historic ambitions of being among the first in the state to explicitly feature Black women and nonbinary artists — is fraying under the weight of criticisms of negligence and "institutional racist violence." At

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Black Women Artists Accuse Wisconsin Museum of 'Institutional Racist Violence'

BY ANGELICA VILLA August 24, 2022 4:40pm

MMoCA facade.
NICHOLAS SADOWSKI

Black women artists participating in this year's edition of the Wisconsin Triennial, a regional exhibition organized by the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA), have accused the museum of "institutional racist violence."

Screenshots of HyperAllergic and ARTnews articles reporting on 2022 Wisconsin Triennial.

Social Uprising

The growing frequency of social uprising signals that public opinion has reached a point where a critical mass of people wants institutional accountability and a power rebalance. While institutions and policies have yet to catch up, public opinion is visibly swayed, to better favor labor, artists, and people over profit and institutions.

With these contexts in mind, ethical practice and institutional accountability are among the most urgent challenges of our time. Will artists, BIPOC, queer people, and working class people continue see their labor tokenized and coopted for the profit of institutions, or can they thrive in the places that they enrich and revitalize?

If institutions are not yet prepared to meet their communities' expectations, then at what point will people no longer accept the institution as it stands? If institutional leaders become unwilling to negotiate in good faith, at what point will the community walk away and develop new organizations and collectives on their own terms?

SYMBOLIC + SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Printmaking: From Artificial Rarity to Abundance

As an artist and maker, I seek to align symbolic representation and systemic change. I want to elevate and make labor visible; prioritize and center perspectives that have historically been excluded; and make space for reflection on how we as artists cultivate our practices and negotiate the spaces in which we work.

I have created a new body of work, which I call my Negotiation Tables. My methodology involves taking hand-carved woodblocks and transforming them into sites of negotiation.

Installation shot of *Jenie Gao's exhibit, 米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* December 2021. Photo by Jenie Gao.

There are layers of removal, diaspora, and displacement in this process. From the woodblocks, I create prints and residual wood shavings. I don't number the prints pulled from these blocks, not because I wish to endlessly mass-produce them, but rather to give them agency from a predefined limit. Much like community organizing, this requires an element of trust. Printmaking and organizing alike require many steps of lead-up labor prior to the final outcome. After hundreds of hours of carving and long days working at the press, how many of these prints will turn out? After endless hours of canvasing and

campaigning, how many people will respond to this call to action? The only way to see through a monumental effort is to trust the process and repeatedly show up to do the work.

After finishing the prints, instead of destroying the matrices, I transform them into tables. Thus the limiting factor on the population of prints isn't an artificially set quota, but rather the metamorphosis of the woodblock—the tool, matrix, and evidence of the labor—into a transformed identity and purpose.

This transformation is in response to the history of how print became indoctrinated in the fine arts, in contrast to its use in political campaigning, protest, and community activation. Historically, print as an invention made it possible to democratize information and communicate with the masses. But to compete with painting—which most other fine art forms are measured against—print needed to become artificially rare. It is best practice in printmaking to destroy one's printing plates to limit the edition. I have always been uncomfortable with this practice of destroying one's printing plates, or destroying any evidence of the actual labor that went into creating the prints in favor of rarifying the asset. Working through this new methodology, I reflect on what it means for me to challenge print in this way, as an Asian American and woman of color who has been made artificially rare in white dominant spaces.

In a letter to a friend for the book, *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*, Pamela Lee reflects on the experience of being mistaken for other Asian women in the arts. Lee writes, "Misrecognition…legitimizes and reproduces forms of social dominance at the scale of these banal and allegedly harmless exchanges. It masks the actual violence which historically informs and reproduces the systems in which we work, live, move, play."

One of the challenges that printmakers face in the fine art world is why the repetition of an image has value. Can a work of art be valuable if more than one person owns it? This obsession with singular, exclusive ownership of an asset is a colonial pillar of the art world, and one that the technology of printmaking could resist. Yet print has become assimilated, regulated via the limited edition and destruction of the printing plate and other evidence of the labor that created the print.

In her letter, Lee recalls, "Once, you recounted bumping into Artist X at an opening in Los Angeles, where he enthusiastically hailed you by shouting 'MAYA!' You told him that you were most definitely NOT Maya Lin. When the artist began tripping over his apologies, each mealier than the last, you flatly responded, 'That's OK ... I know you're a racist.' I almost spit when you told me this story. I could imagine the look on your face, your gaze level, and hear the coolness of your rebuke" (Ho 19-20). Lee quotes from Nancy Fraser, "'To be misrecognized…is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem'" (Ho 21).

Given the phenomenon of misrecognition, what does it mean for people not to see the value of repeating an image, as if two related images could not possibly do something different,

because they look “too alike?” I can almost hear a white curator or other art world gatekeeper saying, “We couldn’t possibly have more than one Asian woman in our collection! How can we monetize what we cannot tell apart?”

A strength of printmaking is its power to reproduce the same message. Yet this is seen as a weakness in the fine arts, a redundancy that makes prints lose value and exclusivity. How often are marginalized people made to feel like broken records, asking for the same, basic rights? How often are we made to feel that we have to compete against the few other BIPOC and femmes in institutions, as if we can’t be valuable if there’s more than one of us? Is what we are saying truly redundant if we are still waiting for action and reconciliation?

There is power in the multiple, and in the creation of new frameworks of comprehension. There is strength in our reflections and in pursuing legibility of lived experience. There is durability in repetition that elevates individual messages into a collective history.

Finally, somewhere amidst the dissemination of repeated messages, protests, and calls to action, a cycle is broken. This is the power of mass communication—people have individual epiphanies while simultaneously developing a shared, expanded vocabulary. A social message, shared on repeat, influences the formation of a public.

In both printmaking and organizing terms, the outcomes of this labor are imbued with value, agency, and abundance.

The Negotiation Table

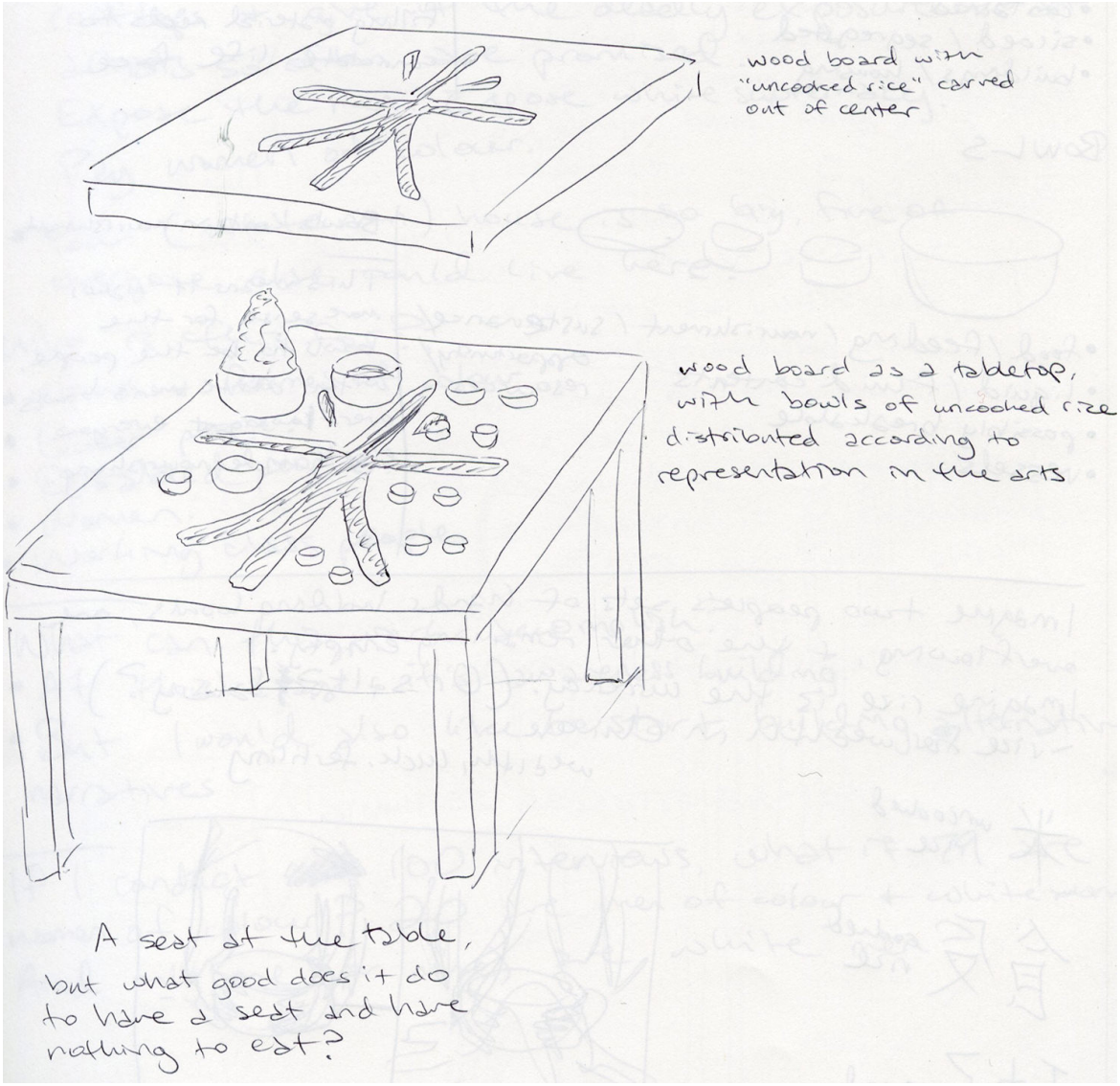
All good negotiations have a walkaway point. Without a walkaway point, one party will inevitably get taken advantage of. A negotiation, in essence, is between what you can and cannot accept.

Negotiations only work when the different parties each have something to gain. For the powerful, this can be as simple as a feeling of being appreciated. However, a problem arises when those with significant power must give something up, with nothing to gain in return, in order for the negotiation to be considered fair. Sometimes, the only corrective measure is to exit the negotiation.

The table structure holds multiple connotations. Tables are gathering places for eating and discourse. They are arenas for study and for play. They are work surfaces for the laborer and the administrator. They hold space for negotiations across the personal, professional, and political.

Tables are also sites where people reveal who they are. “Taking a seat at the table” has become a popular catch phrase in the last decade, especially when it comes to diversity and inclusion. But what actually happens once you sit at the table? Whether you announce or withhold your beliefs, whether you push for change or refrain from action, you reveal

elements of your character. It is nearly impossible to conceal your stance from the public, because even saying nothing is a political position.



Jenie Gao's preliminary sketch of *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* September 2021.

For myself, I've had a public facing career for several years. Creating the negotiation tables has become a way to unfold the political to engage with the personal. In terms of autotheory, the data and representational disparities in my work unfold to my personal, lived experience, revealing that underneath the numbers and facts are people's lives.

My exhibit, *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* centers on data of the US population versus representation in galleries, museums, and private collections. I approach this data through my formative life experience as a "restaurant baby."

米(mǐ) is the Chinese word for uncooked rice and other grains. The rice has become a metaphor for that which could sustain us, but in its unprocessed form is indigestible. The initial presence of the work in the gallery feels almost like a stage, or an altar to a memory. The installation is highly symmetrical, with subtle offsets. In the center of the room are two tables with chairs bookending the installation. To one side of the gallery are two more chairs in front of some laminated place mats and a menu holder on the wall, resembling the waiting area at the front of a takeout restaurant.

Installation shot of *Jenie Gao's exhibit, 米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* December 2021. Photo by Stefan Gibson.

Upon entering the gallery, a viewer's first encounter with the imagery is on the walls. On the left is a solid, jet-black print of a rice plant. On the right is a slightly faded, salty print of the 米 symbol. The affinity between the two images is just enough to connect the 米 character with its pictographic origins as a drawing of the rice stalk itself.

When a viewer approaches the tables, the hand-carved surfaces reveal themselves. There is evidence that much of what exists in this space originated from the woodblocks. The black inked surfaces of blocks produced the prints on the walls; the carved image recessions, the refuse on the floor. The wood shavings are arranged to read, in English, "uncooked rice." The tables are simple: a light blond birch, unadorned and lightly varnished, constructed with hinges on the legs that allow them to fold up. This is an installation that can readily collapse or expand to fit or fill whatever space it comes to occupy.

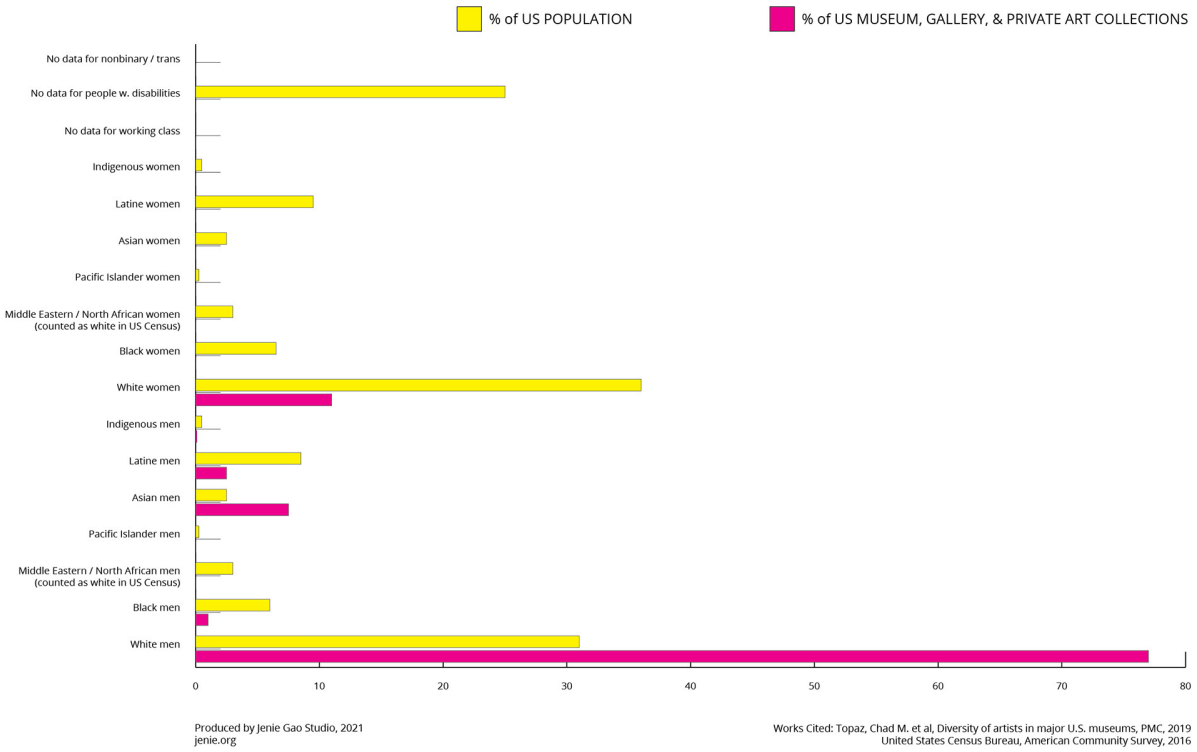
Close-up shot of Jenie Gao's *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* 2021. Photo by Jenie Gao.

Each table surface becomes yet another setting. A giant, white bowl overflowing with rice represents white cis-men, who make up 77% of US museums, galleries, and private collections (Topaz). In contrast, the bowls for Asian women, Indigenous women, Latinx women, and Black women each contain only a few grains of rice each. A stack of empty bowls rests to the side, for data not accounted for in current studies.

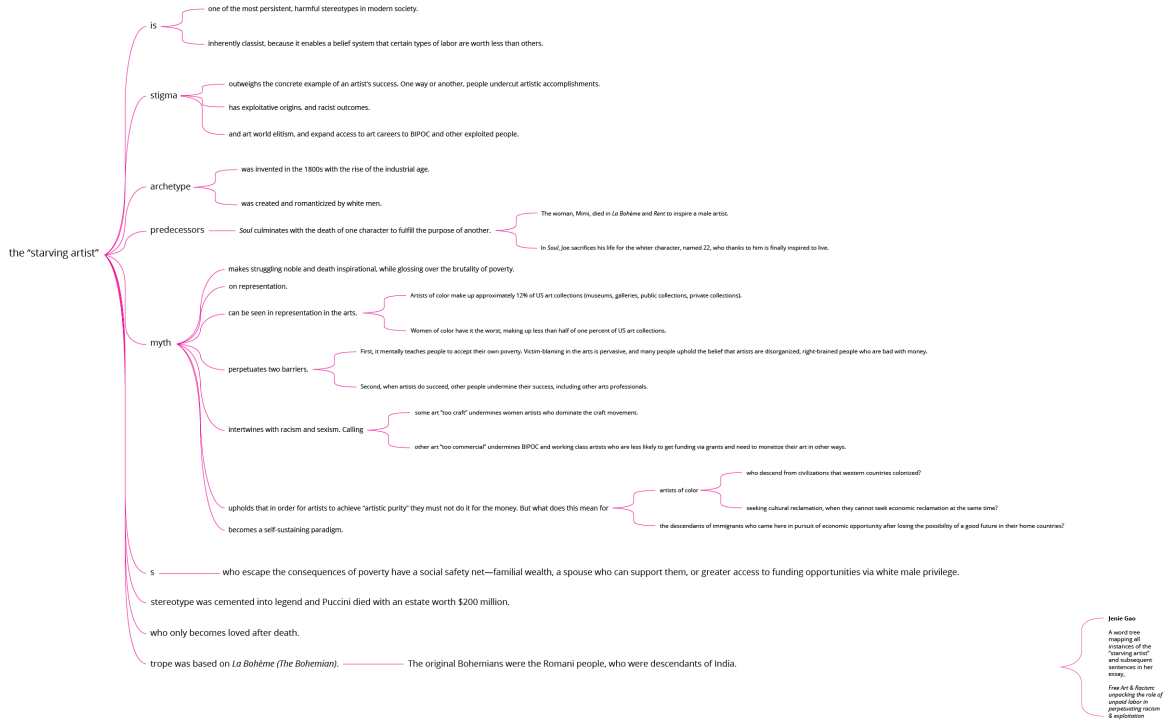
Data about who has representation in the art world continues to unfold and reveal personal stories that constitute the whole. There is a laminated place mat on the table—the same ones as in the waiting area by the entrance. On one side of the place mat is a bar graph of the US population versus demographic representation in US museums, galleries, and private art collections. On the opposite side is a tree poem mapping occurrences of the term, "starving artist," in my essay series, *Free Art and Racism: Unpacking the role of unpaid artists' labor in racism and exploitation.*

Installation shot of Jenie Gao's exhibit, *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations.* Photo by Stefan Gibson.

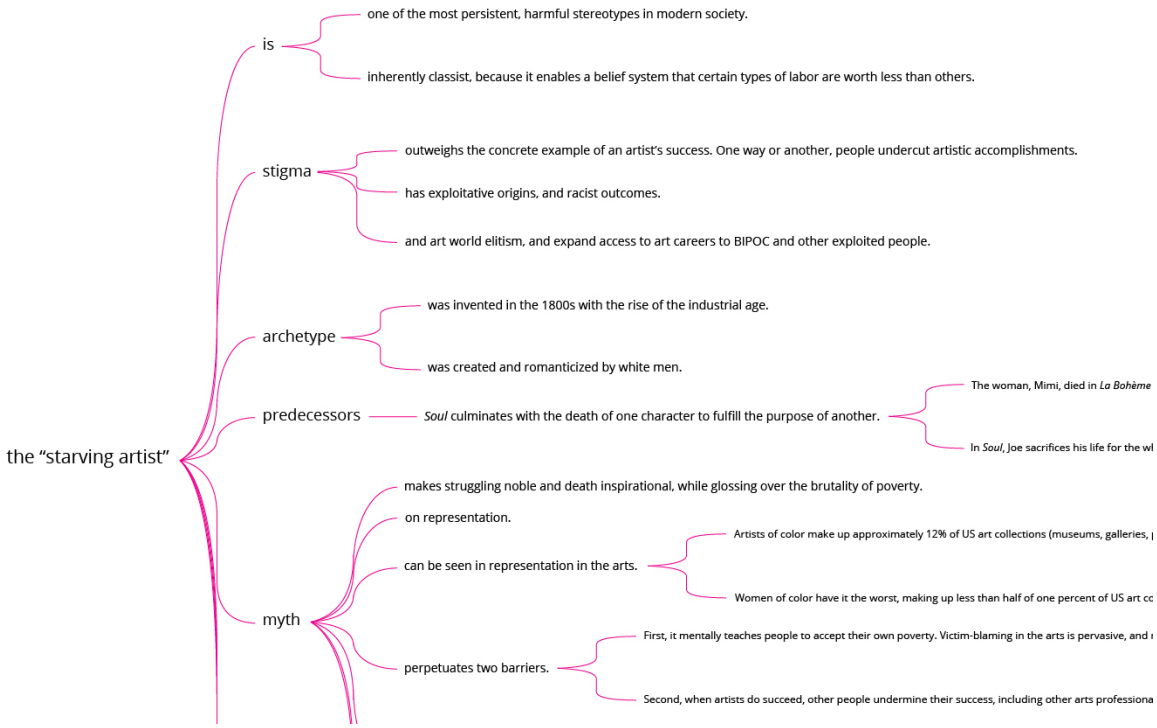
Installation shots of Jenie Gao's exhibit, *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations.* Photo by Jenie Gao.



Jenie Gao's bar graph of US Population versus representation in US museums, gallery, & private art collections.



Jenie Gao's The Starving Artist: a tree poem, September 2021.

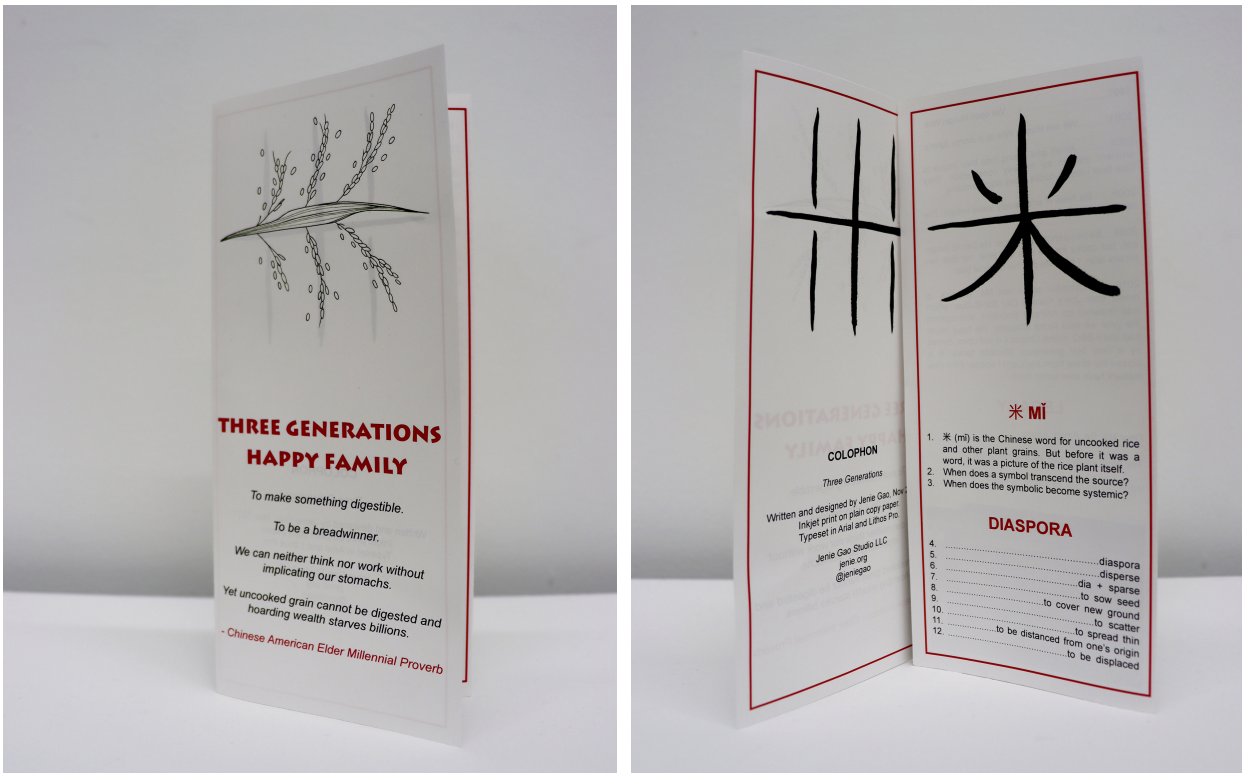


Close-up of Jenie Gao's The Starving Artist: a tree poem, September 2021.

Finally, an artist's book that resembles a tri-fold takeout menu unfolds to reveal a personal timeline of my family's story told via food as a political and socioeconomic indicator. The front cover of the menu reads:

> **THREE GENERATIONS HAPPY FAMILY**
>
> *To make something digestible.*
>
> *To be a breadwinner.*
>
> *We can neither think nor work without implicating our stomachs.*
>
> *Yet uncooked grain cannot be digested and hoarding wealth starves billions.*
>
> - Chinese American Elder Millennial Proverb

On the interior reads the following definition: "米 (mǐ) is the Chinese word for uncooked rice and other plant grains. But before it was a word, it was a picture of the rice plant itself. When does a symbol transcend the source? When does the symbolic become systemic?"



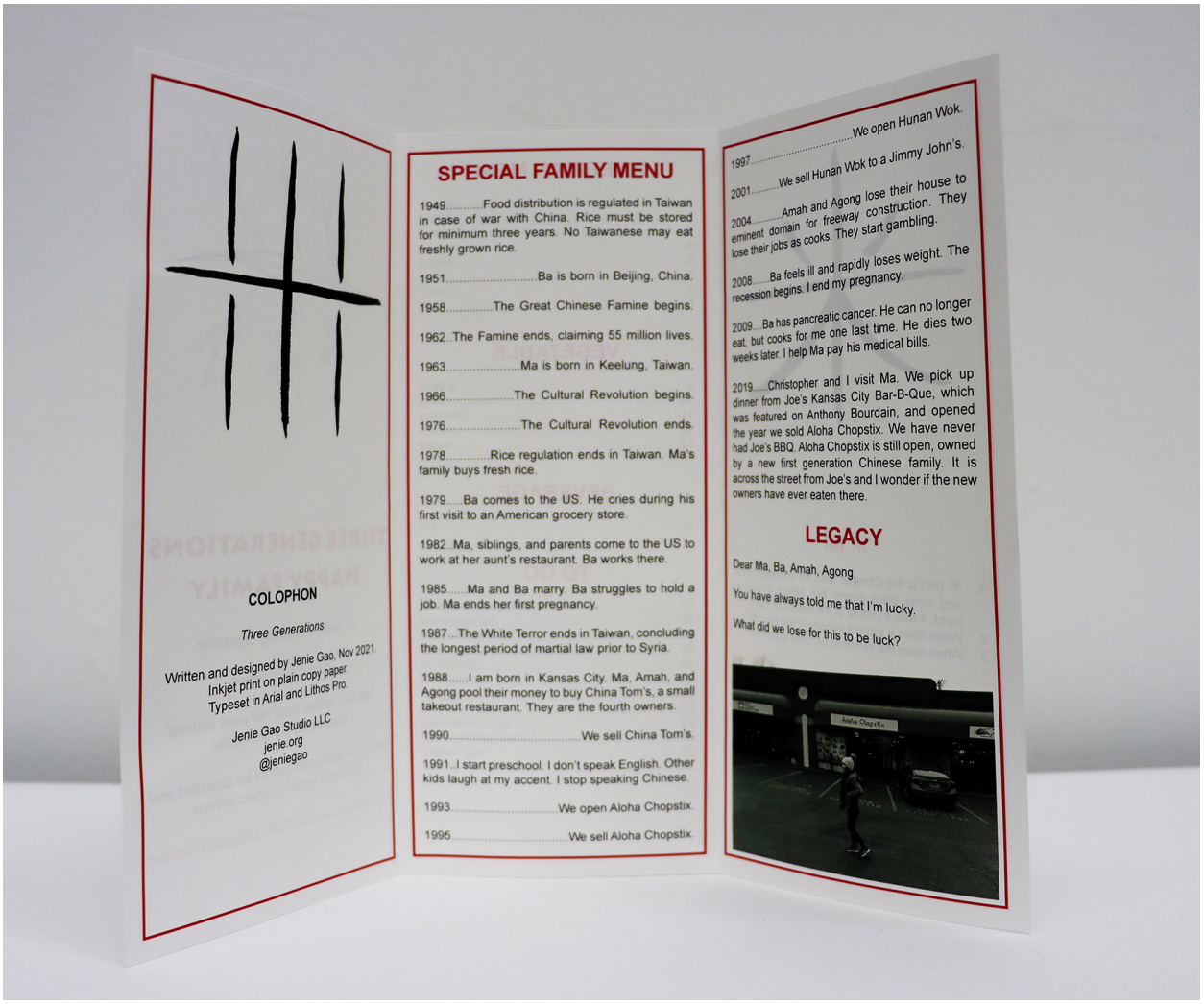
Jenie Gao's *Three Generations Happy Family, artist's book,* 2021. Photo by Jenie Gao.

The Chinese takeout restaurant has functioned as an economic engine for new Chinese immigrants to gain their first footholds. There is a cruel irony in food service being the only job accessible to a family like mine. My mother grew up with rice regulations in Taiwan that weren't lifted until 1978, by which time she was already a teenager. My father was seven years old at the onset of the Great Chinese Famine, a travesty that claimed 55 million lives. The first time he visited an American grocery store, he cried in an aisle of eggs.

Yet there is also something profound about my parents experiencing such intense trauma around food scarcity in their youth—and then distributing food as a means of transforming our family's trajectory. When I was a child, my mother told me that she and her parents opened a restaurant specifically because she was pregnant with me, because they knew the difference between working in a restaurant and getting to own the fruits of their labor. Is this not a model for how a community heals? I am deeply familiar with how easily unhealed trauma becomes a weapon. Mindsets of toxicity and scarcity often boil down to, "I suffered and survived. Others can suffer, too." It is an incredible feat to have endured a trauma, and then say, *"I didn't have enough, so I will make sure those in the future do."*

The food in Chinese takeout restaurants is typically made fast and sold cheap, the venues regarded more as transactional spaces than cultural ones. A joke in the west is that you can tell if a Chinese restaurant is "authentic" by the owners' children playing or doing homework at one of the tables, a not-so-subtle hint that there is no childcare, no division between life and business, no outside support system for a family and establishment like this. But the joke hides in plain sight what diasporic families have long known to be critical

to their survival—we can only survive if the collective survives, however small, wounded, and broken our current support system might be. If we wish to change this family's fortune, then everyone, including the children, must be in on the effort. Also—the public facing menu is for an American palette. The so-called "authentic" stuff? That we keep for ourselves or wait until we can share among the people who genuinely appreciate it.



Jenie Gao's *Three Generations Happy Family, artist's book.* Photo by Jenie Gao.

Is this not also the basis of a viable artist's practice? While all career paths require support systems, the arts industry has so few safety nets built into public infrastructure that it is often an all-consuming effort that becomes a way of life. I think of all the romantic partners, chosen family, friends, mentors, and extended communities, who are in for the long haul of their artist friends' careers. A friend helps staff your table at an art market. Your partner helps assemble furniture in the studio. Those close to you learn the art of slinking away at an art opening, when the person they know becomes a public figure answering questions about the art. Then there's the broader network—a local vendor gives you a surprise discount on raw materials. The owner of your regular café slides a bag of coffee onto your table. A stranger gives a glowing public testimony about your work.

Finally, comes the time when the community truly catches you. The work that feels truest to your values suddenly gets criticized for being too political, too personal, too radical, too queer, too feminine or masculine based on how you present, **too much**. You catch flack for not fitting into the "right" category. You get bullied, online and offline, yet called too dominant or aggressive if you dare to stand up for yourself. You grow exhausted advocating for yourself. Then, just as you start wondering if the world isn't safe enough for you to make this kind of work—your community finds, lifts, and invests in you. You find people who celebrate what others rejected. You see changes among the people and in the streets long before the trends ever reach institutional spaces. You're not sure when it happened, but one day, instead of seeking familiarity at yet another Americanized Chinese restaurant, you wander into a bistro with your queer haircut and taste something reminiscent of your Taiwanese Amah's home cooking. And you think—maybe you really can make it here.

Isn't this much like the story of a small, family, immigrant-owned business trying to make its way? Isn't this also a much older story, of how communities have always survived? I might not be from a family of museumgoers or scholars. But the cultural richness and lineage here has informed who I am as an artist and the critical lens I bring to institutional, "high art" spaces. It is a perspective that I wish to elevate as a cultural author.

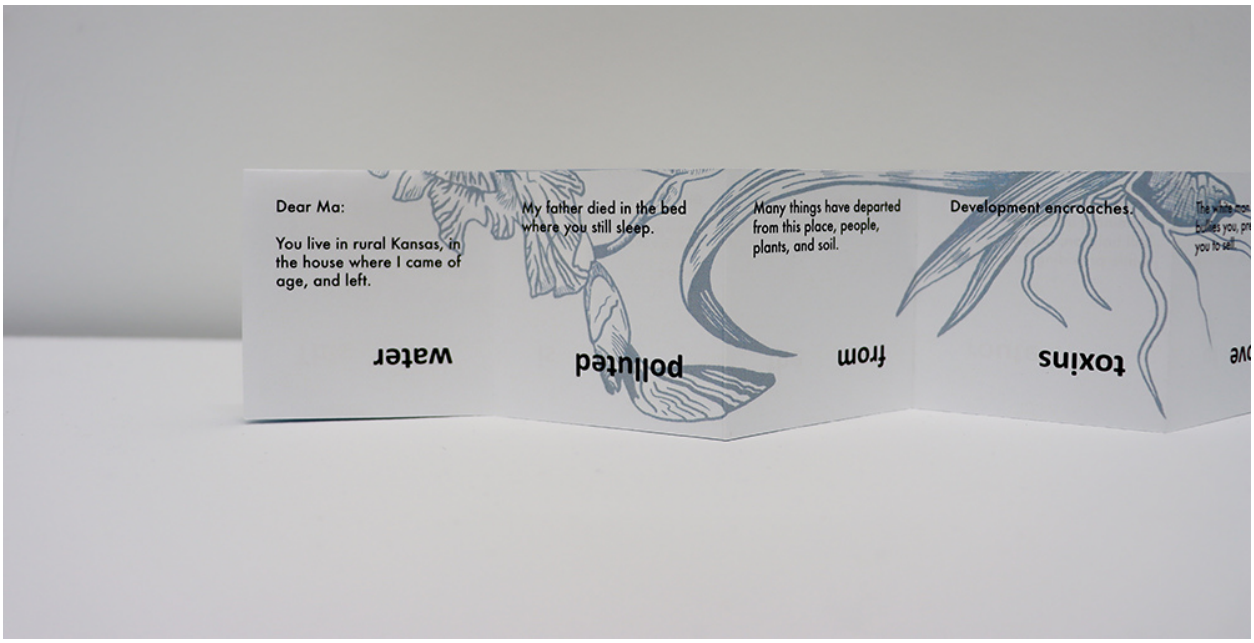
Defining an Ethic

In my second set of negotiation tables, I sought a definition for ethics in the context of my work. *An Ethic is a Root* is an exhibition that navigates how we arrive at our ethics. What are the potential costs of our ethics? What are the gains of upholding them? What is so crucial about having an ethic, in maintaining oneself in the face of a dominant system?

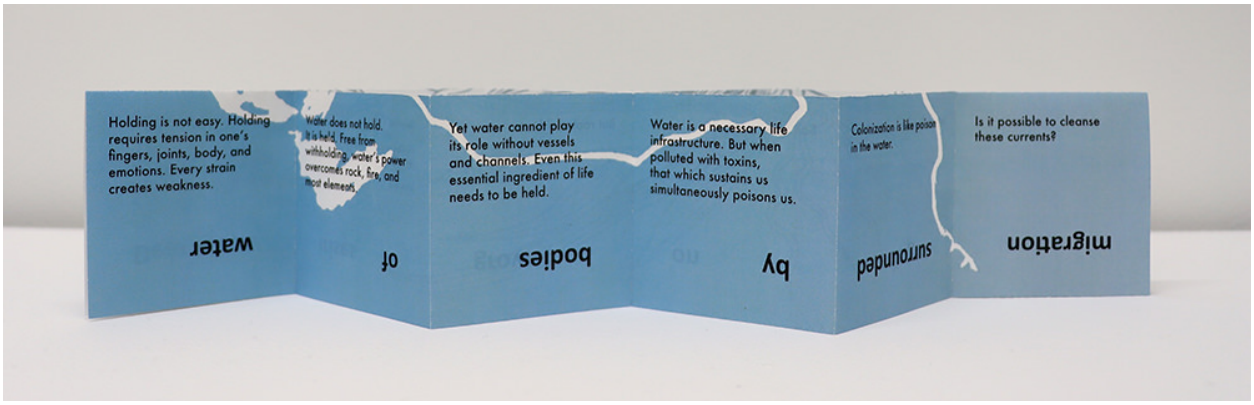
The central image in this installation is a map of my migration route, from where I was born in Kansas City to each of my homes in the Midwest of the United States to my current home in Vancouver, British Columbia. In the creation of this image, I asked myself, how could this map express my relationship with diaspora? What is important to include? What is enough? I decided to make water, instead of land, the geographic anchor, with the Great Lakes blooming at the top of the map. I oriented the map in such a way that my route(s) would grow downward, and in defiance of the colonial map.

My mother still resides in my last childhood home in rural Kansas. It is an older house attached to two acres of land. This land was once lush and green, full of fruit trees and a vibrant ecosystem. This same land now sits mostly barren. The trees are gone. The ponds are gone. Agricultural runoff and nearby development have made the soil poor. The land around my mother's house regularly erodes and floods when it rains. Yet the iris flower continues to grow here, resilient and thriving in large numbers despite the harsh conditions, while healing and replenishing the soil with its roots.

Left: Jenie Gao's *Migration Route,* 60 x 20 inch woodblock print on muslin canvas, fountain roll.
Right: Jenie Gao's *Iris Roots Clean the Water,* 60 x 20 inch woodblock print on muslin canvas, two-layer print.
Photo by Michael Love.



View of Jenie Gao's artist's book, *Dear Ma | Ethic,* March 2022. Photo by Jenie Gao.



View of Jenie Gao's artist's book*, Dear Ma | Ethic.* Photo by Jenie Gao.

Dear Ma,

You live in rural Kansas, in the house where I came of age, and left.

My father died in the bed where you still sleep.

Many things have departed from this place, people, plants, and soil.
Development encroaches.

The white man next door bullies you, pressuring you to sell.

But irises still consistently bloom here.

Irises grow on eroding land and remove toxins from polluted water.

Water floods.

Soil runs.

But roots hold.

-Poem from artist's book, *Dear Ma | Ethic*

Installation shot of the Jenie Gao's exhibit, *An Ethic is a Root,* at Libby Leshgold Gallery, May 2023.
Photo by Khim Hipol.

The woodblock prints on canvas, bearing the image of my migration route and the iris flower, are central to this installation. Two elongated tables, entitled *Beyond Measure*, stand to each side of the prints, anchoring the installation. Each table is its own structure, yet bears a cut edge that matches the other. One table is made from the two-sided woodblock that produced the prints. The other table bears no image of its own, but provides a surface for a set of artist's books addressed to my mother.

Repetition, reflection, and rumination are prominent in this work. The prints reflect the woodblocks. On the floor beneath the prints and tables are linoleum tiles reminiscent of linocut printmaking, as well as mirrored tiles with bevelled edges. The mirrors reflect the woodblocks' undersides and watery blue of the prints, while casting refractions of white light on the walls, causing the entire installation to sparkle. Every part of the installation becomes a container for water and reflection.

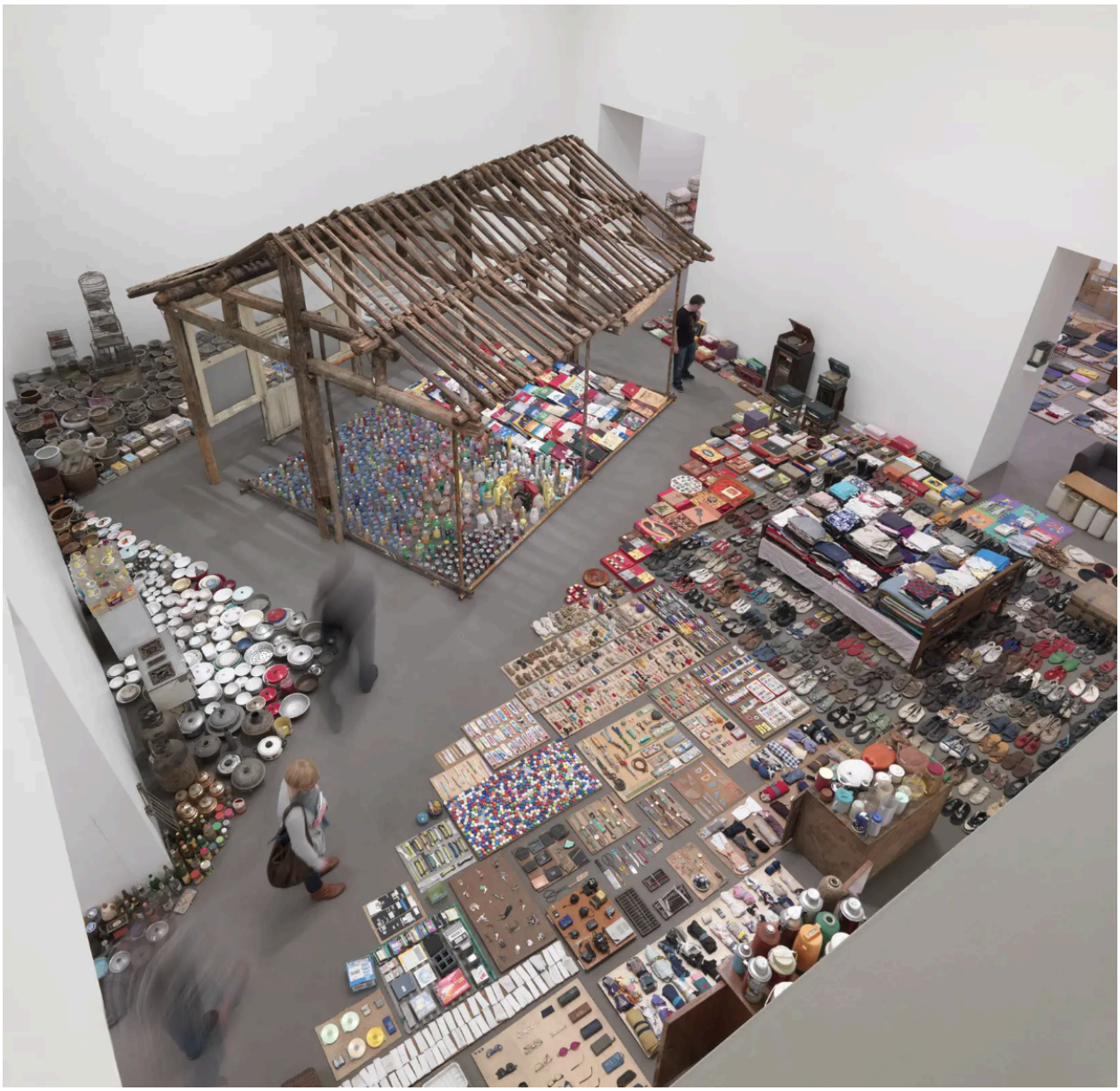
Close-ups of the mirrors, which reflect the undersides of the tables and thus reveal the woodblock of My Migration Route below, at Libby Leshgold Gallery, May 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

Close-up of one table with wood shavings writing the artist's name, 高皆倪 *Beyond Measure,* table installation in the exhibit, *An Ethic is a Root*, first iteration and installation, April 2022. Photo by Jenie Gao.

In 2005, artist Song Dong created *Waste Not,* a collaborative exhibit with his mother, Zhao Xiangyuan, of over 10,000 objects she hoarded after her husband's passing. Song's mother, like my father, endured poverty and precarity in China during the Cultural Revolution. She developed the characteristic resourcefulness of people who survive such times, and an unwillingness to throw away anything that might be useful. This tendency became exacerbated after the sudden death of her husband.

Song Dong's *Waste Not* at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, 2009. Photograph by John Wronn.

In his interview with Carriageworks and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Song shares a story of a failed attempt to help his mother de-clutter her home: "I, with my sister, hoped to organize for her, to make the perfect room for her. So we threw away a lot of things. But she was really angry…so I rethink a lot. I asked my mother, why did you put all [of these things] full of the room? She said, she didn't want to have an empty room because my father was not there…So I got the idea that I want to work with my mother." Song goes on to share his mother's initial hesitation—wouldn't he be embarrassed if people knew his mother was messy? He assured her that people would see themselves in her struggles, and with a note of levity, that he would be famous so she need not worry about him.



Song Dong's *Waste Not* at Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver, BC, 2010.

I see my mother and myself in this generational struggle. I hear echoes of her fears about living in an empty home now that my father and I are gone, which amplifies our grief, our differences, and my personal aggravation about what to do next. I resent the impact of one man's life and death on the women who survive him, who have always needed to find a way regardless of him. I feel relief as well. Here is something that could be so easily pathologized and made shameful, presented with the careful archiving of a fine arts collection. Truly, what differentiates collecting from hoarding besides the presumed agency and privilege of the person who owns the objects? In what ways do I only see the problems of my mother's situation and not the evidence of life persisting in any forms that it can?

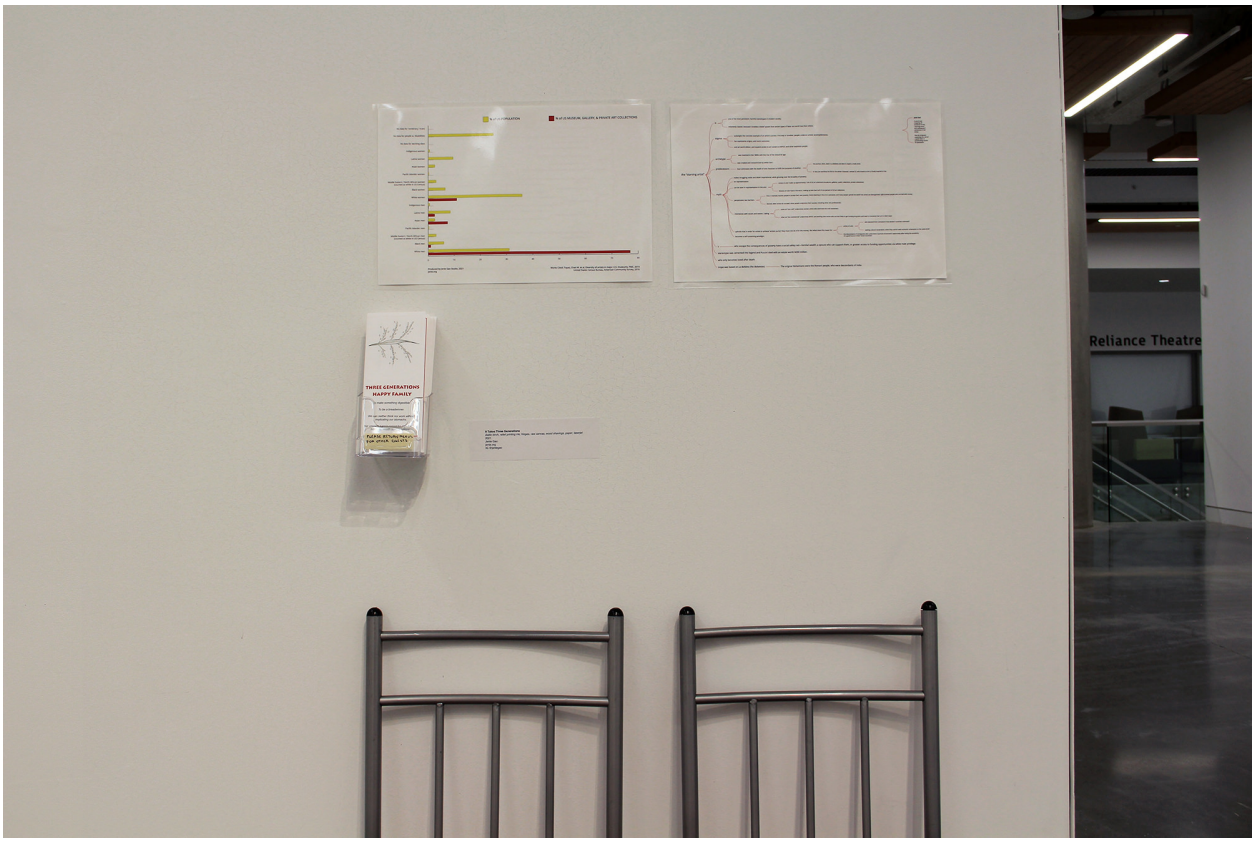
Jenie Gao's exhibit, *An Ethic is a Root,* first iteration and installation, April 2022. Photo by Jenie Gao.

Returning to the work, whereas water represents power that needs channels and containers, a root becomes the metaphor for an ethic. A root both breaks ground and holds it together. It cleans the water and soil while nourishing the plant. It does all of this despite being breakable and weaker than all that surrounds it.

Returning to the systemic, I think about the life an artwork can have beyond the artist. For Song, works like his series, "Wisdom of the Poor," elevate the integrity of a way of life in China that modernization has rapidly erased. He makes the art world archive and take care of that which development paves over.

Song Dong's *Wisdom of the Poor* at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China, 2005.

For me, I want my work to do in the gallery what generations of immigrant entrepreneurs have long understood about their labor. Restaurant workers who can own the profits of what they produce are the ones who can change their fates. I wish to be paid well for showing my artwork, well enough to pay for my own life comforts and to invest in my business and community. I want fair contracts that honor my intellectual property and agency, so that I feel good about being generous with my story, and never extracted from for the benefit of an institution's agenda. I want to be treated as an equal partner and a colleague by the curators and art directors who take an interest in my work. I want artists to be treated not merely as entertainers or production pawns, but as the cultural leaders that we are.



Close-up of Jenie Gao's exhibit, *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations.* Photo by Jenie Gao.


Close-up of exhibit, *An Ethic is a Root,* ancestor altar with a photo of the artist with her father. Photo by Jenie Gao.

Installation shots of Jenie Gao's exhibit, *米(mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations.* Photo by Stefan Gibson.

The Identity Politics of What We Call Printmaking

For all its virtue signaling, the fine arts industry is inherently conservative, and I question the extent to which it will permit printmakers to challenge its best practices, before our work is re-categorized as another art form or relegated to the kind of "community" or "activist art" that belongs on the streets rather than the galleries (at least for another few decades). As an artist moving through academic, fine art, institutional spaces that hold up words like "decolonization" and "equity" in their marketing, I often sense that the messaging is this: You can push the boundaries of any *art medium*, as long as the *fine arts industry* gets the final word on the regulations that surround the finished work.

In 2008, at the age of 20, I was a newly minted printmaker, and in awe of the work of the street artist, Swoon (alias of Caledonia Curry). Swoon was on the precipice of a meteoric rise, as people became enamored with her large-scale, melancholic woodcut portraits wheat-pasted in tucked away, ill kept public spaces. These were breathtaking portraits of overlooked people, rendered not in oil painting but in hand-carved relief, and on materials and in environments that were effectively impermanent.

Back then, I noticed something about Swoon's work. Despite woodcut being a slow, laborious process, Swoon seemed to minimally duplicate her prints. Her installations were intended to be singular and ephemeral, despite the effort that went into them. Did people

fall in love with her street art, in part, because it was on the verge of disappearing? Did the fine art world also embrace this work because of its singularity, as the installations transitioned from the streets to the archival gallery? Furthermore, could Swoon get away with not numbering her prints if they existed simply as prints, independent of the installations that bloomed around them? Was it a requirement for the work to be interdisciplinary, sculptural, and even public, to elevate their status? Once in the gallery, did it become necessary for salable work to be singular or limited in its numbers? Is this the predetermined arc of an artist in capitalism, to cut your teeth in bohemia, and to land (if you're lucky) in the academy, where the faces may change but the rules stay the same?

I have since continued to question the parameters that inform different printmakers' careers. Tom Huck, one of my former undergraduate professors at Washington University in St. Louis, makes large-scale woodcuts that are grotesque, scathing critiques of human societal follies—and are expertly printed in limited editions on heavy, archival rag papers, and exhibited and collected in prestigious institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art. Such is the case for many fine arts printmakers creating political work—Lesley Dill, Jim Dine, Manabu Ikeda, Art Spiegelman, and Swoon are among a few of the decorated names in the collection at Tandem Press, a renowned publisher of fine art prints and steward of some of the highest industry standards in the field of print.

Yeonhee Cheong's *Memento Mori Sewol,* silkscreen printing, potato-dextrine resist, Thiox discharge, direct dyeing, installation in the exhibition Intertwined at Promega BTC Institute, 2017. Photo by Jenie Gao.

I have had various opportunities to curate exhibitions and work with printmakers who are pushing the boundaries of this field. In 2017, I curated a show entitled *Intertwined* at Promega BTC Institute, featuring the works of Rina Yoon, Nirmal Raja, Yeonhee Cheong,

and Kristen Bartel. For her work in this exhibit, Cheong used print to place political images on textiles and wallpapers that become embedded in the surroundings. Building on the history of conversational prints in fashion, the human body becomes a means to quite literally carry a story into public conversations. *Memento Mori Sewol* memorializes the deaths of 306 people who drowned when the ferry MV *Sewol* sank off the coast of South Korea. The event sparked outrage towards botched rescue efforts, and the governmental leadership responded to an already aggrieved populace by suppressing their protests. Cheong created a pattern of almost ghost-like human figures on backgrounds of indigo blues, falling yet floating, seemingly alive and yet suspended in time. She constructed a suit that can be worn out in public, marked with the image of irrecoverable lives.

For *Massacre Camouflage*, Cheong again used the repetition of the human forms as a pattern, but instead of turning it into a garment, opted to display the fabric as-is without having to become something else to carry the subject matter. The scale of the printed fabric enveloped even this immense installation space. The repeated image is based on a photograph of the Korean War taken by *Life Magazine*, that the editors at the time chose not to publish. At the symposium for the opening reception of *Intertwined*, Cheong said of this work, "This textural landscape still repeats itself across the world. *Massacre Camouflage* still utilized the language of typical textile design, which is the repeated pattern. The endless repeat signifies a trauma. However, the trains on the floor off the wall signify a possibility of an intervention by us…that this can be cut and stopped at our will."

Yeonhee Cheong's *Massacre Camouflage,* silkscreen printing on muslin, installation in the exhibition Intertwined at Promega BTC Institute, 2017. Photo by Jenie Gao.

In 2018, I curated a national juried printmaking exhibition entitled *Rewriting the Master Narrative* at Arts + Literature Laboratory, and invited Deborah Maris Lader (director of Chicago Printmakers Collaborative) to jury the final selection of artists. The show focused on how printmaking can challenge existing paradigms of storytelling and story making, as well as the role of the maker of the matrix who replicates messages that the masses might emulate. The exhibition boasted a powerful lineup of artists, and among all the printmakers I had worked with, I noticed a pattern. The more obviously something was a fine art print (or an artist's book), the more likely it was to be editioned and rarified, regardless of the subject matter. But the more that print became something else—an object with a *printed pattern*, a video that animated print, a sculpture that print accessorized, an almost mural-like wall installation—the more likely it was to be uneditioned and to gain a singular identity. As someone who loved all these different print expressions, I still felt a nagging question. Can print be worthy, just as itself, in the fine arts, without trying to pass as something else? Without having to be more than print?

Conversely, can someone who has honed the obsessive technical skills of printmaking still maintain their identity as a printmaker, even as their practice expands to encompass other disciplines? How much does mindset define the printmaker, in relation to the medium itself? I ask these questions somewhat selfishly—as someone with a precision that is rewarded by printmaking, but a practice that wanders and expands. I have the eye and hand of a specialist combined with the heart and mind of a generalist, which can be a

source of strife. Because for all of printmaking's rebelliousness, the craft of the medium combined with fickleness of the fine arts industry can result in a set of standards that are stringent towards even the most politically aggressive artworks.

Lynne Allen's (on left) *Prey II,* Digital print, silkscreen, handwork, editioned; and (on right) *Fringed Bag,* etching on deerskin with hand coloring, sewn beads, and Victorian purse clasp, uneditioned. from the exhibition Rewriting the Master Narrative at Arts + Literature Laboratory, 2018. Photos by Latasia Dhami.

Carlos Llobet Montealegre's *Street Compositions,* relief print, stencils, and spray paint, uneditioned. from the exhibition Rewriting the Master Narrative at Arts + Literature Laboratory, 2018. Photo by Latasia Dhami.

Jessica Meuninck-Ganger's *Knee to the West,* Assembled screenprints on Hanji (Korean mulberry paper), uneditioned, from the exhibition Rewriting the Master Narrative, 2018. Photo by Latasia Dhami.

Amos Kennedy, Jr. is a letterpress printmaker currently based in Detroit, Michigan, and to say that he is prolific is an understatement. Kennedy has produced easily thousands of typographic posters embodying a breadth of political activation, from the bluntly irreverent "Post racial, my ass" to the celebratory "God is Trans." He does not number or even sign the work—and he sells them for dirt-cheap—or sometimes flagrantly refuses to monetize them. What space does Kennedy occupy in the fine arts—Black; man; professor; alumnus of the reputed top-ranked printmaking program—making politically witty, economically accessible work?

In an interview with Hyperallergic, Kennedy told curator Angelina Lippert that while he was faculty at Indiana University, there was a police call on him for his satirical critique of the HR Office of Equal Opportunity. At the conclusion of the investigation, Kennedy created another artwork that read, "'How does the Office of Diversity react to the first Black faculty member in the art department?' … 'Called the police.'" (Lippert). Today, Kennedy's accolades include receiving the Glasgow Fellowship in Crafts of $50,000 USD in 2015 (United States Artists). It is a substantial unrestricted prize for the arts. More modestly, it is slightly lower than the median annual earnings of Americans with Bachelor's degrees, $59,600 USD in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics). A year of one's life back, for a lifetime of work. Kennedy is in his 70s. What is the potential lifetime output of an artist like Kennedy, and what is the fine arts industry—or even simply the niche field of

printmaking—prepared to give him or the communities he cares about in return for all he has contributed?

In 2009, the New Museum mounted a show of Emory Douglas, an artist and Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, who is credited with creating the overarching style and design that defined the Black Panthers. The New Museum's own archives describe the work as follows: "They are dangerous pictures, and they were meant to change the world." Douglas created much of these artworks in his twenties, yet the exhibition record that canonizes this work didn't start until he was in his sixties. How radical is a museum actually being, by showing the political work of an artist forty years in retrospect of its making? Is this separation of time necessary for the digestibility of these works in the fine arts industry? Did the museum contribute financially to contemporary Black causes? How did the reception of this 40-year old work compare to the reception of the Black women, femme, and gender nonconforming artists in Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's 2022 Wisconsin Triennial, whose exhibition ended in defacement of the artwork and the Museum board blackballing the artists for demanding restitution?

To be clear, I want the work of activist artists, including printmakers, to be canonized and recognized in art, political, and cultural histories. Are there problematics in how this work is archived and represented? Absolutely. But opting out of existing systems does not excuse anyone from social responsibility. And so I am striving for what feels like a very real if evasive possibility. I do not want to wait forty years for my "dangerous" work to be considered docile enough for a museum to recognize as culturally relevant. I want artists, including printmakers, like myself to freely, actively participate in the politics of today as is our civic right—*while also* building successful careers in real-time, in an arts industry that can keep up and evolve with the revolutionary changes that artists envision. Imagine—what if museums and other arts institutions were structured so that the wealth generated by exhibiting and acquiring artists' work directly benefited artists *and* communities?

This is the test whose results will remain to be seen, beyond my graduate degree—will fine arts institutions and collectors buy my prints, for a worthy price, without a visible inventory number that designates their rank in the edition? They already do this for painting, even paintings with multiple studies and versions. But will they do it for print? For those who still value rarity, is it enough for collectors to see the Negotiation Tables, to know that it is impossible to re-print my woodblocks and that the prints are finite? Here is why this question matters. A quick browse of art on the market—on larger platforms such as Artsy or individual art dealers like Tandem Press—shows no correlation between sizes of print editions and art prices. There are no rules that dictate the values of individual prints in editions of 100 prints or 18 prints or 5 prints, other than the unwritten ones surrounding an artist's name and the clout of the institutions that endorse them.

I invite those with the power to make art acquisitions to reflect on this question. We have already established that women of color—which includes Asian American women and can be further narrowed to specific ethnicities—are nearly non-existent in North American art collections. How much more do you need me to prove the rarity of my work, when you don't have enough representation of my peer group as it stands?

Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023, *The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making,* installed in Michael O'Brien Commons at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Photo by Jenie Gao.

Close-up of Jenie's hands holding the artist's book Dear Ma | Ethic in An Ethic Is A Root. Photo by Khim Hipol.

FRAMEWORKS OF COMPREHENSION

#StopAsianHate (In) Visibility

In the US, Anti-Asian hate crimes have skyrocketed since 2020, increasing by 76% in 2020 and 339% in 2021, despite hate crimes on the whole decreasing (Yam). In Canada, Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 301% in 2020 (Yun). Media underreports on these crimes, lacking a framework of comprehension for crimes that impact people of Asian descent.

Researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw, who pioneered the term, intersectionality, talks about frames that enable us to see people. She opens her TED talk, *The Urgency of Intersectionality,* by having the audience stand while she reads the names of Black people killed by the police, and to sit down when they no longer recognize the names. Halfway through, most of the audience sits down. She reveals that the only difference between the first and second set of names is gender. The second set of names people didn't recognize were all Black women. She explains that Black women exist at an intersection, invisible to advocacy based on either race or gender that misses those at the crossroads.

Regarding frames, as an Asian American woman, I have largely had to rely on reading material about adjacent marginalizations to build a vocabulary of cultural literacy and advocacy. In the US, I've benefited from literature by Black and queer authors and thinkers to expand my language to combat oppression. I have benefited from literature by Indigenous Latinx authors on subjects like migration and Indigenous First Nations authors on sovereignty. But there simply isn't the same attention on issues facing people of Asian descent, and that's hurting comprehension of racism in 2022.

On March 16, 2021, when a white man shot and killed eight people—six of whom were Asian women—at three spas in Atlanta, Georgia, I found myself incapacitated for two days, unable to think of what to do or say despite my very public role in advocacy for the last decade. All these years, I have aligned myself with movements for other marginalized groups. Yet all this work I have done facing out towards the community, I could not readily apply to issues that hit closest to me personally. I experienced a confluence of reckonings. I felt anger about the year of anti-Asian hate crimes building up to this moment, and finally, only once it was a massacre of eight people, did an anti-Asian hate crime make national headlines. I felt a deep resentment of white institutions that have invited me to speak and work when they needed any BIPOC face of any race, that put up Black Lives Matter and rainbow signs in their windows, that were suddenly silent following Atlanta. Yet the people at these institutions weren't the only ones unaccustomed to Asians being hyper-visible. I wasn't used to it either. Is this the condition of being Asian in America? To make yourself literate in all the multiplicities of Americanness besides your own? To advocate for everyone else's right to belong here, except yours?

The hyper-visibility of #StopAsianHate flashed and then flickered. The majority of Asian victims have been female and older. The victims exist at the intersection of being Asian,

female, and old, three demographics that society devalues. #StopAsianHate has struggled to maintain the visibility and momentum as similar social movements.

Header image of my essay, *"Not hating" Asians is not enough to achieve true justice,* published March 18, 2021. The original post was shared over 500 times on Instagram and Facebook.

The US tends to fall into binary thinking, and in terms of race, has created a Black versus white binary along which all races get measured against whiteness. This binary is a flawed way to look at race. It lacks nuance and continues to look at whiteness as the solution and white adjacency as the goal for BIPOC. It overgeneralizes Asian identities (who descend from 49+ nations representing 4.7 billion people and a multiplicity of ethnicities) and positions the amalgamate "Asian American" as a wedge and problematic model minority, more a hindrance than a help to the race conversation. Most egregiously, it labels Asian people as succeeding via proximity to whiteness, as if Asians only "succeed" because white people permit it, and not via their own agency or ability. But if anti-Asian hate crimes have taught us anything, it's that Asians are not white adjacent, because even those who fit a narrow definition of economic success are not safe in their bodies like white people are. Without literacy on Asian-specific issues, we also lose an opportunity to address the greater scope of western imperialism beyond the US. We allow white supremacy to continue taking credit for any indicator of BIPOC success. Ultimately, there is no justice for anyone as long as everyone is still measured against whiteness.

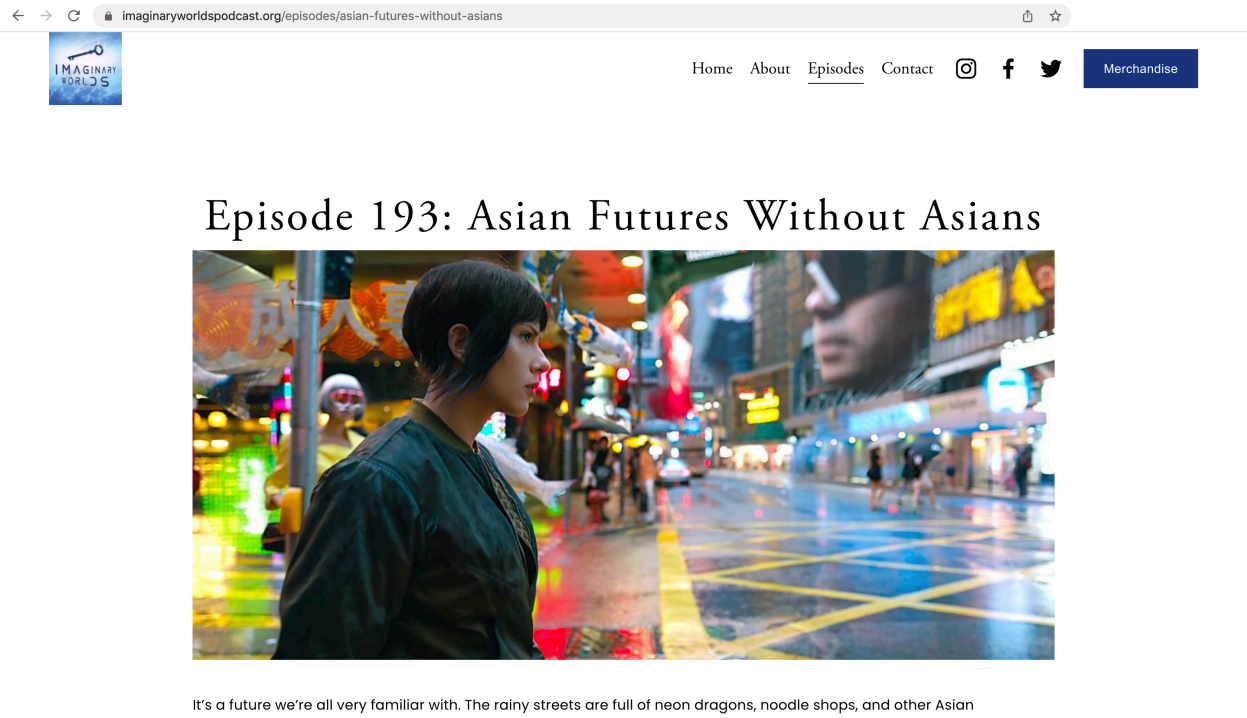
In some ways, the increase in anti-Asian hate is the overt expression of racism that people believe they can get away with. While anti-Black and anti-Indigenous discrimination have not diminished, people who are afraid of being publicly labeled as anti-Black in the US and anti-Indigenous in Canada can be bolder in revealing their true feelings about racial equity

in their treatment of Asians and ethnic groups who are not "on trend." There is not enough literature on Asian diasporas to combat this, and it becomes more critical every day.

As an Asian American woman, I wrestle with the responsibility I have to increase visibility for Asian people, while not wanting to make art based solely on identity. Historically excluded artists carry the layered labor of defending their own existence, shouldering ethical short falls of institutions, and still performing at an excellent level. In mainstream culture, Disney-Marvel's *Black Panther* and *Shang-Chi* were seen as wins for the Black and Asian communities. But these wins belonged to Black and Asian men. In both stories, women bore the burden of saving their countries' and families' legacies (Attiah). In *Shang-Chi*, we saw a brief portrayal of Shang-Chi's sister, Xialing, and her resentment of secondary treatment, but the primary narrative of a father and son quickly superseded this (Cheung).

In *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay*, James Baldwin criticizes the misrepresentation of Billie Holiday's traumatic experiences with rape, abuse, and violence in the film, *Lady Sings the Blues*: "The film cannot accept—because it cannot use—this simplicity. That victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or she, has become a threat. The victim's testimony must, therefore, be altered."

What happens when victims speak for themselves—*and* other people bear witness? As Anti-Asian hate crimes rise, so, too, does the desire for Asian diasporic experiences to be legible. Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* became a best seller in 2020. The book offered crucial vocabulary and provided a frame for understanding Asian people in the Americas.



Screenshot of Eric Molinsky's *Imaginary Worlds* Podcast, Astria Suparak's *Asian Futures Without Asians,* 2022.

Astria Suparak's *Asian Futures, Without Asians* also reveals the readiness of people to grow their cultural literacy. The appropriation of Asian cultures has remained invisible for the last two centuries. Analyzing over 200 films from the last few decades, Suparak gives a critical lens on the sci-fi genre, and how white filmmakers create futures full of Asian culture but without Asian people. *Asian Futures, Without Asians* broke Walker Art Center's record for most watched video in 2022. This signals people's appetite for cultural literacy and increased scrutiny of the media we consume. The popularity of Suparak's work shortly after *Minor Feelings* became a best seller also marks a milestone for Asian American artists.

It is also striking that two of the most critical Asian American works since 2020 are about making Asian invisibility visible. It's as if America as a nation is saying, "Okay, we see that we do not see you. What should we see?"

Of course, this rise in Asian-created media must also be met with people who are ready to embrace it, which is counterintuitive to academic skepticism. In her writings on Nishnaabeg intelligence, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson challenges the colonial structure of academia that calls for proof and self-advocacy to gain acceptance. "My experience of education, from kindergarten to graduate school, was one of coping with someone else's agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my wellbeing as a kwezens, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence…My experience of education was one of continually being measured against a set of principles that required surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda in order to fulfill those principles" (Simpson 6).

For those hopeful about a potential "wave" of Asian American content—yes, be hopeful, and also vigilant. The first Hollywood film about the Asian American experience was *Flower Drum Song* in 1961. The second was *Joy Luck Club* in 1993, 32 years later. The third was *Crazy Rich Asians* in 2018, another 25 years later. Asian American centric media has been a once in a generation phenomenon until recently. It has taken a lot to get to this point, and there are still so many more stories that need to be told.

Cultural Agency of Asian Americans, and the Legacy of Justice

At the start of his art residency, writer and poet Ocean Vuong spoke the following words at an event hosted by the Asian/Pacific/American Institute of New York University, "If you are going to be an Asian American artist, be prepared to be unfathomable to the rest of the world and the rest of the country. When it comes to Asian American innovation and agency, we are often legible when we are at service to larger structures and art, often Eurocentric ones…Asian Americans are often asked to be the accommodators of larger forces in this country. We hold the doors, we nurse, we put our heads down, we wash the feet, we do the nails, we press the clothes, we iron it. We accommodate. And I think because of this, when it comes to Asian American talent, it is only legible when it is seen in service of Bach as prodigies or Beethovens. You can play the piano as well as an instrument, a talented finely tuned instrument of Western art, but when it comes to your own thinking, your own creation, you will not be legible. You'll be inconceivable… as an Asian American, when you

dare to have your own agency, your own dreams, when you no longer become the instrument, the empty vessel of larger pre-made art, you will be called pretentious…They will not be ready for your mind when it creates its own thing."

I think of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in relation to this question of agency for Asian American artists. Maya Lin was a 21-year-old college student when she beat 1,400 competitors in a blind-juried competition. The work she designed resembles a raised scar in the earth, inscribed with the names of dead soldiers who never returned from the Vietnam War. It is not a monument to glorify war, but a memorial to acknowledge the dead.

The design was controversial, with opponents going as far as to criticize why someone of Chinese descent was designing a memorial for American soldiers. As a Chinese American artist, Maya Lin was inconceivable to her critics. Yet she has arguably created one of the most enduring works of public art to this day.

Photo of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial from my visit to Washington, D.C. in December 2016.

But while the work succeeds in emphasizing the toll of war on human life, it has a shortcoming. Because the work centers entirely on American soldiers, it passively omits that this war happened in Vietnam, on the continent of Asia. Via this omission, the work exists in tension with the role of American wars on Asian diasporas. It further highlights the conflicts inherent within Asian American identities. American and European driven wars and imperialism tore Asian countries apart and pitted them against one another. But when the survivors and descendants of these traumas migrated to places like the US, they found themselves suddenly reassembled like particleboard into the shared, homogenous identity of "Asian America." In so many ways, western colonialism has rigged the Asian

American, Asian diasporic identity to be one that others won't trust. Whose war, whose country, and whose people, do descendants of diaspora fight for anyway?

Debates around the loyalties of Asian Americans overshadow the more pertinent question—to whom do the colonial forces of the US, Canada, and European nations owe reparations and reconciliation? In countries like the US and Canada, people of Asian descent get framed as perpetual foreigners, no matter how many generations their families have been here. The immigrant narrative is also oversimplified as people searching for a better life, without the scrutiny of why "better lives" have such a high concentration in the global north and west. The "better life" / "perpetual foreigner" framework serves as a justification for white institutions to assert, "We don't owe you anything. Be grateful we even allow you to be here."

In the semantics of identity, things begin to fall apart. There is a dizzying number of monikers that attempt to encapsulate the Asian diaspora—Asian American, APA / AAPI / APIA (Asian & Pacific Islander American), APIDA (Asian Pacific Islander & Desi American), SWANA (Southwest Asian & North African), AANHPI (Asian Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander American), and more. These acronyms exist in the struggle between efforts of inclusivity and the drawbacks of over-generalizing. The abbreviations are also unusual. While every group debates the problematics of these terms (e.g. Latinx/Latine, Aboriginal/Indigenous), every other group outside of Asian diaspora identifies using full words, not acronyms. But embedded in the impossibility to create a moniker that accommodates "all Asians," there is a glimmer of resistance. What does it mean to ethnically group Native Hawaiians with Pacific Islanders? Are Palestinians Southwest Asian? What do these ethnic groupings do to binary definitions of Indigenous versus International and local versus global in white dominant institutions?

Emily Carr University recruits students and faculty from the Indigenous diaspora, from as far as South America and Hawaii as part of their strategy to indigenize the university. Yet as of this writing, there are no Coast Salish faculty at Emily Carr representing the people who have lived on this land since time immemorial. If a Native Hawaiian fits Emily Carr's indigenization agenda, then why not someone from Guam whose land, like Hawaii, was also strategically colonized for US military purposes? The Canadian government used taxpayer dollars to build Ayalon Canada Park on top of destroyed Palestinian homes (Gadzo). Palestinians are Indigenous to Palestine. Don't Canadian institutions have a responsibility to them as they do to First Nations people? What exactly do decolonization and indigenization mean in an institutional context, and who stands to benefit from these definitions?

It is worth remembering—Europeans colonized the present day Americas while searching for a shorter route to Asia. The European fetish for Asia was so great that the first European settlers mistook the Native peoples of Turtle Island for Indians—and the misnomer persists to this day. In the 1700s, the British government imported Chinese and Indian goods to the colonies to get them hooked on "Asia-mania" and make them easier to control. The plan worked and backfired. Teatime became so much a staple of colony life that Bostonians flew into a rage when Asian goods had to pass through British regulation

and taxation. Revolutionaries, disguised as Native Americans, threw black Darjeeling tea from India that they drank from fine China, into the Boston Harbor. From Lewis and Clark to the Panama Canal, the dream of a passage to Asia has endured in the western imagination. This is the reality hidden in plain sight—that colonial nations like the US and Canada came into existence because of Europeans' desire to possess and subjugate Asia.

Asianness, in all its unaccommodating unwieldiness, shatters the narrow version of decolonization that serves white dominant institutions. It is a satisfying, diasporic blow to the currency and clout that institutions gain for false equity work. It creates space for a more genuine definition of decolonization. What if the institution became a space to redistribute resources among the many rather than the few? What if indigenization were locally specific rather than [North] American centric? What if policies around migration were an act of repair, rather than continued extraction from the homelands that people leave behind? What if an international education was nurtured as an opportunity for healthy cultural exchange rather than an assimilation plan?

On the subject of the Asian American artist's agency Vuong continues, "That doesn't mean that you shouldn't [be an artist]. You should do it. But be prepared, expect it, and even more so, why not? Why not be as ambitious as you want to be? Why not be pretentious? What is pretentious but to have the pretense to the assumption that you belong here? Be prepared to be inconceivable, and then be prepared to innovate beyond that. Because we need you, and we are ready for you."

I take a cue from Vuong's remarks to reflect on what it means to be an Asian American diasporic artist practicing in the 21st century. We can let ourselves forget and be vessels for the pre-made and pre-determined, in service of colonial structures. Or we can lean into our own agency and criticality, to make work from a perspective that our local and global communities need. We can create in a way that pushes the boundaries of what art can be and what artists can do.

Public Art + Civic Engagement

I was hesitant to return to academia, and not for any worry about the art making or research. I have long been critical of predatory tuition structures, exclusionary admissions processes and curricula, and the particular failure of art schools to prepare their students to have viable careers. I am further put off by the hiring practices at universities—how many artists are sold on the notion that they must have a Master of Fine Arts degree for which many incur debt, so that they can work a precarious, temporary teaching position at a university (possibly getting cannibalized by their alma mater) to pay off that debt? Finally, for as much as I value the ecosystem of knowledge and resources within universities, I also resent how little universities seem to do to close the chasms between their institutional resources and the communities surrounding them.

I have felt this tension between art institutions and communities especially in my role as a public artist. On the one hand, I am the ideal arts alumnus, someone who has succeeded as

a professional, practicing artist after undergrad in a field with a high attrition rate. On the other hand, I have crossed that chasm between university and community, by doing work that is embedded in people's daily lives. The art world tends to look down on works like murals, community art, public art, and art forms that are more accessible to the general public, which conflicts with the inclusive values that the arts like to tout. I enjoy working across these different art spaces, but I often find that the audiences I'm most interested in engaging with aren't exclusively those who visit galleries or academic art spaces. I decided to lean into this tension by bringing my documentation of community work into an educational space and centering this process as the work of art making.

First, it's important to address that civically engaged work includes risks and consequences. In 2021, I lost a $160,000 USD public art commission with a hotel, which would have been my first six-figure art project, because of my alignment with affordable housing and anti-gentrification activism. The scale of this project could have transformed my business. Was the loss worth it? I can only say that I trust my code of ethics. Whatever immediate repercussions I may face, the community has consistently shown up even more strongly with me. That feels like the real success. For the long-term, I choose the trust of those I fight alongside.

In the summer of 2022, I was named a finalist for a public art commission for the Metro Transit System in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. I spent that summer conducting community interviews with 27 bus riders—70% BIPOC—and creating a proposal for this art site.

This summer became a proving ground for a moment years in the making. I'm the only person of color who was a finalist for this high profile public art project, for public transit at a time when there is contentious debate around who the City of Madison is building new transit lines for. I chose to focus my project on primarily BIPOC bus riders, who have been ignored or left out of most surveys of ridership. [In Madison's most recent 2019 survey of public transit, 84% of those surveyed were white, despite the high diversity of bus riders.]

From these interviews, I created an art proposal entitled *The Time is Ours*, which portrays the city from the perspective of the bus rider. Each section of the artwork starts with a portrait of a bus rider looking out the window, observing the passage of time via subtle but distinct signifiers of life in this Midwestern city, including: melting ice and the first spring crocuses, buzzing cicadas and sunflowers, migrating geese and fluffy milkweed pods, and snow and empty space.

The concept is a nod to the sentiment that many bus riders shared with me, that even those with the longest commutes and frustrations with Metro feel that their time spent in transit belongs to them. They can read, listen to music, gaze out the window, and more. The time is theirs to do as they choose.

Jenie Gao's panoramic view and mockup of *The Time is Ours* on full building, 2022.

Jenie Gao's design mockup of 7,400 square foot public artwork, *The Time is Ours,* 2022.

The physical layers of the artwork are a nod to my printmaking background and the founding principles of my practice. *The Time is Ours* is composed of two main layers—the painted mural wall and CNC cut shapes made of brushed silver aluminum that are floated away from the wall to create depth. Large, gestural waves and graphic line work in the painted portions resemble the mark making in my hand carved woodblocks. These gestures also allude to the shape of native prairie plants and waves of the surrounding lakes—Madison's original Ho-Chunk name, Teejop, means four lakes, referencing the bodies of water that encircle this city.

Through my proposal, I am demonstrating what public art can be when centered on community benefit. Each layer of my Metro proposal addresses both the symbolic and systemic aspects of this project such as:

1) **The interview process:** My interviews with bus riders prioritize and center the perspectives of the people who rely on public transit, especially BIPOC who were excluded from the official City of Madison survey of bus ridership. Because of this, I was able to collect insights on people's needs that the City did not previously have to inform their construction (or removal) of future transit lines. I also interviewed City employees, all of whom receive a free bus pass but not all of whom use it, on the barriers to transit usage. From staff interviews, I learned that salaried city administrators were far more likely to use their free bus passes than city bus drivers and mechanics who often lived farther away and held hourly positions that required them to clock into work at exact times.
2) **Hiring practices:** In my art proposal, I share my plan to partner with a local non-profit to hire studio assistants who rely on the buses to help produce and install the

final work. I did this specifically in response to multiple interviewees, who shared with me that not having a car made it harder for them to get good jobs, because employers would often reject applicants based on their access to a personal vehicle to get to work. I also share my plan to keep much of the budget local by hiring local vendors and art assistants.

3) **Pedestrians and use of public space:** The artwork will be situated on East Washington Avenue, the main thoroughfare by which 55,000 people a day drive to the Capitol building. East Wash is a stroad, and recent development has turned the area into a hot concrete desert with little tree cover and narrow sidewalks that are far too close to traffic. The Metro building is one of the few sections of this road where the building is set back from the street. Grass and full shade make it significantly cooler than surrounding blocks, a pleasant oasis amidst the noise. I designed my artwork to avoid mature tree coverage and preserve this green space, so the City cannot use the artwork as a reason to clear tree cover as a part of developing this city corridor.

Jenie Gao's design mockup of 7,400 square foot public artwork, *The Time is Ours,* 2022.

For this Metro project, the other finalists were all white and significantly better resourced than me. There were many barriers for someone like me to compete for a project at this level. But it is because of the work I have done at the grassroots level that the community has been willing to share their stories with me and to take time to petition the City of Madison to select me as the artist for this commission.

Following the other finalists' and my presentations on September 7, 2022, the City of Madison collected feedback via an online form. There was a massive outpour of responses. Between emails and the city's feedback form, there are 77 pages of community comments

that are publicly available on the city's website that almost unanimously support my proposal. Additionally, without my prompting, fellow artist and activist Nipinet Landsem, created an online guide that provided summaries of the finalists' work, boilerplate text, and step-by-step instructions to navigate the city process for submitting feedback. Nipinet's labor made engaging in the civic process significantly easier for a lot of people.

It was humbling and affirming to witness the public response to this project, and also a demonstration of collective brilliance. These documents have become a living archive of the public's attentiveness to the ethics of artists and the city committees that make decisions for urban planning. People of all backgrounds care about city planning and the cultural ethos embodied by public art. Finally, the kind of trust that people shared with me can only be built over time. It is born of repeatedly taking difficult, ethical stances that are unpopular with institutions and aligned with the people.

Too often, artists are relegated to focusing on the symbolic and cut out from leadership and decision-making. But this isolation of creativity makes us vulnerable to cooptation and art washing. All layers of this work, from community outreach to interviews to design, are fundamental parts of the art. As artists, our societal function is more than symbolic. We are cultural authors and leaders capable of envisioning different systems. The time is ours to claim that right and power, to create generative systems that work better for everyone.

Returning to academia, by bringing my public art practice into the academic exhibition spaces of Emily Carr University, I turned the white box gallery into a learning space. It made visible the often hidden labor of the arts. It presented possible answers to the questions and misgivings that current students may have about what they do after art school. It helped to close the gap I sometimes feel between the work I create for gallery and museum shows and the work I do out in the community, how each gets valued, and whom the work is perceived to be for.

Exhibiting this project was also a chance to connect my public facing practice with my personal motivations to do this work. Why am I concerned about the ethics of artistic practice, or how artists' work gets used? Why am I fixated on devising methodologies to challenge, disrupt, and change the role that the arts can play in our communities? Why should I be the author of these thoughts and this research?

I see public art as an opportunity for community stewardship. Whose needs aren't being met? Who stands to benefit from this work? How will this work impact the surrounding ecosystem? Who and what will we center in each negotiation?

Ultimately, I hope that this time I've spent deepening my personal practice and connecting the different parts of my cultural memory will make me a better public artist. I have nourished myself and therefore I have the capacity to nourish others as well.

Jenie Gao's installation for MFA State of Practice Exhibition, *The Time is Ours: What Public Art Can Be*, September 2022. Photos by Michael Love.

FINAL EXHIBITION: CYCLE | BREAKING AND MAKING

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

My latest Negotiation Table is entitled *Cycle | Breaking and Making*. It is the fifth table I have created and the first to be fashioned out of a pre-existing table. The table is Canadian-made with US-made parts and a knock-off of a popular European furniture style called the Chippendale, which itself is an appropriation of Ming and Tang Dynasty furniture styles. The popularity of this furniture arose around the time that European nations began funding expeditions in search of a shorter route to Asia.

The installation elucidates Europeans' centuries-long obsession with Asia that drove westward expansion and colonization. By cutting my own indelible mark into the table, I bring together personal and political signifiers in the process of cultivating a long-term, cultural memory of diaspora that can withstand assimilation.

The woodblocks embedded in the table depict two birds, Fènghuáng 鳳凰, also sometimes known as the Chinese Phoenix, and the Homing Pigeon.

Historically in Chinese mythology, Fèng and Huáng were depicted separately, for the male and female birds. But the masculine and feminine merged over time, and eventually the Fènghuáng came to represent the empress and the feminine as Chinese clans shifted from nomadic and egalitarian towards a patriarchal society. But both masculine and feminine powers remain embedded within the identity of Fènghuáng. According to myth, the disappearance of Fènghuáng is a sign of political corruption, whereas the sighting of Fènghuáng foretells harmony following the rise of new leadership.

Pigeon and Fènghuáng, woodblock prints on canvas, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

The Homing Pigeon is a bird that I grew up raising with my dad. My dad was in the seventh grade when all of China's schools shut down during the Cultural Revolution. His former educators endured public beatings, imprisonment, or worse. While the schools were closed, my dad turned to raising pigeons. Decades later, after immigrating to the US, my dad would find white men who kept homing pigeons for competitive racing, and discarded the older birds. My dad and I kept two pigeon coops—one for the retired birds, and one for their offspring. It is almost impossible to re-home a pigeon that has identified its home site; even a pigeon with a new mate and life will fly hundreds of miles towards a memory of home. There, they will die, rather than seek shelter elsewhere. So we kept the retired birds caged, and only their offspring flew free in a land their parents would never recognize. People

asked my dad, would he ever competitively race the birds? He said no. He only wanted to watch them fly.

For a long time, I have felt a resonance with the pigeon, and seen them as an emblem of diaspora and class strife. Pigeons live on almost every continent, and yet are not considered invasive because they do not harm the ecosystems they have been introduced to. Historically, royalty and the upper class kept doves as pets. But the doves went feral, and those that learned to live without their patrons earned the stigmatized name of pigeon. Beyond semantics, what is the difference between the white dove that symbolizes peace and the colored pigeon that flies into fire delivering messages of safety to those trapped by war?

The Homing Pigeon and Fènghuáng are positioned so that their combined image moves cyclically, with no top or bottom, illustrating how even in tension, social systems only work when individuals move collectively.

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

The prints of Homing Pigeon and Fènghuáng are on raw muslin canvas and stretched like traditional paintings. This practice of stretching prints hearkens back to my early days as a burgeoning artist, when I fell in love with making large works but lacked the finances,

physical space, and familial support to sustain an ambitious art career. I vowed to myself, back then, not to let these limitations define my work. I switched from printing on luxurious yet delicate papers to more resilient fabric canvases. The resulting works were light, airy, and more easily moveable, while also gaining the stature of painting.

The finished woodblocks rest in the surface of a reclaimed table. The blocks sit flush inside the table and resemble inlaid jade.

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

The original table was made some time between 1953 and the early 1960s, about a decade before quotas limiting Chinese immigration to the US and Canada were lifted. It is a Canadian made table, with a table slide that was produced in Watertown, Wisconsin, which is just a 45-minute drive from Madison, where I used to live.

Photo of the table slide that extends the table for the expansion leaves, which reads "The Watertown Slide."

The design of the table is a knock-off of Chippendale furniture from Europe, which itself was appropriated heavily from Ming and Tang-dynasty furniture in China. The popularity of Orientalism and Chinoiserie in Europe drove nations like Britain and Spain to fund expeditions in search of a shorter route to Asia.


The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023.
Photo by Michael Love.

Original table for *Cycle | Breaking and Making*, before reclamation.

Example of a Huanghuali Kang Table from the Ming Dynasty, 1600s. Recorded provenance of this table only lists owners in London and San Francisco with no previous record of how it was acquired, so this image is being used without the permission of the British Antique Dealers' Association.

Below are political illustrations from the 1800s during China's Century of Humiliation, of the nations that almost carved China up into new territories. In other words, Europeans' obsession with Asia is inextricable from their westward expansion, *and* their political interventions set in motion the kind of country that China would become today.

I have cut into this knock-off of a stolen table design. I have made an indelible mark to keep the history of diaspora in the public's living memory. Accountability takes a long time to achieve. The function of oppression is to wear people down and make them forget so they cannot fight their oppressors. By creating a record, remembering becomes a key function in long-term justice.

Cycle | Breaking and Making debuted in Gallery #1 of the Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons, the first visible exhibition space for people coming through the southern entrance of the Emily Carr building. I painted the walls a deep red, to anchor the boundaries of this exhibit to the east and south, the geographic directions that my parents are from.

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

Shanxi, my father's province, means Western Mountain. It is not lost on me that I have come to do this work surrounded by the Western Mountains of Turtle Island, near the site of one of the largest jade deposits on the earth outside of Southeast Asia and Taiwan. My table anchors the space, northwest of the gallery's boundaries.

While this is not my land, I hope this gesture is significant as an act of care, to connect a diaspora across a local and global context. Distance has not made me forget.

In the installation process, I found myself having a final negotiation with the artwork itself. Early on, I knew that I did not want any chairs around the table. Conceptually, it felt emphatic to have no actual invitation for anyone to take a seat at the table, while also allowing people to move cyclically around the space and imagery. Pragmatically, having no seating also opened the space up for bodies of all mobilities to flow through the space.

Still, from an accessibility perspective, I wanted people to have the option of sitting with the work longer. I tried including chairs at the perimeter of the exhibit that aesthetically matched with the table, but the installation rejected them. *Cycle | Breaking and Making* needed room to breathe.

I opted to place a bench across the hallway. Viewers could sit and linger while viewing the art. Meanwhile, the art was freed of handling this responsibility within the installation itself, because the proper supports existed within the infrastructure of the gallery. In this way, the work could stay focused on its main purpose, without either becoming complicit with the gallery's access issues nor having to solve problems that infrastructure would be better suited for. Over the course of the exhibit, I saw many people sit and linger on the bench. I had some wonderful gallery visits, many of which concluded with my guests and me sitting on that bench together, taking in the whole view of the work while also allowing our bodies to rest.

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition opening reception March 30, 2023. Photo by Rebecca Wang.

One of the joys of creating an extensive body of work is how each new piece expands on and necessitates different strategies. My exhibition, *米 (mǐ) uncooked rice: It Takes Three Generations,* was based on data of racial and gender disparities in the arts. It thus

demanded didactics that helped it avoid political ambiguity, especially in an arts environment that might be tempted to obsess more with the work's aesthetics than its message. Meanwhile, the strength of my second table exhibition, *An Ethic is a Root*, was its poetry. It benefited from the accompaniment of an artist's book and the inclusion of an altar that were generous in their vulnerability.

I went through a number of iterations and edits with *Cycle | Breaking and Making*. I initially planned to stencil a pattern over the red wall paint. But the red walls reverberated with unencumbered power and rejected further adornment. As a storyteller, I also considered including a complementary artist's book. But the table and prints told a complete story without additional didactics present, and so I tucked my manuscript away for a future project. Ultimately, I had to accept what this installation was telling me compared to my previous Negotiation Tables—that this was enough. This *is* enough, and there is elegance and power that comes from letting something be exactly what it is—and nothing more.

The Negotiation Table: Cycle | Breaking and Making, Jenie Gao's MFA Thesis Exhibition 2023. Photo by Khim Hipol.

EPILOGUE

A case study of the student-led tuition protest at Emily Carr University

From Institutional Critique to Institutional Accountability

On November 4, 2022, I received a text from a fellow board member at Emily Carr Students' Union (ECSU) that the university's tuition increase vote had been moved up four months earlier in the school year than it had ever before taken place. This would become the highest tuition increase in the university's history.

ECSU board members had just met with university executives, urging them to host a longer student consultation process and not disregard students in university decisions. Despite this, the administration chose to accelerate the tuition vote four months early. The administration chose to schedule all tuition meetings during student finals. The administration chose to withhold the exact increase numbers until a few days before the Board of Governors' vote. To a reasonable observer, it appeared that the administration had deliberately obfuscated what was happening to undermine student awareness.

The proposed increases were as follows:

- Domestic Undergraduate Students: 2%
- Domestic Graduate Students: No Increase
- International Undergraduate Students (Returning): 10%
- International Undergraduate Students (Incoming) 30%
- International Graduate Students (Incoming): 5%

There was the immediate injustice facing international students. In 2022, international students already paid four times as much as domestic students. After the increase, international students would pay six times as much as their domestic peers. International students are only a quarter of Emily Carr's student population, but will pay 73% of the tuition revenue in the 2023/24 academic year. This means that incoming international students will pay an additional $21,965.40 CAD, or a total of $95,183.40 in tuition, for a four-year degree, not including additional fees. Meanwhile, student awards are only 1% of the university's budget, with international students qualifying for the least aid. Tuition, in a sense, is a head tax under a different name.

The increase has other disconcerting implications for the university's future. Emily Carr's drastic tuition increases are a reaction to the government reducing support across all universities for decades: "public funding to BC colleges and universities has dropped to less than 44% of total operating revenue, down from more than 80% in the 1980s and more than 90% in the 1970s" (Fund it, Fix it.). In British Columbia, there is a push to privatize universities so they depend increasingly upon rising tuition costs to stay afloat. If this increased passed, it would further solidify Emily Carr's reliance on tuition revenue, which in the long run, will harm domestic students, too. While there are protections capping domestic increases at 2%, who's to say that the current legislation will be permanent?

Then there's Emily Carr's deficit. While this deficit is well known internally, there is little information about it that is easily, publicly available. The administration's plan includes increasing the international student body by 33%. But in order for this to work, the students recruited must have no idea that Emily Carr is experiencing a financial crisis and that they will be subjected to unrestricted increases. In *Report on the Realities for International Students*, Balraj Kahlon writes, "Canadian post-secondary schools have become so reliant on international student revenue that they have become complacent–if not complicit–with deceitful student recruitment practices" (14).

The tuition increase is the antithesis of the university's rhetoric about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. It is global extraction via Canada's education system. It is not possible to decolonize or indigenize Emily Carr University when global extraction and Indigenous displacement are two sides of the same coin. Many international students would not come to Canada if European colonization had not devastated their homelands and concentrated stolen wealth and opportunities in the global north.

Additionally, Emily Carr *has* Indigenous students and faculty who are international—such as people from the US, Mexico, and countries in Central and South America. Upper administration has created a tuition plan that doubly exploits Indigenous International students that the university *recruits* as a part of their plan to "indigenize."

It is further noteworthy that many international students are from nations that won their independence from the UK and other European colonizers, or whose countries are still contending with foreign political intervention in their governments. To have students whose ancestors had to fight for independence pay for the deficit of a Canadian institution that is still a part of the British monarchy is the ultimate hypocrisy.

Civil Unrest and Community Solidarity

The administration's lack of transparency backfired. In a few short weeks, student organizers created a historic campaign. Over 600 students participated in the first week of tuition awareness events and protests. At least 300 students attended the walkout on December 1, 2022, a few hours before the Board of Governors' final vote.

Students rose to the occasion in countless ways: writing letters to their representatives in the Legislative Assembly; tabling to build tuition awareness; building news media relations; photographing and recording protests for their school projects; and more. Students brought attention to the BC government's $5.7 billion surplus in the fiscal quarter from April to September 2022, and to the student-led campaign, Fund It Fix It, demanding that the provincial government increase post-secondary funding by $200 million (The Canadian Press). The Faculty Association released a letter in solidarity with students, emphasizing that no students should be penalized for participating in the protests. As upper administration doubled down on aggressive measures (e.g. increasing campus security and surveillance) to pass this unprecedented increase, students demonstrated an inspirational level of community building.

Emily Carr University students hold signs in peaceful protest at the December 1, 2022 Board of Governors meeting, as the Board votes to approve the tuition increase.

On December 1, 2022, the Board of Governors (BoG) narrowly passed the tuition increase. The initial optics made the vote look more drastic—7 yes's to 4 no's. But on a Board of 13 people, one person abstained and the Chancellor was absent. So six people did not vote in favor of the increase and the President *who reports to the BoG* is allowed a vote; without her, only six members voted yes.

Since the vote, the person who abstained has been removed from the BoG. The President also announced her resignation on January 20, 2023, mere months before the completion of the presidential review that would determine her re-appointment.

The momentum created by student organizing continues. The university majority favors fairness for students. A record number of 25 students vied for 11 Students' Union board positions for the 2023/24 academic year, compared to 16 candidates the year prior.

On Belonging: A Home Worth Fighting For

How do I adequately articulate the inner conflict that is the call of advocacy work? I wish this work didn't have to be done; yet I feel called to do it. I wish this injustice didn't exist, didn't give me this purpose. I wish away the ill conditions, the very conditions, that so much of my identity and community are wrapped up in.

I came to Emily Carr for my education, not to fight for equity in education. After years of serving on nonprofit boards and committees and in all sorts of community organizing

capacities, I was tired, and ready for a self-assigned sabbatical. I relished, perhaps naively, in the idea that I knew how to step away from this labor, and that even if I did not, in a new city my anonymity would shield me. I had no intention of getting involved in university politics. While I could not look away from the unprecedented tuition hike, I struggled with the seemingly inescapable responsibility that people ask of me in every place I have lived.

I also felt gaslit. As an international student from the US, and particularly as an Asian American, I did not come here to be treated as a second-class citizen and perpetual foreigner. I came to Canada for my Master's largely because of the lower tuition fees. Among the Canadian schools I looked at, I chose Emily Carr because of the plans they published online for hiring tenure-track Indigenous faculty and also taking what appeared to be deliberate measures to decolonize the school. Only after my arrival was I suddenly aware of the heist—that the same recruitment strategy designed to lure me here would be used on future international students specifically to cushion the university's finances.

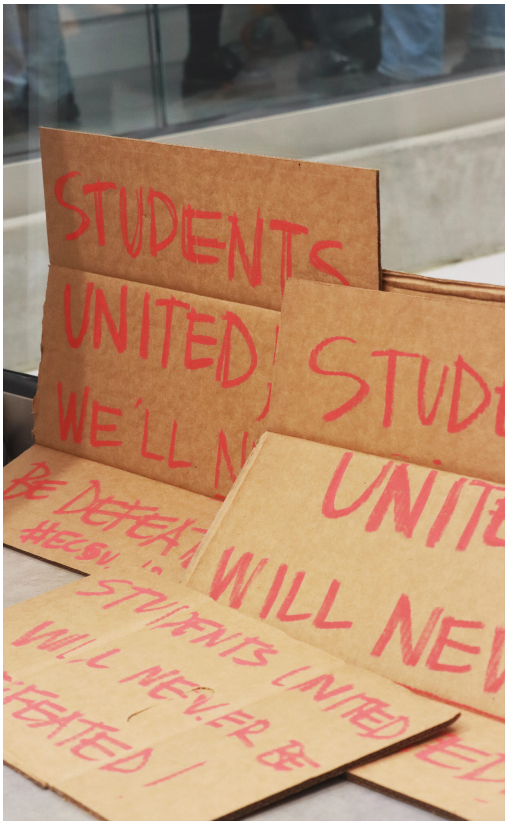
By the conclusion of my first year at Emily Carr, I had born witness to the university's repeated mishandlings of race and gender in the classroom; the inability to resolve conflicts or hold perpetrators of harm accountable; and the traumatic ripple effect of the spring 2022 tuition increase on students, which spurred bullying and harassment among students that conveniently fell along racial and socioeconomic lines. I ran for the University Senate and became Chair of Students' Union largely because of the spring 2022 tuition increases. I challenged the Provost for the Vice Chair seat on the Senate, and while I didn't win it, I still demonstrated that it was possible for students and faculty to get one more non-administrative voice at all tables of university governance.

But even as I stepped into these leadership and civic service roles, I felt resentful to be spending the last few weeks of the fall 2022 term before my final MFA critiques organizing a student protest. On the one hand, not stepping up would contradict the motivations that my creative practice is built upon. On the other hand, this isn't what I came here for, was it?

The anti-tuition campaign became a milestone for me, of when I became wholeheartedly willing to fight for this community. My love for the school's community outweighed any resentment of the roles that institutional administrators forced us to take up. As fellow students and I organized, I felt a shift in my relationship with community labor and leadership. For the first time in a while, I felt buoyed by this work, because I had found my definition of home. Home is a place that I am willing to fight for, not bound by geography but by the efforts of those working to make this place better for everyone.

Finally, I did get what I came here for, as both a studio and political artist. I'm deeply fulfilled by my life and work. While people like me may often be recruited for diversity optics, the reality remains that we are here. Try as institutional representatives might, they can't make all of us forget who we are, and it would be foolish of them to do so. The tension that fuels civil unrest is also an indicator of cultural relevance. So if an institution is to remain relevant, then its representatives need to listen to messengers of change.

Emily Carr University sit-in outside President's Office, November 24, 2022. Photos by Parumveer Walia.



Emily Carr University student walkout, December 1, 2022. Photos by Parumveer Walia.

On Remembering Ourselves

As a second generation Taiwanese and Chinese American descended from two parallel yet connected diasporas, I am the generation most vulnerable to forgetting—forgetting the languages of my parents, the traditions, the mannerisms. I have never even known the land of my ancestors. I am chilled by the implications of cultural memory loss—those who don't know their roots don't know themselves and are vulnerable to getting misused.

As I reckon with what it means to be the socially mobile daughter of an aging, widowed mother, I feel the responsibility placed on individuals to mitigate oppression. It took three generations, the migration of my maternal grandparents and parents, to position me to become the cycle breaker in our family. Yet even now, our fight is not over. My mother faces encroaching development and bullying from white neighbors who want to buy and bulldoze her home. She regularly receives the kinds of phone calls and mailers that state, *"We buy ugly houses! Sell your house for cash!!!"* that prey on low-income people in neighborhoods that are ripe for redevelopment. The housing crises of metropolises are now impacting small towns, threatening to displace people who have lived in these areas for decades. I feel the pressure to be someone my mother can financially rely on in her old age, while fighting with an arts industry that is complicit with these problems. If I have children, I will become the person providing for three generations.

Yet I am not powerless. On the contrary, my art is a lifeline, culturally and financially. I am a woman of color who makes a full-time income in the arts. This makes me an outlier statistic. I reflect on the potential of the outlier. Too often, outliers are used to claim that the system is fine, that anyone can succeed through hard work. But the true value of outliers is that they prove it's possible to challenge the status quo. It is easy for the current state to ignore or co-opt one anomaly. But when enough anomalies occur, the dominant system cannot ignore us, and at a certain point, anomalies can take over. In printmaking terms, this is the power of repetition. Each act of record making, each act of distribution, becomes an act of care. This story matters. This perspective matters. This labor matters.

I have centered my research on the act of negotiation, and the critical transformation in my work is about how we, as artists and arts professionals, move away from an industry based in artificial rarity to one of abundance. I further situate this work in a vision of decolonization that is not North American centric, but globally connected. I look forward to doing this work with colleagues who share in a vision of abundance that isn't some far away ideal, but a joy we can relish in the present, together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Great achievements come with even greater support. I thank my graduate supervisor, Cameron Cartiere, who in our very first meeting over a video call in summer of 2020 demonstrated a level of interest, care, and readiness to support my research that so impressed me, I applied for the Master of Fine Arts program at Emily Carr University. We committed to working together over a year before I arrived. It is easy to be skeptical in this world. I feel fortunate for the moments when we are called to take a leap of faith that can change one's life. Thank you, Cameron, for your mentorship, brilliance, and constancy.

Thank you to Sharon Bayly, the shop tech that I relied on the most these last two years. Sharon provided indispensable support troubleshooting the construction of my Negotiation Tables, dialoguing on solutions to achieve the level of craft I desired, and offering a second set of hands throughout the assembly of my work.

Thank you to the shop techs and support staff in general, who make the daily operations of this school and our use of the facilities possible. Thank you to Steven Hall in the Digital Fabrication Lab for being a reliable steward of the CNC machine, and supporting my strange, unconventional uses of this technology, like cutting two giant holes in the surface of a perfectly fine dining table. Thank you to Yang Hong and Kevin Romaniuk, who ensured that the installations of the MFA State of Practice and Thesis exhibitions ran smoothly. Thank you to Faria Firoz, for your assistance painting the big red walls. Thank you to Khim Hipol for the stunning documentation of my thesis exhibition, including the cover photo of this paper. Thank you to the student organizers and staff with whom I have served at Students' Union, for continually reminding me what we are fighting for in education.

Thank you to my defense committee, Diyan Achjadi and Germaine Koh, for your close reading of my work and generative questions during the defense. Thank you to the Graduate Seminar faculty, with specific thanks to Alla Gadassik and Lauren Marsden, for your feedback at pivotal stages of the thesis draft and fine tuning of my final presentation. This thesis is better for all the sharp minds that have reviewed and edited the work.

Thank you to the people who filled the university boardroom during my thesis defense, representing four different MFA cohorts, faculty, and members of the community outside of Emily Carr. You are the ones that I hope this research benefits, and I am honored to have your care and attention for what I have created.

Academic work also relies on the support of those outside of university spaces. In my chapter on Public Art + Civic Engagement, I wrote about the massive turnout of public commenters in support of my finalist proposal for the Madison Metro Transit project. Many of these commenters relied on a guide created by my friend and colleague, Nipinet Landsem, which provided summaries of the four finalists' work, boilerplate text, and step-by-step instructions to navigate the city process for submitting feedback. Nipinet's labor made engaging in the civic process significantly easier for a lot of people. I didn't ask this of you, and I am grateful and humbled that you supported my project in this way.

Thank you to my husband, Christopher, one of the most reliable people on this whole planet. Christopher and I were long distance my first year in this MFA, and while finishing his own graduate degree, he took care of the final logistics to move us out of Madison and across the continent. Since arriving in Vancouver, he has done everything from magically making food and hydration appear on my desk corner while I'm deep "in the zone" with writing and research, to being the official on-call preparator of Jenie Gao Studio responsible for moving unwieldy art objects and patching walls.

Thank you to Rina Yoon, who while not directly involved in my thesis, has been my "art mom" since 2010 and perhaps witnessed a longer arc of my career than anyone else.

As a second generation Taiwanese and Chinese American and descendant of diaspora, I also wish to acknowledge the geographies—physical and cultural—that have informed me. My dad was from China, with roots in Shanxi and Southern Mongolia. My mother was born in Taiwan and is a descendant of the people who migrated from Fujian over 500 years ago. I grew up in semi-rural Kansas on the lands of the Kansa, Osage, Kickapoo, and Shawnee, until I was 18 years old. I did my undergraduate studies at Washington University in St. Louis, on the lands of the Osage, Missouria, and Illini Confederacy. I then lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the lands of the Potawatomi, Menominee, and Ho-Chunk. From 2014 onward, I lived in Teejop, land of the Ho-Chunk, also known as Madison, Wisconsin. I remain connected to Wisconsin, a place that has shaped who I am as an artist and person, and which has always been home to the Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Oneida, and Mohican nations. Since summer of 2021, I have lived in Vancouver on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish, where I presently reside.

My mother gave me three names, Jenie Lynn Gao, 高皆倪, and 高韻馨, each to connect me to a different part of who I am. She named me Jenie Lynn Gao, with the altered spelling of Jenie based on her own rules of cadence, pattern, and beauty as she navigated English, her third language after Hokkien and Mandarin. Written out, my English name fits a numeric sequence of 5-4-3 which add up to 12, a complete cycle. Even keel, deliberate, with an eye for the details. Ma named me 高皆倪, which phonetically is Gāo Jiē Ní. This is how she would write my name to family overseas. Ever intentional, my mother selected the characters of 高皆倪 for their layered meaning. I will not share the word play here, but for those who can read it, I invite you to see my mother's message, a glimpse of what she dared not hope for herself but emblazoned in my identity. Finally, my mother named me 高韻馨, Yùn Hsīn, which means Beautiful Voice. It is a name that contains the sounds of the moon and the stars, combined with my family name 高, which means tall, high, or great. My mother gave me this name because she wanted me to be someone who was above frivolity and petty vitriol. She wanted me to have the power and grace to speak meaningfully, so that people would listen to what I have to say. I thank her for these gifts, and accept the responsibility that comes with stewarding them.

For those who have found their way here, thank you, for being a generous reader.

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