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### Every Rock Has a Soul

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# Every Rock Has a Soul

By Karen Yung

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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## Table of Contents:

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Everything Has a Soul, Including Rocks.....	7
3. Ideas of Inheritance.....	19
4. Memories in the Drawers.....	25
5. Conclusion.....	34
6. Notes.....	37
7. Bibliography.....	44
8. Plates.....	46

## Introduction

“Mom are we the only Chinese people in the whole entire world?” were the first words I asked my mother when she picked me up from my first day of preschool. This question is the fundamental idea in all of my questions in my studio practice. I grew up in the city of Pasadena, a small, impoverished town just southeast of Houston, Texas that was predominantly Hispanic. My parents taught me to speak Cantonese before English since they feared that I would forget my mother tongue. I always thought it was weird that my playmates could not speak Cantonese and only spoke English and Spanish. I saw people whose features did not resemble mine at all. Now, as an artist, I look back and see the beginning of my feelings of cultural alienation. When I was eight, we moved to live in the Bellaire area of Houston, otherwise known as “Chinatown.” It was then that I realized I was not the only Chinese person in the whole world. There were restaurants that I went to where people spoke what I spoke, looked like me, and even seemed to be dealing with the same problems I was. This relief was only temporary though. My parents put me into the nearby Catholic school where my views and beliefs were always put in question. My teachers and classmates were primarily wealthy, white Catholics who often looked down on me for being Chinese and Buddhist.

Alienated by my school surroundings, I spent my days anxiously waiting for the school bell to ring so that I could go home and seek refuge in my own culture. Home is where I can freely walk around and understand the snippets of conversations of old Cantonese ladies haggling at the supermarket. Home is where I can easily purchase a whole bag of chopped beef tendons with tea-soaked soy sauce eggs without having others cringing their faces and question what I am eating. Home is where they know how to make Singapore-style mei-fun<sup>i</sup> without forgetting the char siu<sup>ii</sup> or the soy sauce. Home is where I can enjoy my cheap instant noodles with two slices of spam and one over easy egg without being judged. Home is where I would not be looked-down upon just because I can’t afford to waste my money on some

ugly, brown designer bag made in Paris. Home is here, where I can comfortably say I am a Buddhist without being scolded or demeaned. Home is the place where my imagination flew as I surrounded myself with rocks and played with my origami sets.

In fifth grade, my religion teacher demanded that “you can either convert to Catholicism or continue believing in your pagan gods.” Growing up in a Buddhist household, I was very confused by my teacher’s demand as I thought it was unfair for him to call Buddha a fake god. My Buddhist teachings said that Jesus Christ was a deity that dwelled within one of the many realms of Heaven. My teacher made me write many one-page papers every week that put forth how Jesus can be seen in everything. “But Jesus is not Buddha, so why would I find him in everything?” I thought.

These conflicts made me come to dislike the social environment that surrounded me, an environment that constantly told me that my views and beliefs were wrong all because of the culture and traditions that I was born into. My only respite was finding comfort in my Chinese culture and being at home, where I could surround myself with the rocks and objects that helped me ease these feelings of not belonging.

It is because of these experiences that in my studio practice I seek to create objects and spaces that bring a sense of familiarity, feelings of acceptance, and relief from alienation for other Asian Americans and immigrants who deal with the same feelings of displacement. Belonging to a large first-generation Asian diaspora community brings me a sense of purpose.



Pasadena, Texas, 2004  
Karen Yung, Age 6

Everything Has a Soul, Including Rocks





Mr. Wong in my family's household residence.  
He is surrounded by a cabinet altar as well as by a clear crystal ball, citrine clusters, hematite and a tray of green phantom quartzes and smokey quartzes.  
They are all located in the southwest corner of our home.

Wherever I go, rocks have always surrounded me. Hand carved tiger eyes, crystal clusters, geodes, stalagmites, and many other natural and machine-shaped rocks watched over me. Growing up, my house was always filled with varieties of crystals lathed into balls and clusters that resembled mountain ranges. Holidays were spent going to the International Gem & Jewelry Show, where my father would spend hours standing in front of the rocks. There, as he puts it, he felt for their inner energy and “breath” before deciding to scavenge what funds we had at the time to invest in another cache of rocks. Smooth meteorites, yellow citrines, clear quartz, amethyst geodes, celestite spheres, and various fluorite crystals line the counters and shelves of my childhood home, some taking up residence under the beds and even on top of the toilet tank.

When I was ten, my parents brought Mr. Wong home. I remember how my parents struggled to carry him up the rickety stairs of the town house, my mother heaving and asking for a break every few minutes due to her frailness while my father furiously barked orders at me to ensure that Mr. Wong “did not travel all this way for nothing.” It took several loops around the house with various arrangements until Mr. Wong was placed with my father’s approval in his new placement in our home. It was only then that I got to fully take him in. Mr. Wong stands about six feet tall, five inches across with a yellowish orange hue to his uneven exterior. Due to Mr. Wong’s uneven bottom, my father had to purchase a wooden stand so that he could stand straight.

As a child, Mr. Wong was a pleasant presence that generally became a reassuring feeling that I got used to having around. I often sat and admired Mr. Wong, as he was propped gently against the wall next to the outdoor patio, allowing the ever-changing light of the sun to brush against him. From a distance, he appears to be a simple smooth cone on a pedestal, it is not until you are up close that you begin to notice the many smaller crystalized bumps and protrusions that sparkle every time they catch the sunlight. My mother and I often

adorn the large stalagmite with mala and amber prayer beads. Sometimes we tie other golden trinkets onto him with the special five-colored braided cords. My parents treat Mr. Wong as a full human; my father occasionally pulls out the water bucket and towel to gently wipe away dust from the stalagmite. During prayer times, he also swirls incense around Mr. Wong to ensure that he also gains the blessings and rays of the protection deity Mahakala<sup>iii</sup>.

My father believes that rocks possess a type of energy or life force called "qi." Qi is a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy believed to be the underlying force that animates and gives life to all things in the universe. The strength of qi in rocks is an important part of many traditional Chinese practices, including feng shui and traditional Chinese medicine. This idea highly influences my studio practice.

Feng shui,<sup>iv</sup> otherwise known as Chinese geomancy, is an ancient Chinese practice that aims to create a harmonious environment by arranging objects and spaces in a way that maximizes the flow of energy, or "qi." The practice is based on the belief that the arrangement of objects in a space can have a significant impact on the energy of that space, and that by arranging objects in a way that promotes the flow of positive energy, one can achieve greater health, wealth, and happiness. Rocks and crystals are believed to act as enhancements, helping with the flow of energy that circulates within our bodies and the environments that we dwell in. Crystals are most often used to present the element of earth, not only because they are originally from the ground, but also because they have the heftiness and strength of protection due to their size and weight. The type of crystal placed in specific areas depends on various aspects of their formation and visual appearance. Taller, mountain-like stalagmites are often placed in sharp corners of homes to act as large pillars guarding the owner from knife edges. Smaller multigroups of clear white quartz are often placed in specific formations beneath beds in order to absorb the holy energy of the deities living within the space and protect against negative energies when the sleeper rests. Larger rocks,

through their physical weight and jagged appearances, act as guardians that absorb negative energy and forces that may attack their owner. Similar to stalagmites, they are more often placed in sharp corners of homes or in areas where the owner needs support due to the architecture of the space or the owner's personal vulnerability. Smaller pieces of rocks, such as clusters of quartz, are considered to have significantly less qi but are still able to rebound negative energies when placed at specific locations or in certain formations. Geodes are often preferred over just flat pieces in that they have similar poundage to larger rocks. Geodes contain more qi due to the cluster of crystals within them. Oftentimes, the qi strength of geodes can be so strong that when you place your palm close to the openings, you can feel the heat from these rocks.

When thinking about feng shui and how it affects the qi of the owner, I began to wonder how does the flow of qi affect our daily lives. Placing rocks in specific locations helps to block misfortune, but larger land masses such as the mountains and earth that surround us cannot be so easily moved. In my soft-sculpture artwork, *3 > 1 (Three is Greater than One)*, 2022, I was interested in searching for a medium that would mimic the gentle grooves and flow of rock formations, I wanted the material to also ooze the idea of comfort. Because of this, I chose to play with textiles and fiber work materials. *3 > 1* explores the possible way that the qi of the landscape plays an important factor in affecting a community.

Through the process of knitting merino wool and embroidering each of the characters, I investigated how the bonds we form with others are mysterious and magical. *3 > 1* is a miniature community made up of two-family groups on each end of a knitted island mass. Community is represented through the extended-arms that literally connect the small groups. Each family unit is connected to a cloud deity watching over them.

With no way to control the qi that flows across the larger land masses we reside in, the relationships that we form with others are up to chance and luck. The only qi we can

control is the qi within our smaller domestic spaces. I used  $3 > 1$  to explore this feeling of interconnectedness to emphasize the importance that we should place on the value of the earth that surrounds us. Exploiting nature by mining and excavating from caves destroys mountains. I question whether hollowing out a mountain changes the flow of qi within the land, causing negative side effects for the people living there.

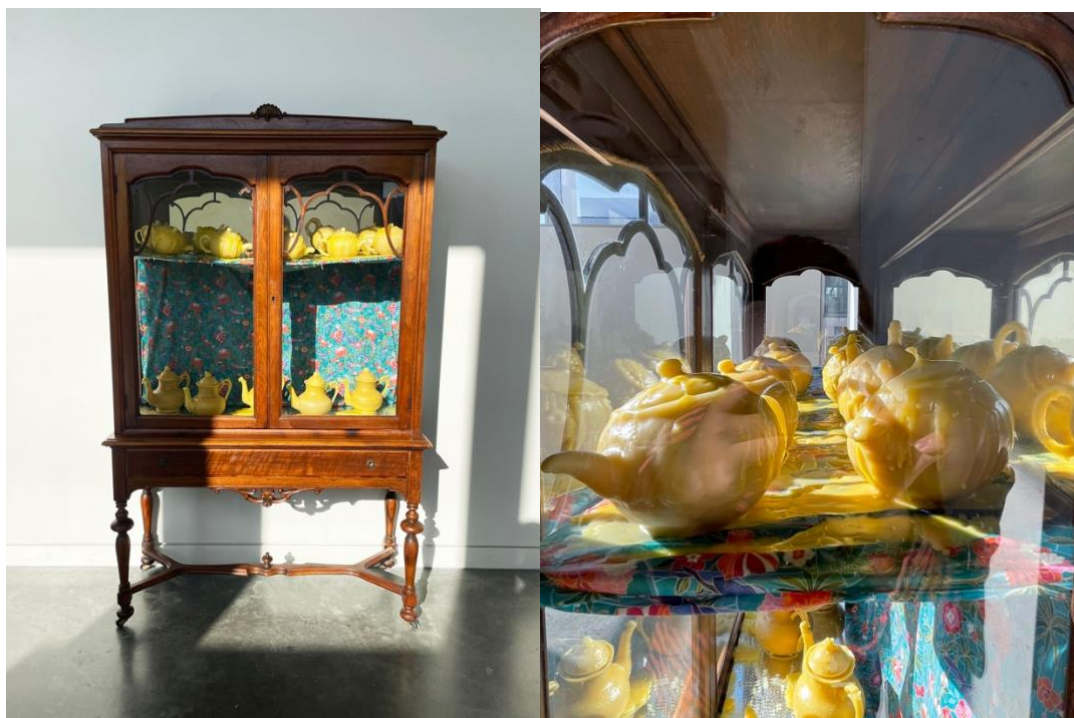


Karen Yung, *3 > 1 (Three is Greater than One)*, 2022,  
 Merino wool, polyester stuffing, vinyl fabric, minky fabric, yarn,  
 embroidery thread, lamp work beads, glass beads, seed beads, ribbon,  
 sewing thread, metal wiring, dog squeakers, size 5 toddler rain boots,  
 30in x 8ft x 8ft.  
 Photo taken by artist.

After a visit home, I began to wonder why my Chinese parents had English tea-time every day. I researched China's relationship to tea and discovered that the history of what I learned was wrong. After reading American journalist Sarah Rose's book *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History*, I intensified my investigation about China's tea history. My discoveries led me to create the sculpture, *Not for All the Tea in China*, 2022. In this artwork, although unfinished, I explore the inheritance



of cultural pain through history. I casted wax to form multiples of Chinese traditional teapots and British porcelain teapots. The Chinese teapots are placed on the top shelf of the found China-cabinet, the British teapots on a mirrored bottom shelf. The Chinese teapots are in various stages of melting, in reference to the false history that has propagated since the 1600s. To gain dominance of the tea trade, the British stole tea seedlings from China and started massive tea farms in India.



Karen Yung, *Not for All the Tea in China*, 2022,  
Beeswax, Liberty fabric, wood.  
Photo taken by artist.

The sculpture *Not for All the Tea in China* is not centered around rocks, yet it was a turning point in my studio practice. It allowed me to discover the advantages of using found objects as material. I have gravitated to specifically using domestic furniture such as drawers and cabinets. It was through my process of repeatedly replicating the teapots that I discovered the amorphous possibilities of wax. I am still on the path of experimenting and finding new materials that provide scale and presence in my artwork.

To refocus, I began more research on how to restore the balance of qi. In our contemporary times, unpolished rocks and geodes such as jade and amethyst are often sought after, not only for their beauty but to be used as a type of blind prize in Dushi.<sup>v</sup> Their powerful qi is what is often sought after by those who collect these crystals and rocks, but this qi can only be felt when one has had the chance to physically touch and observe the rock.

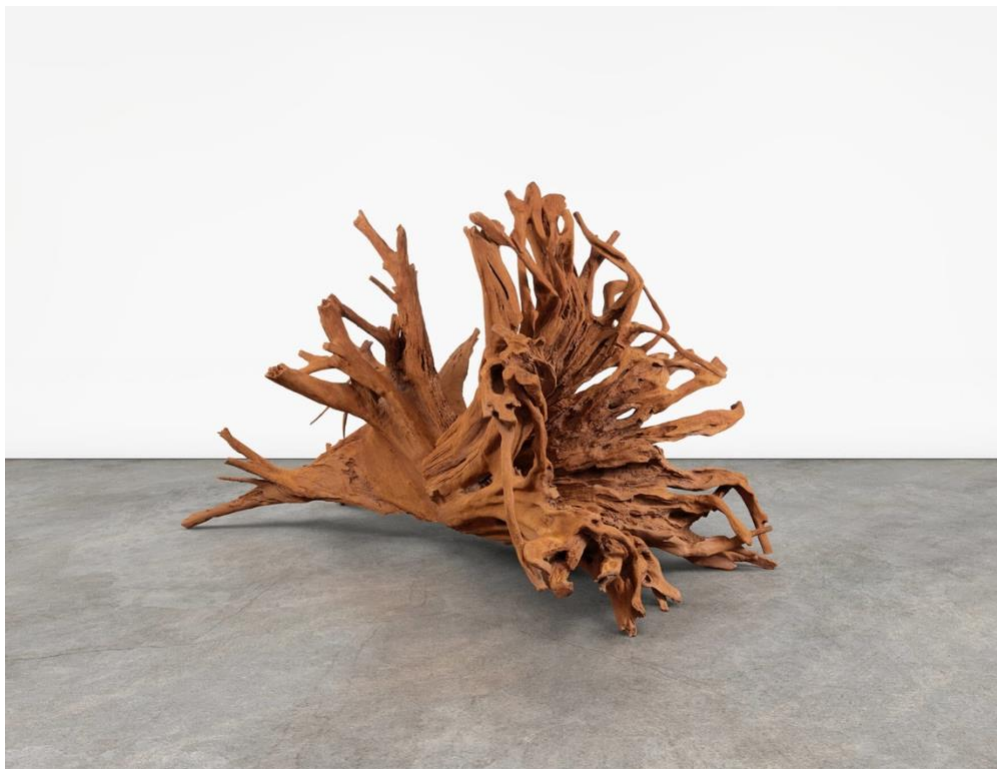
I think it is contradictory that although rocks are seen as precious energy sources, they are not treated with the respect and reverence that they deserve. I question why they must be cut and taken from their rooted homes to feed others' capitalistic and indifferent needs without any thought of what may happen when natural formations go extinct. It was these questions that drew me to create my series, *Eulogy to a Rock*, 2022. In these sculptures, I used scrap wire, found bottles, and dyed beeswax to create ten "stalagmites" of varying sizes.



Karen Yung, *Eulogy to a Rock*, 2022,  
Wax on metal wiring, various dimensions.  
Photo by the artist.

Each of the sculptures were formed first from wrapping and manipulating scrap wire around metal tin bases. Then, I repeatedly poured melted beeswax all over the wiring. I experimented with mimicking the way that the stalagmites are naturally formed.

I drew inspiration for this piece from Ai Weiwei's 2019 exhibition titled *Roots* at the Lisson Gallery in London. In the exhibition, Weiwei exhibits large iron casts of endangered Pequi Vinagreiro trees to call attention to deforestation and forced migration of people for political means. I am fascinated with the process that Weiwei used to replicate the trunks and twist the meshed wire-frame-trunks in different orientations to draw attention to their scale and landscape formations. It was from looking at this exhibition that I started to investigate the possible materials that I could use to add scale and presence to my artwork, the kind of dignified attitude and flow of chi within a space that I sensed in Weiwei's *Roots*.



Ai Weiwei, *Martin*, 2019, from *Roots* exhibition,  
Cast iron, 90 ¾ x 138 ½ x 93 5/8 inches.  
Photo courtesy of Lisson Gallery.



While there are similarities, not one of my stalagmites are formed in the same way. This part of my studio practice is both making and researching. In nature, stalagmites and stalactites start out as water dripping from the tops of caves before they eventually turn from carrot-like structures into their final forms. If they are attached to the ceiling of a cave, they are stalactites; formed from drips that did not fall. Stalagmites are mounds attached to the ground, formed from accumulated drips. This process takes thousands of years. If the process continues over millions of years, it is possible that the stalactite and stalagmite will eventually meet and merge in the center to form a column. There are no bounds for how tall or wide a stalagmite will be.

For this reason, in my technique for making, I replicate their unique forms by constructing forms made of metal. This creates a solid base heavy enough to support the hollow upper structure. The surface is composed of an accumulation of layers of wax. Mimicking randomness, wherever the wax landed, various textures and drips were formed after the wax cooled. Pouring the wax required many applications, building many layers to create a fully aged “stalagmite.” Replicating the real process pays homage to the actual natural process. It may only take me several hours; it takes millions of years of nonstop dripping for real stalagmites to form in an authentic environment.

Even so, collectors and miners do not care about this and go through the process of breaking off stalagmites from their columns. When stalagmites are taken from their roots, they can no longer grow since their water source disappears and the oils on our hands cause the instant death of these rocks. These rocks are not able to move freely about, but they still contain a strong qi within them. People and rocks come from the same origin. By taking the rocks from their original foundation (an outgrowth of a larger rock formation), people are disrupting the natural flow of qi and killing the souls of the stalagmites.<sup>vi</sup> This slow reckless destruction, damage, and consequential killing of qi is why I also chose to present the

stalagmites in various colors of green. Like jade, the stalagmites do not get a choice in what their appearance becomes or how much qi they have. This same logic applies when I create my “stalagmites.” I am never positive about what the outcome will be of the mica powders and binding materials that I mix. This process and this way of making provides the innate richness of the green pigments, and all the other ingredients naturally cool or harden without a human authority.



Karen Yung, Detail of stalagmite from *Eulogy to a Rock*, 2022,  
Wax on metal wiring, various dimensions.  
Photo by the artist.

## Ideas of Inheritance



Chun Wing Yung, Age 20, 1978

My father went to get a photograph to see the qi aura that surrounded him.  
Photo taken by unknown photographer using aura camera that can capture the qi's colors.  
Photo courtesy of Chun Wing Yung.

Rocks are first admired for their physical traits. Many rocks and crystals gain status because they were originally collected by people from previous generations. The ones collected by ancestors become known as Gongshi.<sup>vii</sup> A direct translation is “Honorable Rocks” or Scholar’s Rocks. These rocks are believed to contain a mixture of both the rock’s natural qi and that of the ancestors who had possessed them. By holding on to these rocks, families would be able to continue to harness good luck and positive energy in their home. It is for this reason that many Chinese families have passed down Scholar’s Rocks from generation to generation as a way of maintaining a connection to their ancestors and their cultural heritage. These heirlooms are seen as a tangible connection to the past and to one’s ancestors. The stories and memories that accompany these Honorable Rocks are cherished equally. In addition to their longevity, the value of Scholar’s Rocks as inheritance items is also tied to their symbolism and social status.<sup>viii</sup>

Other cherished items made from stone include stone seals and ink stones. Their preciousness is heightened if they are of high-quality and/or rare rock. The stone seals that are used by government officials or appointed scholars are typically made from jade or Shoushan stone. Stone seals are used to stamp important documents or artworks and act as official signatures. The carving on the seal is often the family name. The more intricate and detailed the craftsmanship, the higher the wealth and status of the family who owns it. These seals were often passed down from generation to generation to preserve the signatures of the ancestors within the family and act as mementos for future generations. By using the same seal as one’s ancestors, the current generation can maintain the same level of luck and success through channeling the qi of their ancestors.

In Chinese culture, the concept of “face,” or a person’s reputation and social standing due to their wealth, is extremely important. Accumulating large numbers of Scholar’s Rocks, especially those made from rare stones enhances a family’s prominence within their

community, allowing them to have more access to exclusive circles and moving them to higher political and economic standing.

I'm curious about the cultural differences between how the West and East view the idea of inheritance. In Western culture, inheritance often revolves around the passing down of material wealth and property. In Eastern cultures, inheritance also includes the passing down of intangible values and beliefs. Being born in the States, I was exposed to mixed viewpoints on the meaning of inheritance. In order to explore the different ways in which Western and Eastern cultures view inheritance, I created the sculpture entitled *Home* in 2023, which explores this idea of inheritance through the use of cultural objects.



Karen Yung, *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.

For the sculpture *Home*, I grew stalagmites on the top and sides of an antique, wooden apothecary cabinet. My intention was to create my version of an inheritance rock. Most important to the process of making, I imbued energy into the piece internally and externally through different methods in order to take the place of the qi that real rocks would contain. As I continuously poured plaster and made molds of each of my objects, I chanted Buddhist prayers of protection and channeled thoughts of healing-light shining onto my artwork to ensure the complete absorption of my qi into the piece. I was inspired by this idea from Asian American ceramic artist Heidi Lau. In a 2022 interview with Art21<sup>ix</sup>, she describes her art practice as “allowing the clay to tell her what to do” through using the “energy of mourning” that surrounded her at the Green-Wood Cemetery residency in Brooklyn, New York. Rather than using the energy of mourning, I focus on imbuing positive qi and healing energy into every part of the apothecary cabinet. Each part took different energy from me: the top, the sixteen drawers, the legs, the supports under the chest and the wheels.



Heidi Lau, *Dwellings*, 2020,  
Ceramic, 10 ½ x 21 x 5 inches (top), 16 x 21 ½ x 21 inches (bottom).  
Photo courtesy of Heidi Lau



Physically, I believe that I can transfer my energy through repetitive labor for qi to be absorbed into my “Yung-made” stalagmites. On the exterior of the structure, first, I created a metal framework out of wire mesh and repurposed aluminum scraps. Then I poured small batches of plaster onto it in circular motions. Each drawer contains different objects that are significant to my childhood memories. While I know that others may not be able to have the same affinity and memories as I do, I believe that I am able to pass on energy by placing objects that spark recognition among those who are familiar with the treatment and objects designed for the drawers. The energy of recognition, commemoration, evocation, and souvenir can spark an individual and/or collective memory through the feelings of nostalgia, evoked by a familiar smell or the sight of cultural objects.

## Memories in the Drawers



Detail shot from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo courtesy of Grace Leung.

The major component of the sculpture *Home* is an apothecary cabinet with sixteen workable drawers. Traditionally and for my purposes, an apothecary cabinet holds healing objects and powers. For each of the sixteen drawers of *Home*, I focused on creating scenes and imagery that I pulled from Chinese mythology,<sup>x</sup> especially the stories I heard as a child.

I separated the drawers into different categories: memories that drew from ancient stories and mythology, memories of comfort, and memories of growth and turtles. Turtles, alive and turtle-sculptures, are used as talesman to ward off bad luck. I order the drawers from top to bottom starting from the left side.

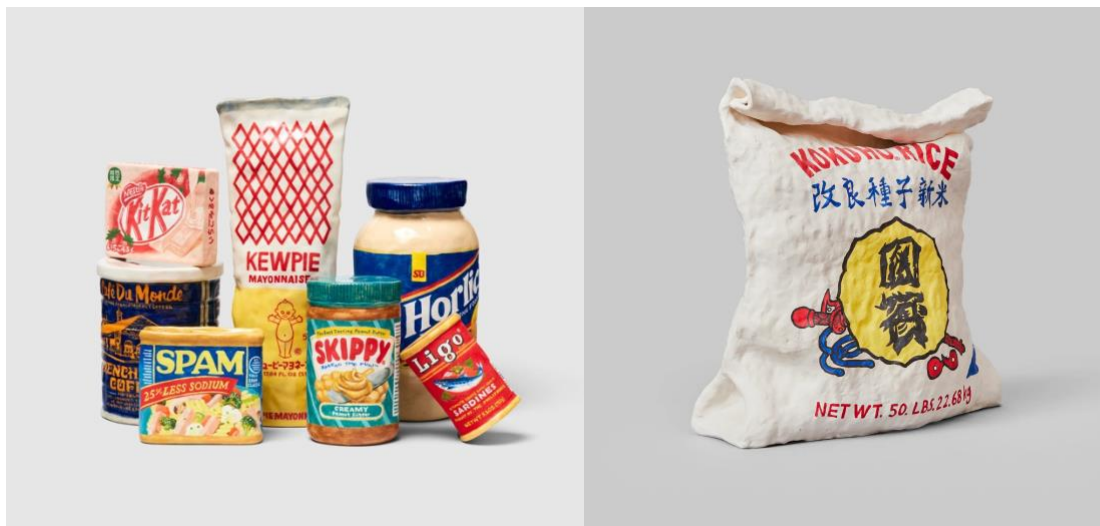
For the first drawer, I lined the inside of the drawer with blue paper and poured an inch of resin to make it appear like water. Then I created a zhubieyu<sup>xi</sup> / pignose turtle by knitting multicolor merino wool into a sheet that I then placed snugly in the drawer. On the knitted turtle, I inserted eighteen craft eyes into many of the crevices. Now the zhubieyu's eyes appear to follow whoever looks at them. This creature acts as a guardian of my *Home*. It watches all evil spirits with its all-seeing eyes and protects *Home* from malicious sicknesses such as the plague or Covid.

The second drawer depicts a cluster of turtles crawling out of the coffee ground dirt towards an inkstone with carved text that reads “ginseng.” The black wax-crayon turtles are embossed with gold leaf to emphasize the preciousness of their shells. With the inkstone in the center of the drawer, I present how even rocks that have been processed and changed still have the power to hold qi. It is up to the beings (both the turtles and people) around the rock to harness this qi.

For the third drawer, I made multiple “ruyis” in multiple shades of green placed in silk pockets. Ruyis is translated to “as you desire.” They are precious treasures due to their association with the Jade Emperor.<sup>xii</sup> I chose to recreate the ruyis using wax versus jade stone since I wanted to call attention to how these scepters are often valued not for their essential

mineral nature, but more for their mystical importance. They are often placed on pedestals and treated so preciously as if they are the actual living thing, as if each remake of the scepter is an embodiment of the actual one that helps to attract positive qi to whoever owns the scepter.

My fourth drawer contains a plaster cast of a peeled orange resting upon an ornate silver cloth with embroidered chrysanthemum flowers. When the drawer is opened, the poem entitled “*A Long River*” by Vietnamese poet Huy Can<sup>xiii</sup> is recited in Vietnamese, accompanied by the scent of citrus. In his poem, Huy Can describes homesickness as a never-ending boat ride. The site and soothing smell of the orange acts to alleviate any emotional pain that may arise when hearing the poem. My intention with this drawer is to evoke calmness and positive qi.



Stephanie H. Shih, *Oriental Grocery*, 2018,  
Ceramic, various dimensions.  
Photos courtesy of Stephanie H. Shih.

My choice to stimulate core memories using food, draws inspiration from the ceramic works of Taiwanese artist Stephanie H. Shih. In her 2018 artwork entitled *Oriental Grocery*, she recreates mass produced products that are often found in Asian American households to

reference the Asian American diaspora. I am interested in how she chooses to display singular kitchen goods such as a bag of Jasmine Rice or a can of Spam to describe the changing meaning of these goods in a mixed culture. Rather than trying to define the changing definition, I investigate how to use these familiar objects to evoke core memories that will help bring about a sense of calm and healing.

I continue to find ways to do this in my fifth drawer, where I covered eight multicolored persimmons<sup>xiv</sup> with the foam netting found on fruits. The persimmons are arranged neatly on top of a lace, plastic tablecloth within the drawer. I created these persimmons from colored plaster to create fruits that would not go bad with time. I believe that by giving fruits that never age, the fruit will continue to bring prosperity to whoever holds them.

The sixth drawer is filled with ginseng roots<sup>xv</sup> in coffee ground dirt. The ginseng roots are made from black crayon wax before being covered in golden mica powder. When the drawer is open, you hear the sounds of a Ruby Crowned Kinglet singing as the aromas of coffee grounds fill your senses. My intention is to emulate a ritual awakening by drawing from the memories of the first smell and sounds one hears when they rise in traditional Chinese settings.

The seventh drawer contains copies of letters that my mother received from her parents during her first years of being away from home—here in America. While the letters may not have been able to bridge the gap that distance created between her and her family, they helped to ease the unhappiness that this distance brought. It is important that these letters are in *Home* since they are the words that can be read again and again to ease homesickness, even after the writer is gone.

The eighth drawer is filled with bowls of century egg congee, a regional dish that is specific to Hong Kong. I created the jook or rice congee using plastic bits, freeze dried spring

onions and silicone. Jook<sup>xvi</sup> has always been a comfort food that I grew up with. Within each of my bowls, there is a large piece of century egg<sup>xvii</sup> floating within. The significance of placing a slice of century egg in each bowl is to recreate a dish that is rooted in my far-away homeland, and it is my go-to comfort food when I'm feeling homesick. This contradiction balances the qi.

The ninth drawer is a sealed drawer that contains aged red envelopes slipped into the corner. Inside one of the envelopes is out-of-commission money from when Hong Kong was still a British colony. It is important to include this item since it has the energy of my grandmother within it. With the idea of the passing on of qi, I believe it is important to pass on energy from someone who was important to me as a child.

The tenth drawer contains small Yung-made stalagmites, made from empty bottles wrapped with wire which then had melted wax poured on them. The brands of drinks are those I drank while growing up. Yung-made stalagmites are embedded in a heavy layer of wax poured into the drawer. Being like the first Yung-made stalagmites imbued with energy, I thought it necessary to include their qi in this *Home*. Metaphorically, *Eulogy to a Rock*, 2022 becomes a scholar's rock for *Home*. Thus, it too, contains the same positive energy.

The eleventh drawer contains a cast of a gold painted red snapper cushioned by fabric. When you open the drawer, you can hear crickets and smell the fishy smells of the fish. The golden fabric lining the drawer is like cloth used to line altars dedicated to Buddha. I wanted to create a drawer that paid homage to the sacrifice of the fish's life in order for it to become my meal. In Buddhism, it is against the law to eat fish that you have caught yourself; you are not supposed to kill any life since every living being is sacred. This holds true for the life of a fish. Keeping a fish tank in your home is considered a sacrifice for the fish. It is a tradition that proposes the sacrifice of the fish helps to take the blow of negative intentions aimed at the owner's life. I felt it was important to honor the fish because while we may keep them as pets, it does not mean that we respect them as anything more than that. So, to balance the qi, the

constant audio bird-chirps act as a soothing reminder of nature's existence, that the gods are always listening to our thoughts and prayers.

On the other hand, when you open the twelfth drawer, the voice of my mother, reading in Cantonese, Li Gou's "*Homesickness*"<sup>xviii</sup> fills the air as twelve black-crayon-wax turtles circle in tight formation around a container of red ink paste. There is a belief that when an animal chooses you to be its owner, they will sign their name in the heavens by stamping their hand on a contract. I like to believe that my childhood pet turtles did the same, too, which was why I presented them to be in the process of walking towards the ink, preparing to agree to place their lives in my care. I specifically chose to place this poem with my pet turtles while thinking of the possibility of reincarnation.<sup>xix</sup> I hope that I will be able to meet them again in this lifetime and repay them for the bad karma from which they protected me.

For my thirteenth drawer, I covered the inside with gold paper or in Western terms, joss paper, along with other offerings that are often burnt or placed on altars to send off to the gods. I purposely made the drawer unable to close by using an incense burner that is too large for the drawer to close. I believe that the burner is the main part of many traditional altars, it should always be on display. Next to the burner are spent incense sticks. Here you see the number of offerings that have been offered to the gods and consequently show the strength of the person's belief in the gods they pray to. It is believed that wherever you burn incense, the offering attracts not only the gods you pray to but also the lower rank earth deities that are nearby. They too will come forth and help you. I wanted *Home* to be a continuously functional altar for me, so that the deities and gods will continue to grace it, me, and the viewers with positive energy.

The fourteenth drawer contains ginseng roots made with a light green wax, as if the roots are in the process of growing and developing. Compared to the seventh drawer, I wanted to show the gradual change of the ginseng roots as they age, since they only become more precious with time due to their rarity.



The fifteenth drawer is filled with replicas of my personal stone seal. I place it here to question the significance of a person's name and identity. I lined the drawer with thin paper which I stamped my Chinese name on repeatedly until the red paste dried up. When you look closer at the replicated seals, you notice that while the seal is replicated perfectly, it does not have my name carved into the bottom. When you open this drawer, a Tang dynasty poem, Li Bai's "*Thoughts on a Still Night*,"<sup>xx</sup> is recited in Mandarin. I specifically chose this poem to speak about the feeling of losing one's sight of home after having lost their identity. I felt that this poem was fitting since the poet, Li Bai, would often long for home but was never able to leave due to his filial duties to the Tang dynasty emperor. In a sense, when you give yourself over to the emperor, you lose your own identity.

By taking away the name that is inscribed at the bottom, I create a loss of identity, my identity. Since stone seals are precious and treated as a person's signature in the East, Western culture treats seals as objects that can be easily traded and sold. It is for this reason that when making the molds, I made sure to include inside the drawer even the seals that broke in the process of being demolded.

The sixteenth drawer references a jewelry box filled with eight persimmons. The drawer is lined with tile to replicate a sink with persimmons appearing to float in resin that looks like water. To me, persimmons look like jewels when they are being washed. There is great excitement when persimmons become available because of their brief ripening time. It's a tradition to give them as gifts because their color is close to the color of gold. Balancing this qi is asking us to contemplate how to care for and value fleeting, ephemeral, nourishing, and sweet moments in life.

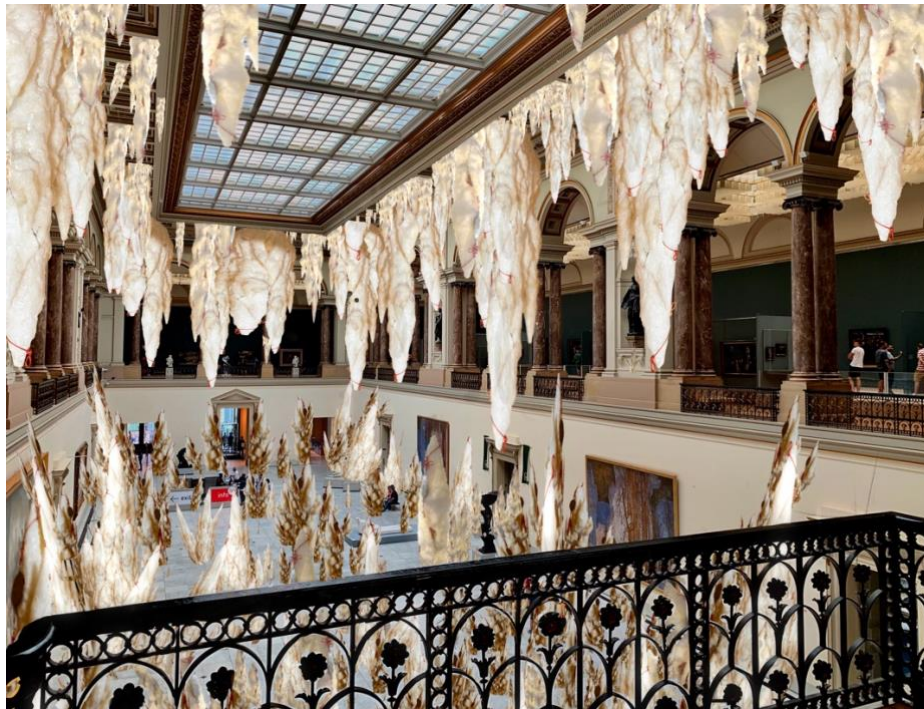
By creating a unique combination of objects with varying essential elements, I aim to create a living, qi-filled artwork that reflects the energy of my ancestors. My intention is to

share that qi-energy to provide comfort and strength to anyone who feels displaced in this Western culture.

## Conclusion

Displacement causes feelings of unease, unhappiness, doubt, and lost. My intention for *Home* is to emanate positive qi as a healing energy. My target audience is first generation Asian Americans to decipher, understand, and gain comfort from all the drawers. A person cannot be passive when interacting with qi. They must seek it to gain its benefits. My intention for the flow of the qi from drawer to drawer is to make the energy available to anyone who seeks to receive it. By manipulating and combining domestic objects as sculptural materials, my artworks allow me to explore my ongoing struggles with my bicultural identity. I draw reference from the stories and landscapes passed on to me by my predecessors to create art works that speak about the larger Asian American diaspora, yet also affect many immigrants in the United States.

I started with initial questions pertaining to my cultural identity and my relationship with the qi of rocks and mountains. I have unearthed many more questions that will allow me to continue to further my practice as I seek answers. While many of my sketches and plans for artworks created here at Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts have been too grandiose to complete here, I believe the art I have created so far will allow me to build the stairway needed to reach those successes soon.



Karen Yung, “Digital Sketch of the proposed exhibition, *Stalagmites* growing from the skylight of the Belgium Museum in Brussels,” 2022.

This installation plan/idea was the guiding force that inspired me to figure out how I could make Yung-made stalagmites. All my artwork and research in the last two semesters has been an attempt to understand how to accomplish creating and constructing this image.

These stalagmites are placed in this space to honor the importance and glory of the qi that these rocks have within them.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Also known as Singapore-style rice noodles; recipe: Maggie Zhu, “Singapore Noodles,” Omnivore’s Cookbook, November 18, 2022, <https://omnivorescookbook.com/singapore-noodles/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Chinese BBQ pork.

<sup>iii</sup> In the upper realms, Mahakala lives only eight clouds away from Jesus Christ!

<sup>iv</sup> Feng shui is commonly used in the design and arrangement of homes, offices, and other spaces, and is an important part of traditional Chinese culture. In feng shui, the elements of earth, metal, water, wood, and fire must be placed in perfect balance with one another to evoke positive qi and prosperity for those who dwell in that environment. To have balanced qi in your home, it is important to include objects from the four elements: fire, earth, water, and air. In our home, rocks are used to represent the element of earth. Rocks also can be used as substitutes for other elements. This is possible because of the variety of ways in which rocks are created. Amber and blue agate can be used to take the place of the elements of fire and water depending on the richness of their colors and visuals. Blue agate often comes in various levels of blue, but it can only be used if the color is a rich blue versus the common light blue. The deeper the color of the rock, the stronger the qi within. Those with significantly less color are often believed to have had their qi drained through overuse. Visual aspects such as the smoothness and lack of or multitude of cracking within any rock are also important aspects of which take note. The cracks and air bubbles that are often found in amber are what allows it to align with the element of fire due to their similarity to the cracking and popping sounds of fire when it’s burning.

<sup>v</sup>Urban residents often flock in hordes to rural areas such as Yunnan to take part in a type of gambling called Dushi, or stone gambling. In these transactions, the buyer chooses at random an unpolished rock, and they can only check the quality through a thin slit in the side. After checking the color and quality through the slit, the buyer decides whether they are willing to gamble their savings away on the unknown value of the piece or to continue looking. This transaction is often considered to be risky since neither the seller nor the buyer knows the true quality of the rocks collected, and it is only after the buyer has bought and cut the rock that the true value will be known. Those who choose to go into such a business of gambling on rocks must go through many years of trial and error before they can

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truly understand how to properly choose. Many have gone bankrupt going into the rock gambling business, as every cut into the mystery jade rocks can mean either fortune or despair. The reason for this is that the true quality of the jade is not known until the jade rock is cut entirely into half. Dark green jade is the most expensive and sought after since the deepness of the green is thought to be what attracts positive fortune and luck. By wearing these jade pendants, people hope to attract prosperity and wealth to themselves; the richer color presents the strength of this hope. Lighter colored jades such as white and light green jades are not considered to be as powerful due to the belief that their lack of color presents the fading of the positive energies within them. It is due to this belief of being able to come across a rock that can change their fortunes that many buyers go into the rock gambling business. In turn, the uproar of jade gambling has caused many once rich ecosystems to become plots of land where sellers mine for jade rocks. The mining process of jade causes the land in these rural areas to degrade due to the lack of rocks to uphold the soil atop of them. Additionally, the continuation of unmonitored mining practices and abundant mining waste has caused large environmental issues such as landslides and water poisoning, causing the once abundant farming environments to rapidly deteriorate. But because of the deterioration of the environment and dreams to change their fortunes, many residents in these areas have had to turn to the rock gambling business in order to hopefully change their fortunes.

<sup>vi</sup> By disrupting the qi within the caves, the feng shui within these places will become weaker or change with the loss of circulating qi.

<sup>vii</sup> Scholar's rocks are naturally occurring rocks or stones that have been carefully selected for their unique aesthetic qualities, which are often shaped and polished to accentuate their natural beauty. These scholar's rocks became an important form of inheritance that would be carefully preserved and passed down through generations within Chinese families. The practice of passing down scholar's rocks as inheritance is not limited to a particular region or social class within China. Instead, it is a tradition that has been adopted by families across China, from rural villages to urban cities. In fact, it is not uncommon for a family to have multiple scholar's rocks in their possession, each with its own unique story and significance. One reason why scholar's rocks are so highly valued as inheritance items is their longevity. Unlike other material possessions that may deteriorate over time, scholar's

rocks are seen as a legacy that can be passed down through many generations. This longevity is also reflected in the fact that many scholar's rocks are hundreds or even thousands of years old, with some dating back to the Tang dynasty (618-907).

<sup>viii</sup> During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), owning scholar's rocks became a status symbol among the elite, with wealthy families vying to collect the most prized and unique rocks. This competition for scholar's rocks continued into the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), with wealthy families commissioning artists to create elaborate displays and gardens featuring their prized rocks. These rocks were seen as symbols of strength and stability for the families who obtained them, qualities that are highly valued in Chinese culture. They are also seen as symbols of knowledge and wisdom, with scholars and artists alike using them to inspire creativity and reflection.

<sup>ix</sup> Heidi Lau, "Heidi Lau's Spirit Vessels," Art21, YouTube video,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ffsSKNKKSc>.

<sup>x</sup> More specifically Hong Kong superstitious ideals and beliefs. Superstition has remained an important element of society in Hong Kong in spite of the constant mixing of Western and Eastern cultures since the 1400s. During the 1930s Chinese Revolution, many Taoist practitioners of feng shui migrated to Hong Kong, where they taught and ingrained their ideas among the people. All buildings and architecture in Hong Kong are specifically built and placed according to the advice of feng shui masters and principles. These ideas are still prevalent to this day, with many people believing in the idea of lucky numbers, colors, and symbols.

<sup>xi</sup> A zhubieyu was a sea creature that was believed to have scaly skin with four arms; each of the scales acted as a socket for one of its many eyeballs, which covered its entire body. These eyes were considered to work the same as evil eyes in that they helped to keep away misfortune and plague. People considered zhubieyu to be a delicacy that, when eaten, would ensure that they could absorb the zhubieyu's healing powers. It was not until later times that it was discovered that the recorded creature was the first sighting of a snapping turtle.

<sup>xii</sup> In Chinese Buddhism, the Jade Emperor is the king of the Heavens and the deity of fortune and power. Many people often keep a ruyi around their house or on their person in the belief that it will attract positive energy that will cleanse their misfortunes to allow their wishes to come true.



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<sup>xiii</sup>Huy Can's "A Long River":

Sóng gợn tràng giang buồn điệp điệp  
 Con thuyền xuôi mái nước song song,  
 Thuyền về nước lại, sầu trăm ngả;  
 Củi một cành khô lạc mấy giòng.

Lơ thơ cồn nhỏ gió đìu hiu,  
 Đâu tiếng làng xa vãn chợ chiều.  
 Nắng xuống, trời lên sâu chót vót;  
 Sông dài, trời rộng, bến cô liêu.

Bèo dạt về đâu, hàng nối hàng;  
 Mênh mông không một chuyến đò ngang.  
 Không cầu gọi chút niềm thân mật.  
 Lặng lẽ bờ xanh tiếp bãi vàng.

Lớp lớp mây cao đùn núi bạc...  
 Chim nghiêng cánh nhỏ: bóng chiều sa  
 Lòng quê dợn dợn vời con nước,  
 Không khói hoàng hôn cũng nhớ nhà.

Translated:

Undulating waves of a long river spread unending melancholy  
 Going downstream, a boat plows parallel lines of moving waters,  
 Sadness spreads many directions as home faring boat leaves water behind;  
 A single piece of floating firewood gets lost in its course.

Soft breezes flow over sparse sandbanks,  
 Sounds of a closing afternoon market echo from a faraway village.

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Sun is sloping down while melancholy rising higher on sky;  
Under vast sky and along this river bank, lies a solitary pier.

Rows after rows of water hyacinths float in aimless directions;  
There is no ferry to cross this vast water.  
There is no bridge to evoke a feeling of connection.  
Only green banks quietly join amber sandy beaches.

Layers of clouds rise high like white mountains...  
Small birds slope their wings: so, does the wing of the afternoon.  
Love of hometown undulates with rising tides  
One feels homesick even without seeing sunset smokes

<sup>xiv</sup> Persimmons are an autumn fruit that holds significant meaning due to their orange yellow skin that resembles the color of gold and were thought to be able to bring prosperity to whoever ate them.

<sup>xv</sup> The million-year-old ginseng was believed to be able to cure all sickness and ailments as well as even give eternal life. Because of its powers, Buddha had locked it away in a secret golden pagoda in his home in the far East. The problem was that whoever entered the pagoda would become trapped within its configuration since Buddha specifically saved this treasure for the future of the world. The ginseng stayed safe for many years until one day, a young snake demon stole the ginseng and used it to cure a monk with whom she had fallen in love. Buddha was angered and imprisoned the young snake demon within the pagoda as a way to make her mull over her faults and sins. But throughout that time, the monk continued to live next to the tower and upkeep Buddha's temple until Buddha, touched by the monk's unwavering devotion, decided to free the snake demon, but only after taking away her millions of years of cultivation.

<sup>xvi</sup> Its origins link back to being a poor man's food since jook was made from mainly rice and whatever spare ingredients peasants would have at the time.

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<sup>xvii</sup> While most Westerners would not willingly eat century eggs due to its strange appearance and aroma, it has always been a staple delicacy in Eastern cultures due to the amount of time and effort used to make it.

<sup>xviii</sup> Li Gou's "Homesickness":

人言落日是天涯，

望极天涯不见家。

已恨碧山相阻隔，

碧山还被暮云遮。

Translated:

Some say the sun sets on the horizon

I see all corners of the sky but I do not see my home

I already hate the blue mountains for keeping us separated

Blue mountains covered in cloud by evening

<sup>xix</sup> In Buddhism, it is believed that all living things go through many cycles of reincarnation. Despite this, the ones who you help will owe you in the next life cycle.

<sup>xx</sup> Li Bai's "Thoughts on a Still Night":

床前明月光

疑是地上霜

举头望明月

低头思故乡

Translated:

Before my bed lies a pool of moonlight

I could imagine that it's frost on the ground

I look up and see the bright shining moon

Bowing my head, I am thinking of home.

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## Plates



Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer One from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Two from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Three from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Four from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Five from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Six from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Seven & Eight from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Nine & Ten from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Eleven from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Twelve from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Thirteen from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Fourteen from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.



Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Fifteen from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.





Karen Yung, Detail Shot of Drawer Sixteen from *Home*, 2023,  
Antique apothecary cabinet, wire, cement, plaster, wax, 36 x 23 x 76 inches.  
Photo by the artist.