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other oceans, other skies

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other oceans, other skies

by

Sharlene Lee

A thesis presentation presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Introduction

As an artist, I often explore my perception of self within the spaces I find myself in. I am interested in questions surrounding memory, place, and identity. My multi-media artworks in installation, performance and moving image are physical manifestations of stories I stitch together. These stories offer a potential for transformation from viewer to participant and a shift in how our world is seen and experienced. I offer a space for viewers to contemplate different perspectives and lives lived.

I was born in the southernmost tip of Malaysia, a city called Johor Bahru. As a child, I was told stories about how Singapore was once a part of Malaysia, and I imagined a massive slicing effort to sever the island away from the peninsula.¹ No, it had always been that way, the straits had always separated the two cities and the bridge some people crossed every day to get to work had always been there. The city held memories of a time when people moved around differently, and families could easily cross the border to visit loved ones. Today, both countries monitor the beaches and the one-mile-wide body of water that separates them.

My country saw its boundaries drawn and re-written multiple times during Western and Japanese colonial rule² in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Had my grandparents somehow moved a mile south when they arrived from China, my childhood would have been vastly different. I grew up fascinated with the idea of borders, migration, and being born in the right place at the right time. I became acutely aware of how I was perceived once I moved to Singapore at eighteen years old. Despite sharing nearly identical ancestral origins, I was perceived as an outsider.

In the first chapter of this text, I explore the idea of home through an exploration of immigration, cultural heritage, and personal history. As a foreign-born artist in the United States, I explore the challenges of finding my footing in a new environment and adapting to new cultures. With the help of local immigrant communities, I found that a home is built not only in place but also through values and customs you share with the people around you. I examine their inherited traditions and consider their significance in helping diasporic individuals connect with their communities and reaffirm their identities. I demonstrate how my Southeast Asian heritage serves as a significant influence on much of my work. I draw inspiration from traditional customs, histories, and motifs, which are closely tied to my Peranakan³ cultural identity. By preserving and celebrating these cultural elements in my art, I hope to honor and maintain a connection to my heritage and roots.

Growing up in Malaysia, I observed the institutional discrimination and patriarchal systems that are designed to keep women in subordinate roles and limit their opportunities for advancement. In my second chapter, I highlight the thread that underscores my deep commitment to feminism and its discourse in my artworks. I am particularly interested in gender's intersection with culture, community, and politics. I feel grateful for being born into a family that has provided me with support and encouragement regardless of being a woman. In my perspective, my education at an all-girls school until the age of eighteen has instilled feminist values in me, despite growing up under a predominantly patriarchal sociopolitical system.

In Malaysia, it is customary for everyone to learn English and Malay, which was taught concurrently throughout my educational⁴ journey. At home, I speak Mandarin to my grandparents, and, eventually, I acquired French as my fourth spoken language. In my final two chapters, I delve into the perception of spoken language and accents. My focus lies on the

influence and dominance of English as the global *lingua franca*⁵ and its significance as the primary language in the United States. I discuss the decisions I made in my creation of an immersive space for the Kemper Art Museum that would allow individuals to examine their own assumptions and prejudices about people who differ from them.



Figure 1: Sharlene Lee, *Well-spoken (Installation view)*, 2023, 3-channel video installation with sound, 3:03 minutes.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Home

The *nonya* [lady]⁶ of the household greets you in her finest attire, her red kebaya heavily embroidered with sunny chrysanthemums, her hand-painted sarong adorned with peacocks strutting in lush gardens. Her hair, bunned immaculately to perfection, is adorned with fresh jasmine flowers from her garden.⁷

Currently 10,000 miles away from Malaysia, I wonder how much of my memory and idea of home has changed and continues to warp the longer I stay away. Whenever I return home, I am always in a hurry to re-absorb the many sights, sounds, and tastes I enjoyed as a child. However, as more time has passed, the more things have changed, and my original idea of the place is frozen in that period of time. Soon, I will have been gone longer than I have ever lived there. A lot of my present daily life is informed by who I was in my years growing up, and I often recreate parts of my early family life and culture that I enjoy no matter where I am.

In *Descendants*, 2021, I incorporated Peranakan Chinese traditional designs and motifs into the creation of lanterns. In my culture, lanterns were commonly displayed outside of homes and were often adorned with family names, business names, or images of deities, which told stories of the building's occupants. By incorporating these traditional designs and motifs into my lanterns, I pay homage to the cultural significance of this practice and highlight the importance of preserving these customs for future generations. Through this installation, I highlight the fading and dying Peranakan culture, which is gradually disappearing due to various factors, including dwindling numbers of Peranakan⁸ people and the influence of modernization.

This artwork features various symbolic elements including dragons, phoenixes, and floral motifs like peonies, chrysanthemums, lotuses, and plum blossoms. These symbols represent good fortune and prosperity, reflecting the cultural values and beliefs of the Chinese Peranakan community.

I laser cut and constructed the lanterns⁹, hiding stories through symbols in the final design. As a way of exploring the impact of colonialism on Asian cultures, I deliberately concealed emblems and logos of the colonial powers that influenced the racial makeup of Asia during the twentieth century.



Figure 2: Sharlene Lee, *Descendants (detail)*, 2021, Mulberry paper on basswood, 32x17x17 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Pattern which includes simplified seals of the British Straits Settlements, Government-General of French Indochina, Portuguese Empire, Imperial Seal of Japan, Dutch East India Company, and Spanish Empire. Image courtesy of the artist.

The stark white color of the lanterns was a deliberate choice, to portray a ghostly reflection of the vibrant, colorful lanterns that once adorned the homes of the Peranakan people. In Chinese culture, white is often associated with death and mourning. However, it was often the color of the kebaya¹⁰ lace blouses traditionally worn by the matriarchs (nonya) of the home and evokes a sense of nostalgia, especially with the lace-like quality of the lantern. It was strategically built and lit to throw intricate patterns onto the walls of the space by adding light and shadow onto the already haunting atmosphere.



Figure 4: Sharlene Lee, *Descendants (detail)*, 2021, Mulberry paper on basswood, 32x17x17 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

I filled the *Descendants* installation space with ambient music popular in Malaysia in the 1950s, some of which has auditory hints of English and Malay as most Peranakans then were fluent in

both languages. This adds to the dreamlike ambiance of the exhibit and gives visitors the impression of walking down the street during that time, further emphasizing the fleeting nature of the Peranakan culture and traditions.

In creating a poetic and ephemeral atmosphere, I looked at artworks that also create similar surreal ambiances such as Nalini Melani's *In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012 created for DOCUMENTA(13). She painted on Mylar cylinders to throw captivating shadows around the installation room and used Christa Wolf's 1984 novel *Cassandra* as inspiration, perhaps seeing herself reflected in the novel's protagonist: a struggling female artist.

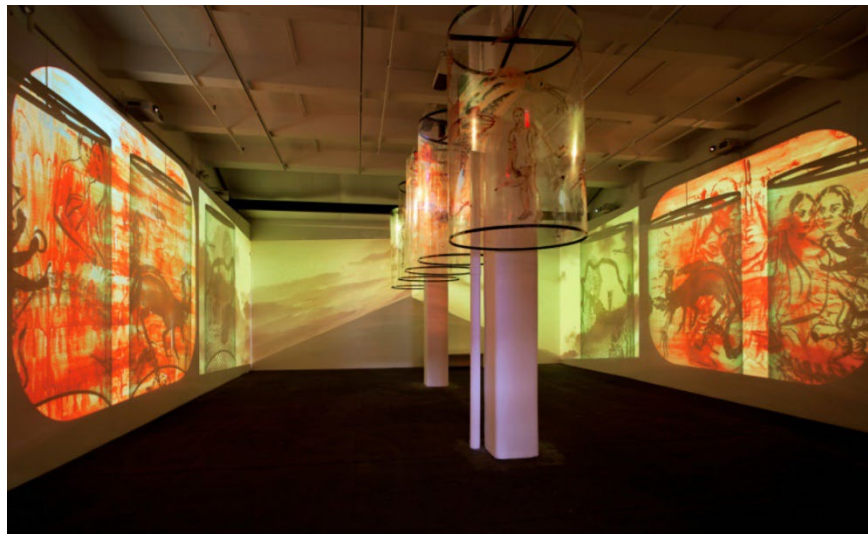


Figure 5: Nalini Malani, *In Search of Vanished Blood*, 2012, Six channel video/shadow play with five rotating reverse painted Mylar cylinders, sound, 11 minutes, accessed April 19, 2023, Galerie Lelong website.

Various cultural deities and motifs on the Mylar sheets were painted and projected on the wall around the room while a distorted voice oscillated between a spoken poem, shrieking, and singing. The projected video clashed with the painted shapes, obscuring and revealing hidden figures on the wall. Melani's use of cultural literature and ominous sounds gave me a sense of

foreboding and fear. The effect was a kaleidoscopic immersive environment that demonstrated the overwhelming disenfranchisement and patriarchal living conditions of women in India.

The concept of space holding a memory was a theme I also explored in my artwork *Fill the Void*, 2023, where I used Singaporean void decks¹¹ to convey the idea of community and belonging. On most days, I would observe people casually hanging out in the space, chatting with friends, or playing a quick game of Chinese chess. Occasionally large events would occur, such as a wedding with a few hundred people attending or the loud clanging sounds of a funeral service. The void deck is filled by the community around it.



Figure 6: Void Deck image by mailer_diablo on Wikicommons, accessed April 19, 2023.

My interest lies in the integration of these spaces in neighborhoods compared to similar spaces in the United States. Unlike the public parks of the United States, which may serve a similar function, void decks are built into the fabric of every residential area and within the immediate vicinity of apartment buildings.

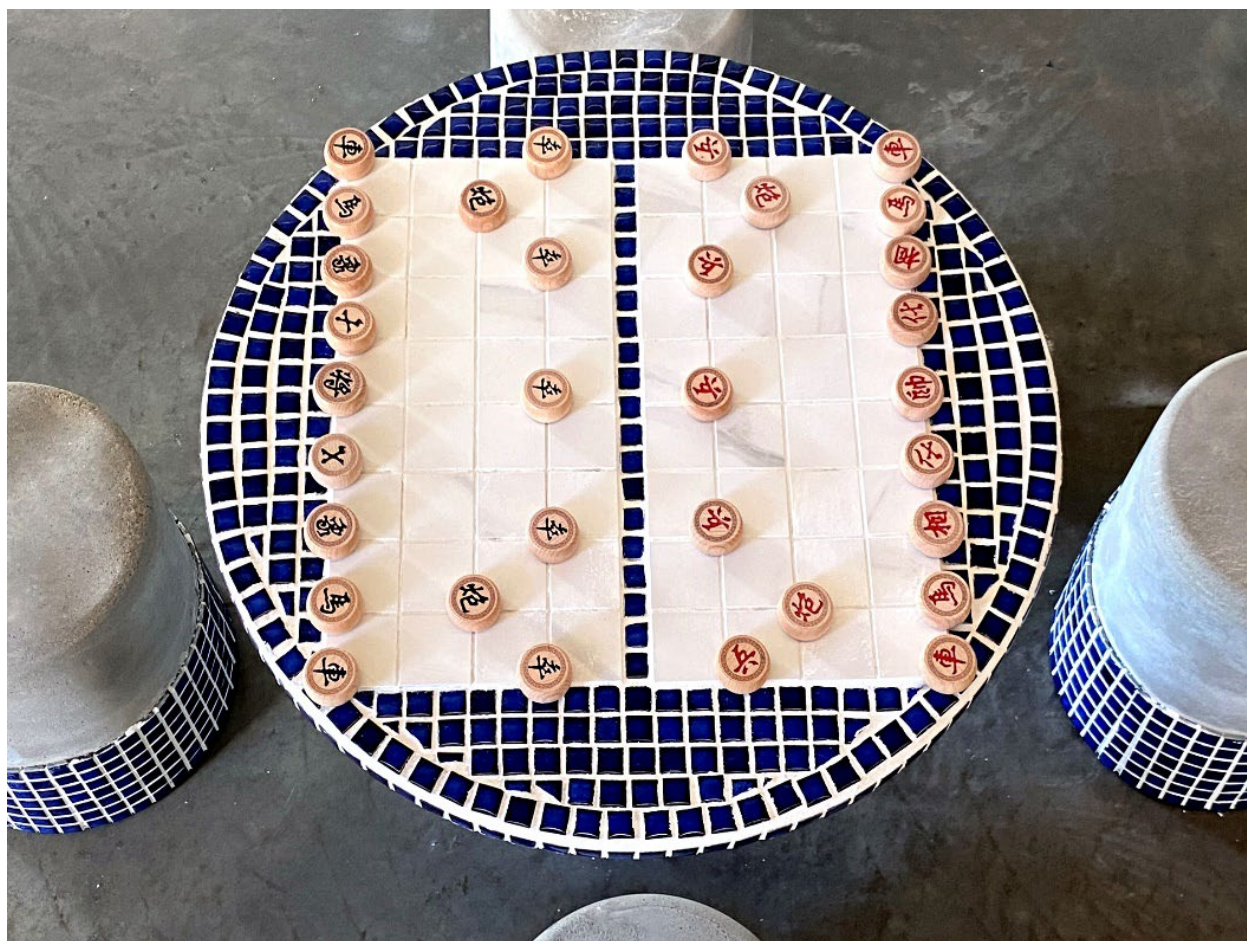


Figure 7: Sharlene Lee, *Fill the void (detail)*, 2023, 3x3x2 feet. Image courtesy of the artist.

In *Fill the void*, I constructed a public table and chairs in a brutalist style typical of void decks, using unpolished concrete with decorative tiles mortared to its surface. In keeping with the tradition of the typical void deck design, I arranged a Chinese chessboard on the surface using small bright tiles. In the installation space, I included a video projection of the void deck under my sister's apartment building in Singapore, as if bringing home to St Louis. My intention was to create a contrast between East and West, as well as to challenge the exclusivity of galleries by featuring fixtures that are atypical of such spaces.



Figure 8: Sharlene Lee, *Fill the void*, 2023, 3x3x2 feet. Image courtesy of the artist.

As Southeast Asian public spaces like the void decks are often utilized for traditional and cultural rituals, it is not uncommon for people to be exposed to various cultural customs. My upbringing in a Chinese family allowed me to actively participate in a range of customs and rituals including folding joss paper for ancestor worship and funerary-related events. Before the annual Ching Ming¹² festival or Hungry Ghost¹³ festival, my family¹⁴ would sit around the house watching TV folding joss paper. Joss paper is usually made of thin sheets of bamboo paper decorated with metallic foils and dyes to create intricate patterns and motifs. This communicative practice is based on the belief that our ancestors have a continued existence in a parallel world and have the ability to influence our fortunes. Older family members, such as my grandmother, have favorite folds and designs. In our family tradition, they teach these folding techniques to the younger generations.

In my work *Past is Present*, 2022, I designed “Hell Bank Notes” to be burned in an interactive performative artwork. “Hell Bank Notes” are a type of Chinese joss paper that have deities and large currency denominations depicted on them. I redesigned it to decolonize the typical design of the Chinese joss paper by removing words like “Hell Notes”¹⁵ and “Bank of Hell.” I believe they present a distorted interpretation of the Chinese belief system surrounding the afterlife. Additionally, I also eliminated the use of faux currency designs, such as those resembling United States or British banknotes.



Figure 9: Image of an assortment of joss paper by Yum of China website, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.yumofchina.com/joss-paper/>.

In my illustration, I included the Tai Mountain, the Capital, Mirror Tower, Oblivion Waters, Naihe Bridge, and Home Pavilion, all of which are places and objects associated with Chinese mythology related to death. I remained faithful to the bright colors that are often associated with joss papers but embellished them with the customary use of gold leaf.



Figure 10: Sharlene Lee, *Past is Present* (detail), 2022, inkjet print and gold leaf on mulberry paper, 6.2x4 inches.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Once the new design was completed, I arranged them in a stack in the gallery with a basket to collect the folded pieces. I provided basic folding instructions for visitors to follow while thinking of a message to someone who had passed away. My intention was to evoke in the viewer the image of a loved one long gone, highlighting the universal experience of longing for someone who is no longer with us.



Figure 11: Sharlene Lee, *Past is Present* (installation view), 2022, inkjet print and gold leaf on mulberry paper, 6.2x4 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

In the second part of this project, I filmed myself burning the folded joss paper offerings as a means of “delivering” the messages to the spirit realm, presenting it as a video installation in *Two-way Mirror*, 2022. I captured a bird's-eye view of myself burning the paper, occasionally breaking the fourth wall by looking upwards at the camera. After I reversed the footage, it now appears as if I am in the role of the imagined recipient and removing pieces of paper out of the fire. The video is projection mapped onto fragmented pieces of a white-painted surface on the floor, creating a mirror and portal-like effect. The outcome is a visual portrayal of the space between life and death that visitors can observe by looking downwards. My motivation is to show how the small size of the fire I created contrasts with the much larger pyres typically seen back home, emphasizing the isolation experienced by diasporic individuals who lack others with whom to share their traditions and rituals. I contemplate if my ancestors would receive these gifts if I had moved so far from home.



Figure 12: Folded Hell Notes piled onto pyres in Malaysia. Image captured by the artist's mother.

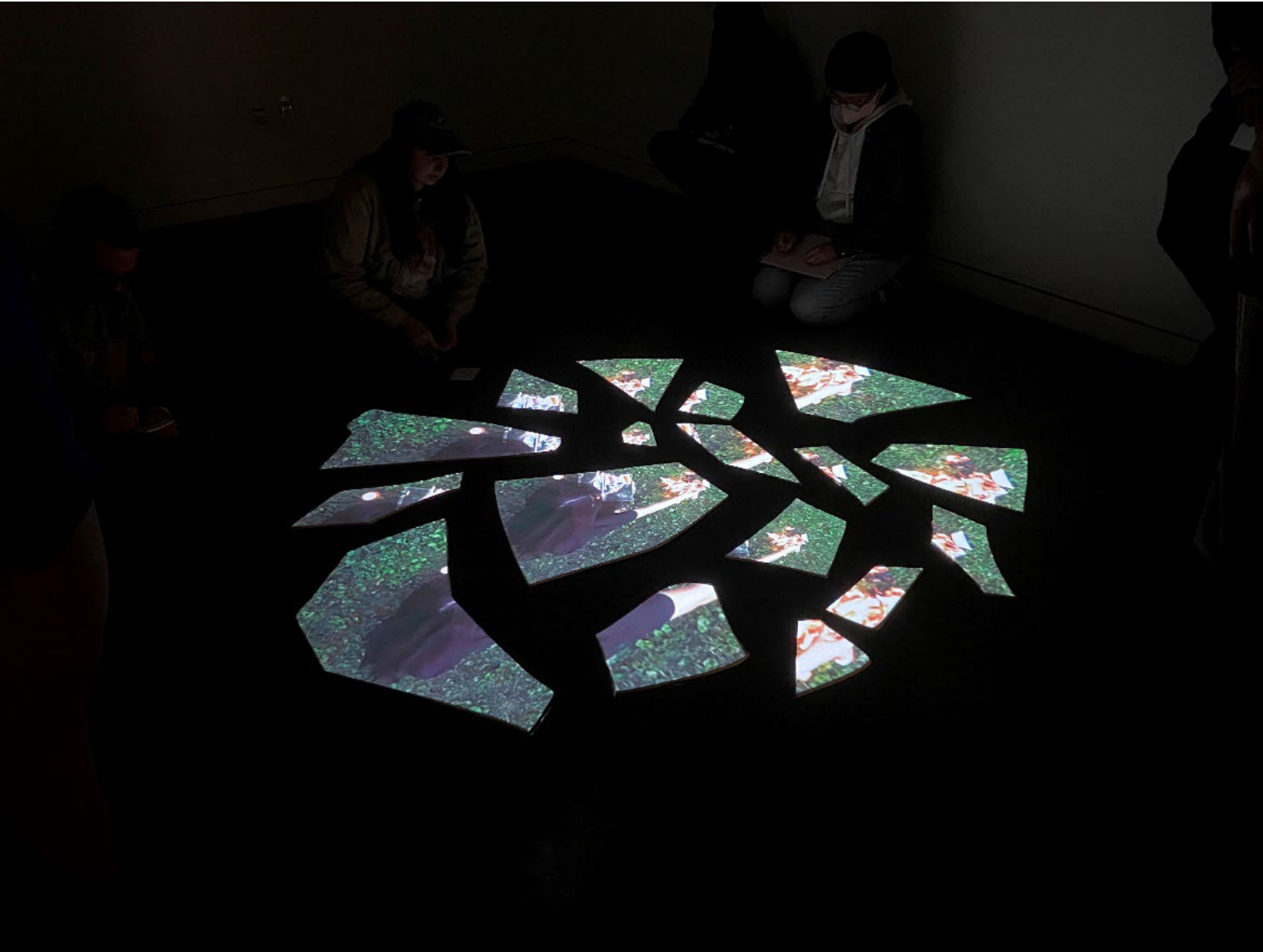


Figure 13: Sharlene Lee, *Two-way mirror*, 2022, video projection, 04:00min, looped, sculptural elements.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Finding myself in St. Louis, I reflected upon those who, like me, had migrated to the city fifty to one hundred years ago. In Huping Ling's¹⁶ books *Chinese in St. Louis: 1857-2007*, 2007 and *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community*, 2004, she gives an overview of the history of the Chinese community in St. Louis. The first Chinese immigrants settled in an enclave called "Hop Alley" which was located in present day downtown St. Louis near Busch Stadium: "Despite frequent police raids and the biases of many white St Louisans, Hop Alley showed remarkable resilience and energy until 1966, when bulldozers of urban renewal leveled the area to make a parking lot for Busch Stadium."¹⁷

My multi-media artwork *Home Run*, 2022 is an exploration of this small ethnic enclave before its demolition. Upon conducting research through the State Historical Society of Missouri, I discovered a scarcity of images documenting the area's history despite its prolonged existence in contrast to the countless amount of baseball paraphernalia present in the area today. I assembled a collection of all the publicly accessible photos and merged them together to create a ten-foot-long collage resembling a long city street.



Figure 14: Sharlene Lee, *Home Run*, 2022, Mounted print, 98x33 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Upon closer examination, various details revealed how the city was evolving over time. One notable detail was the Gateway Arch being in the early stages of construction in the 1960s, as well as the presence of different advertisements, such as the “new” domestic washing machines. These details offered insight into the shifting lifestyles of the residents during that time. As Huping Ling writes: “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Chinese provided 60 percent of the laundry services for the city, even though they comprised less than 0.1 percent of the population.”¹⁸

To bring Hop Alley into the present-day space once again, one night I projected the final composition onto my body as I stood by the different areas around Busch Stadium. I held a baseball bat and dressed myself in a white St. Louis Cardinals baseball jersey. My uniformed body became a canvas to project the collage.

By posing in the space as if I were an All-American baseball legend, I used my body as a representation of the people who lived there in the past decades. As Amelia Jones¹⁹ suggests in her 1998 text *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, “Body art in all of its permutations (performance, photograph, film, video, text), insists upon subjectivities and identities (gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and otherwise) as absolutely central components of any cultural practice.”²⁰

I used the photographic documentation of my one-night performance in the baseball cards I created. The main motif for the cards was appropriated from the “Turn Back the Clock” baseball card series. I included historical facts and designed symbols to represent the many activities and businesses in Hop Alley during its heyday and the communities²¹ that banded together to run it.



Figure 15: Sharlene Lee, *Home Run*, 2022, video, 00:51min, looped.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16: eBay listing image of six Turn Back the Clock baseball cards, eBay listing site, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/283947111833>.



Figure 17: Sharlene Lee, *Home Run Baseball Cards*, 2022, 3.5x2.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

While working through this artwork, I was looking at other artists that convey diaspora and memory through landscapes such as Do Ho Suh and his work *348 West 22nd Street*, 2019, which I saw in LACMA. Walking inside this piece felt like I was travelling through Do Ho Suh's mind. Each item, even sinks, electrical outlets, and door hinges were meticulously crafted with great attention to detail, ensuring that everything was accurately sized and proportioned, and I was amazed at the readability for viewers of different backgrounds.



Figure 18: Do Ho Suh, *348 West 22nd Street, Apartment A, Unit-2, Corridor and Staircase*, 2011–15, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. ©Museum Associates/LACMA.

The ghostly spatial quality of the tulle structures evokes questions about home being a space where stories and life happen within it once upon a time in the past. The wireframes, resembling x-ray images, impart a sense of a house's skeletal framework that only becomes fully inhabited as we accumulate memories and moments.

Woman

As a female and migrant artist, I am always exploring artistic ways to best convey my experiences of being a woman, both positive and negative. My goal in my studio practice is to amplify the voices of women who have been historically marginalized and undervalued, particularly those whose contributions have been deemed less important because their primary roles have been the responsibility of their families. This approach often evokes a range of emotions from empowerment to frustration as I navigate the complexities of gender identity and representation in our patriarchal society. For example, in my work *A Room of Her Own*, 2022, I depicted women as spectral figures, phantoms of people who once lived, who nurtured, taught, and clothed our mothers and grandmothers but whose identities remain largely unknown to us. I conceived the work by reflecting on a sense of disconnection to my mother's lineage because I did not inherit my last name from her.

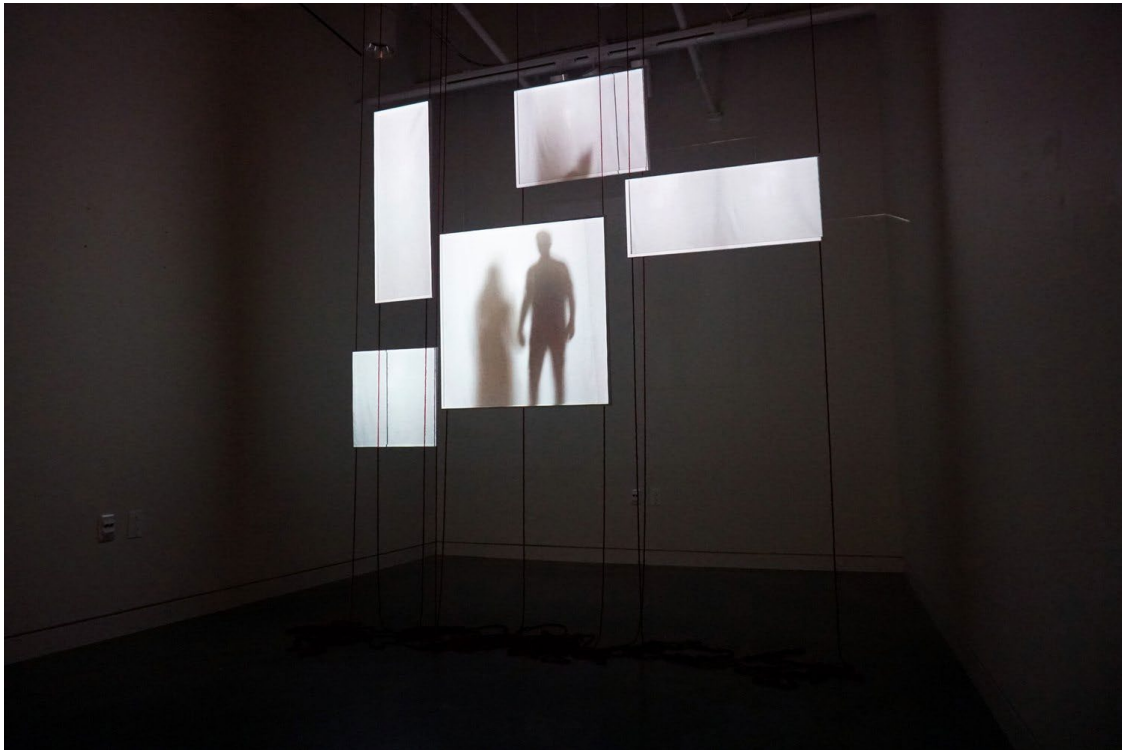


Figure 19: Sharlene Lee, *Room of her Own*, 2022, Video on fabric screens.
Image courtesy of the artist.

I was thinking about my great-grandmother when I created *A Room of Her Own*. At four years old, my grandmother lost her father during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia in the 1940s. She told me that a truck came for all able-bodied males to work at the new train-tracks construction site (possibly the Burma-Siam Railway).²² Her mother, who was pregnant at the time, was told to abort the child as all hope was lost. However, she was determined to keep him, her son, my grand uncle. The family spent the next three years in fear that air raid sirens meant the destruction of their home and family. My grandmother recalled her sister and mother having to dirty their faces to seem less attractive to soldiers while her brothers would hide out deeper in the woods to avoid detection. I wanted to dedicate this work to the woman who ran from military forces in the Sino-Japanese war in China and eventually lost her husband and raised four children on her own.

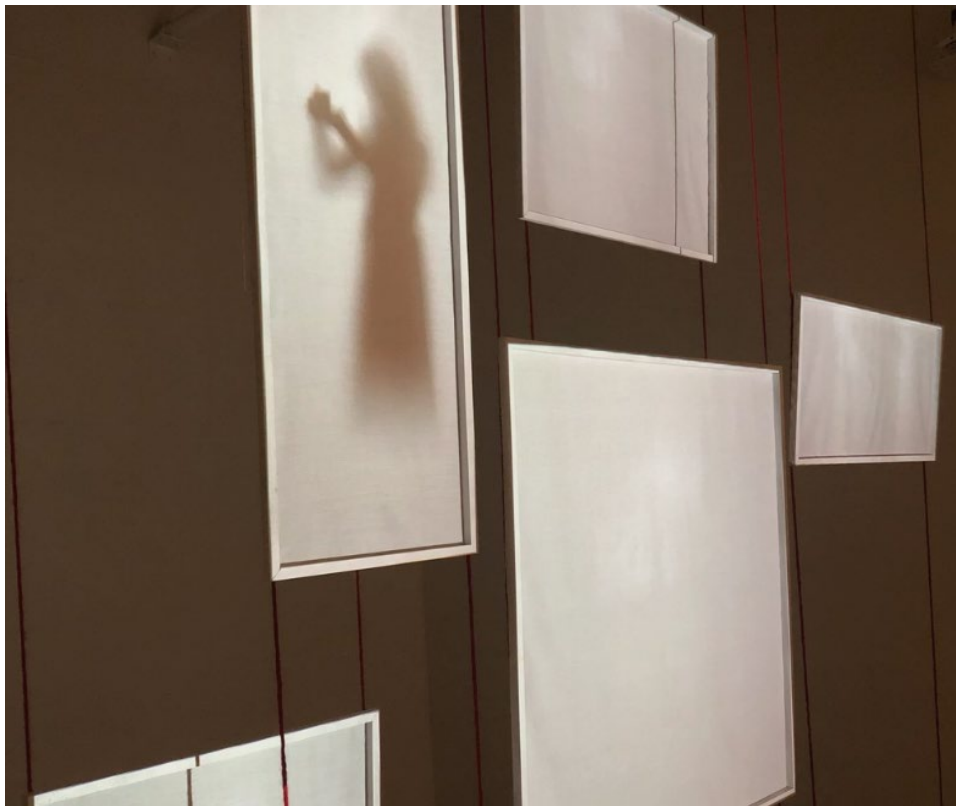


Figure 20: Sharlene Lee, *Room of her Own (detail)*, 2022, Video on fabric screens. Image courtesy of the artist.

In *A Room of Her Own*, the female figure is seen as a shadow, captured as a silhouette on a white background. The use of a figure is a recurring theme in my work, as I am interested in the potential affect²³ that a human presence can have on viewers. Similar to my previous artwork *Home Run*, 2022, where I used my body as a canvas to represent immigrants in the United States, in *A Room of Her Own*, I used myself to represent the women who came before us. By presenting myself as a figure in my art, I am confronting the viewers with a person and all that the figure embodies implicitly to create a visceral and immediate connection with my viewers.

In my performance, I depicted various domestic/private settings, such as caring for a child, reading, doing laundry, standing in contemplation, and holding a baby. Using projection mapping, the figures are portrayed solely in ghostly silhouettes and arranged on framed white linen rectangles resembling typical family portraits hanging on a wall. The time-based video format allowed me to have the figures going in and out of focus, almost as if the woman is fading from our sight. As a metaphor for the difference between how we recognize men and women, I depicted her holding hands with a male figure who is portrayed in more focus and with a darker shadow. This symbolizes how men are often remembered more vividly, as evidenced by the fact that descending generations inherit their father's names.

The voices of several of my female friends recited the following passage by Rebecca Solnit from *The Faraway Nearby*, 2013. Their readings were played together as overlapping voices on speakers in the installation space:

When my friends began to have babies and I came to comprehend the heroic labor it takes to keep one alive, the constant exhausting tending of a being who can do nothing and demands everything, I realized that my mother had done all these things for me before I remembered. I was fed; I was washed; I was clothed; I was taught to speak and given a thousand other things, over and over again, hourly, daily, for years. She gave me everything before she gave me nothing.²⁴

By doing so, I created a chorus²⁵ of female voices that echoed throughout the space overlapping each other as if the same words are being repeated by different people. The passage refers to Solnit's complicated relationship with her mother, and my aim was to convey that no matter how complex the relationships of mothers and daughters may be, the labor and contributions of the many women who came before us still exist and influence how we see ourselves in the world.

The title draws inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, where she discusses women's opportunities to receive education and write. I feel a connection to her writing, especially where she highlights the precarious situation of women writers and how marginalization can result in the deprivation of significant ideas and thoughts. The curious contrast between how women are portrayed in media and the undervalued and underestimated reality they face is something that resonates with me.

Artist Amanda Heng also grew up in Singapore experiencing the preferential treatment of the men over the women in her family. Through her artwork, she frequently challenges conventional notions of womanhood and interrogates the social and cultural power structures that dictate its definition. Heng's work has often centered on raising public awareness on these issues and bringing attention to various aspects of Asian women's life experiences. One of her most notable performance artworks, *Let's Walk*, 1999, was a response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis²⁶ where female employees were the first to be fired from their companies. In the performance of *Let's Walk*, Heng and a group of women with high-heeled shoes in their mouths walked backwards while looking through a small mirror to guide their way. She was making the statement that during the financial crisis, women had to resort to creating strategies that their male counterparts did not, like dressing better and submitting to so-called "beautifying" themselves through cosmetic surgeries and makeup. All of this to save their jobs.

In her 1996 and 2014 photo series, *Another Woman*, Amanda Heng depicts the language, generational, and culture divide between her and her mother, who is only able to speak in Teochew, a Chinese dialect. I was interested in how Heng depicted a complicated mother-daughter relationship as well as the significance and power of language. By exploring the complexities of their relationship, her work prompts viewers to consider the ways in which mother-daughter bonds can transcend barriers of language, age, and generation.



Figure 21: Amanda Heng, *Let's Walk*, 1999. Image by Ray Langenbach ©Asia Art Archive.



Figure 22: Amanda Heng, *Another Woman*, 1996. © Singapore Art Museum collection.

While creating my installation, *Mind the Gap*, 2021, I began research towards built structures and their function in enforcing patriarchal power over women. In my home country Malaysia and in countries like Japan, Iran, India and Mexico, gender-segregated public train carriages have been the norm since 2010s. While these regulations have been successful in making women feel more comfortable and safer travelling on trains during peak hours, the practice seems almost antiquated and reminiscent of ancient cultures that restrict women's freedom by segregating living quarters based on gender.



Figure 23: A sign on a Japanese rail platform indicating a boarding point for women-only cars, accessed April 19, 2023. Image by Claus Anders on Wikicommons.



Figure 24: Image from the Malaysian newspaper *New Straits Times* 2016 article "Provide women-only coaches," accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/06/151178/provide-women-only-coaches>.



Figure 25: Sharlene Lee, *Mind the Gap*, 2021, 2-channel video installation on paper screens, 10x10x10 feet.
Image courtesy of the artist.

I was also reminded of the gender-segregated areas in old Peranakan homes, where young women were confined to separate living quarters and not allowed to participate in social gatherings or business meetings that took place within the home. Instead, they were relegated to the sidelines and could only observe visitors from a distance through screen doors. As in *A Room of Her Own*, 2022, I employed the use of veils and frames to set a context that questions the

agency of women in our contemporary world. I created ten-foot-long papercuts of traditional Peranakan screen-doors and train doors to draw a parallel between the screen doors in old Peranakan homes and the doors of gender-segregated train cars, thereby highlighting the similarities between the two.



Figure 26: A well-preserved wealthy Peranakan home in Penang, Malaysia, accessed April 20, 2023. Image from Penang Peranakan Mansion website.

Within the installation, I incorporated two distinct projections side by side. Two layers of papercut screens divided the two projections. On the left, a video depicted the view as a passenger looking out a train window as the train continuously moved from one station to the next. On the right, behind two screen layers, a video depicting an unidentified woman preparing a Pie Tie Hat.²⁷ Throughout the footage of her cooking, sounds and visuals from within gender-segregated spaces were interspersed, gradually blending sounds of her chopping food into sounds of the train chugging along as the video changes.



Figure 27: Sharlene Lee, *Mind the Gap (detail)*, 2021, 2-channel video installation on paper screens, 10x10x10 feet. Image courtesy of the artist.

The screens partially hide the video of the woman in the kitchen. Being physically behind the screens makes her inaccessible for viewers. The placement echoes the way the problem is being hidden, maintained, and not “fixed.” Domestic and private space is associated with women and domestic tasks, while the frontal public space, shown by the views out the of the train window, represents men and their freedom of movement through the world and society. As Rebecca Solnit writes in *The Guardian*: “It was, and still is, a sort of blame-the-victim

framework, this insistence that women modify their presence in public space, or just give up and stay in, rather than that we transform public space (or men) so that women have the right to walk down the street unharassed.”²⁸ As part of the *Mind the Gap* installation, I also incorporated suspended text phrases that appears to float across the space such as "women only" or "train car for women only" in Farsi, Hindi, Tamil, Indonesian, Malay, Japanese, and Mandarin: the languages spoken in countries with these gender-segregated train cars. I intentionally utilized the precise language and nomenclature employed by the respective countries to describe gender-segregated train cars, not only for accuracy but also to draw the attention of individuals from these countries and motivate them to discuss the cultural, social, and political factors that may have led to the creation of a segregated public space. This was a deliberate effort to use language to create a certain distance between the work and some viewers, while also providing clues about the themes and message of the installation through the use of non-English languages.

To me, the decorative element of this installation obscures the violence of the situation: the violence that first caused the shift towards using segregated cars and the violence of the cultures accepting the first violence as the status quo. To solve the problem, governments could have educated and changed the thinking and actions of their men. They have allowed men to face no repercussions as they continue to behave as though entitled to access women’s bodies. For me, the beauty of the installation space allows for a slower way to contemplate the horrendous situation.

Language as Power

I am intrigued by how people's spoken language and accent influence the way they are perceived. I also contemplated the legacy of British colonialism in Southeast Asia and the enduring presence of the English language in the region and my own self. As Rosemary Salomone writes in *The Rise of English*, 2021, “A core strategy of colonialism was to control language, which became a means of establishing “truth”, “order” and “reality”. Devaluing local languages and knowledge preserved the colonial myth that these languages lacked depth and complexity to function beyond everyday life.”²⁹ My proficiency in my grandparents’ languages Teochew, Mandarin, and Cantonese has never been the strongest, but the accent I inherited is there, nonetheless. This was the starting point into my thesis exploration of the linguistic consequences of assimilation and the trade-off between fitting in and disconnecting from one's cultural heritage. As I find myself in the United States, I am particularly interested in the tension between English and numerous other languages in the country, noting the differences between “English” and the “right type” of English.³⁰

Fueled by political rhetoric³¹ in the recent years, non-English languages are seen as a threat and “other” in the United States. As an artist with an interest in the ideas of home and belonging, I am curious about how language can significantly affect, positively or negatively, someone’s connection with their surroundings. A migrant like me may also feel a sense of disorientation and frustration trying to navigate and assimilate into a new cultural environment in addition to learning a new way of speaking. Personally, I have faced challenges with not sounding “American” enough, and I have observed people's expressions of impatience and frustration once they notice my accent. In many situations, I often end up saying nothing at all. Julia Kristeva writes in *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1988, “One nevertheless lets you know that it is

irritating all the same. Occasionally, raising the eyebrows or saying, “I beg your pardon?” in quick succession lead you to understand that you will ‘never be a part of it’, that ‘it is not worth it,’ that there, at least, one is ‘not taken in.’”³² In my work, *I don’t speak it*, 2023, I collaborated with French filmmaker Tamara Lambert to depict French immigrants speaking in their non-English native language in a 4-channel video installation. My intention is to create a sense of disorientation in the viewer, providing a glimpse into the lives of immigrants as they struggle with language fluency or accents. The native languages of the four participants portrayed scenes of frustration and stress. These languages included Cape Verdean Creole, Mina, French, and Romanian. Each participant spoke in their respective language and acted out a unique scenario I wrote conveying stories revolving around ordinary tasks in which a stranger might request assistance from others.



Figure 28: Sharlene Lee, *I don’t speak it*, 2022, 4-channel installation, 20x20inchx6ft.
Image courtesy of the artist.

There are several scenarios enacted in this work. The Mina-speaking woman, in the first video, is searching for her child and becoming increasingly frustrated that you, the viewer, do not understand her in this urgent situation. In the second video, the Creole-speaking woman has a dead cellphone and pleads for you to lend her yours. In the third video, the French-speaking man demands that you move from his paid parking spot. Finally, the Romanian man, in a grocery store, requests your help reaching for a product due to his injured hand. Throughout each video, you are able to observe the characters' surroundings and their locations to gain clues about what they may be talking about. You, the viewer, know they are talking to you because the actors look directly at the camera as they speak and seem to almost respond to your silence.

I used four monitors on each side of a six-foot-tall pillar that resembles an emergency call-point pillar. The structure is a visual representation of the support system that immigrants often require when settling into a new community, and the use of blue represents administrative bureaucracy associated with hierarchical structures and governments. Immigrants who may not be fluent in the local language or familiar with a new area may find themselves in emergency situations and require assistance. To enhance the viewers' understanding of dissonance and emigration, I distributed customs and border forms to all who came to the installation. At the event, I invited viewers to reflect on their own relationships to language, communication, and cultural identity while exploring the idea of language as a form of power.



Figure 29: Sharlene Lee, *I don't speak it*, 2022, 4-channel installation, 20x20x6 feet.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Well-spoken

After exhibiting *I Don't Speak It*, 2022 I was interested in the social and cultural impact of the English language, both within the United States and as a global *lingua franca*.³³ Specifically, I was intrigued by the ways it benefits native Anglophones and marginalizes those who acquire it as a second language.

For my culminating work at the Sam Fox School, I reached out to local immigrant communities to request participation. I contacted people I knew and people from the OCA St. Louis Chapter,³⁴ St. Louis Mosaic Project, and International Institute St. Louis to request native speakers of non-English languages. Ten out of thirty people I contacted agreed to participate. They spoke Mandarin (China), Kannada (India), Bulgarian, Chichewa (Malawi), Ukrainian, Visayan (Philippines), Vietnamese, Spanish (Mexico), French (France) and Dari (Afghanistan). I interviewed them about their experiences with people making assumptions about them. With it, I developed an individualized script for each, whether it was being overlooked for a job for not being a native English speaker or racist experiences with people on the street.

For *Well-spoken*, 2023, I recorded the full bodies of the ten participants in front of a green screen, instructing them to minimize movement. I also captured footage where they were not speaking, just standing idly, or with minimal movement like writing in a book. Their ten videos were split into 3-video channels where I orchestrated their voices to overlap or be singular and organized moments of silence.

As it is my priority to approach this work with sensitivity, ensuring that the dignity and autonomy of my subjects is fully respected, I looked at Krzysztof Wodiczko's body of work³⁵ including *The St. Louis Projections*, 2004, where the artist projected hands and overlaid it with

audio testimonies of St. Louis residents who have lost loved ones as well as those who are currently in prison. Although their faces may not be visible, their stories and perspectives were conveyed powerfully. The artwork was projected on the outside walls of the downtown branch of the St Louis Public Library. This location emphasized that the projected images serve as a poignant reminder of the city's collective memory. The evening event allowed people to come and sit on lawn chairs to witness the heart-wrenching testimonies, calling attention to important topics that may otherwise be overlooked or forgotten.

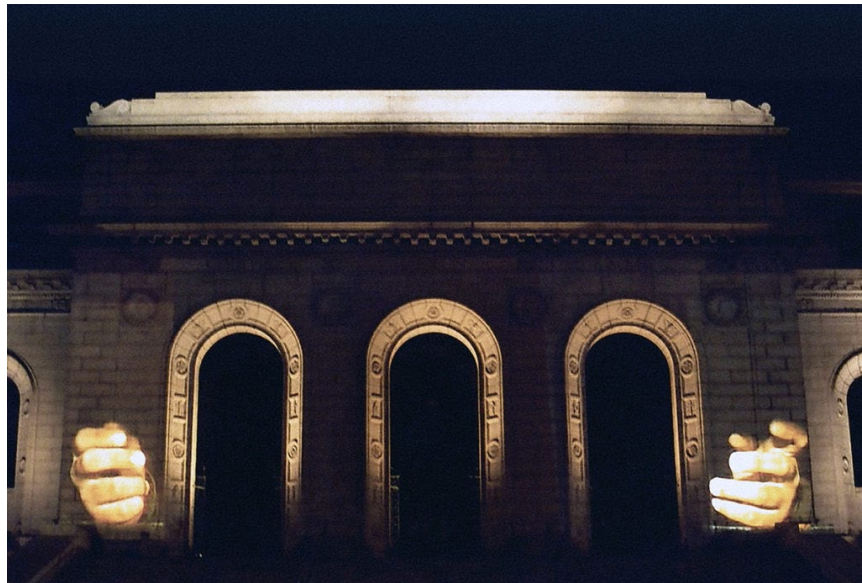


Figure 30: Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Central Library*, 2004, Video projection, St Louis, Missouri.

In the *Well-spoken* installation space, the figures are positioned against a black background, almost as if they are suspended in space without any context to provide clues about what they might be saying to the viewer. They stand idle when not speaking, almost as if they are waiting for something to happen and waiting for a response. Could it be that they are waiting for full acceptance by the society around them?

With the power dynamics reversed, the immigrant figures have the upper hand, saying phrases like, "Hey, do understand me?" "How can you not speak Mandarin yet?" and "Sorry this job requires a native Spanish speaker" in their native language. Viewers will encounter many different languages spoken "at" them with no way to respond. This approach puts the native English-speaker into the shoes of immigrants who have been marginalized due to their limited English proficiency and into the disorientation that comes with adapting to an unfamiliar place. I wanted to highlight the privilege and power imbalance that exists between those who speak English fluently and those who do not.



Figure 31: Sharlene Lee, *Well-spoken (detail)*, 2023, 3-channel video installation with sound, 3:03 minutes.

Image courtesy of the artist.

As this series involves participants reenacting stories of instances where they were subjected to stereotyping or impatience due to their accent or nationality, I was reminded of Nina Katchadourian's *Accent Elimination*, 2005. She hires a speech coach to try to “neutralize” her parents’ native Swedish and Turkish accents while they attempt to teach her each of their own accents. The script was read in two ways: one in each person's natural accent and the other in their "new" accent. The result is an interesting tension between assimilation versus preservation of one’s culture. Between preserving parts of my cultural identity while correcting my own way of speaking, this artwork reminds me that there are so many layers to what it means to belong and one’s perception of our own “otherness.”



Figure 32: Nina Katchadourian, *Accent Elimination*, 2005. Image from artist’s website, accessed 25 April 2023, <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/language/translation/accent.php>.

I named this artwork *Well-spoken*, 2023 as a nod to the backhanded compliment often used as a microaggression. The intention of the work is to create a safe space where viewers can confront their own biases about people they perceive as “other,” and why they may feel a lack of trust, empathy, and understanding in their interactions with people who look different from them.



Figure 33: Sharlene Lee, *Well-spoken*, 2023, 3-channel video installation with sound, 3:03 minutes.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Conclusion

Through this text, I have outlined my motivations as an artist to shift and enrich how our world is perceived through dreamlike and immersive installations. I create art as a form of storytelling that provides a glimpse into the lives of others to create a poetic contemplation of underrepresented narratives.

When I bring forth questions about belonging, language, and identity in my work, ultimately, my aim is to raise awareness and appreciation for the vast range of people that exist around us. I will continue to challenge preconceived notions about our differences to celebrate the diversity that makes us unique. As the international movement of migrants continues to rise, it becomes important to address issues of discrimination towards foreign-born people and minority groups. My hope is that my artworks serve as a catalyst for examining our own biases and committing to openness and respect towards people who are different from us. In my future work, I will still make room to examine the bodily affect that installations featuring human presence or representation can have on viewers.

I continue to believe art has the power to change things and that I, as an artist, can play a role in making society a little bit more equitable. As the saying goes, *air setitik dilautkan, tanah seketul digunungkan*.³⁶

Notes

¹ The country of Malaysia is geographically divided into two regions. East Malaysia and Peninsular (West) Malaysia are separated by the South China Sea.

² In the 1500s, the Malay Peninsula was conquered by Portugal and later by the Dutch in the mid-1600s. Between the 1800s and 1957 Malaysia was under British rule. The Japanese occupied Malaysia during World War II from 1941 to 1945. "Summary of Malaysia's History," Government of Malaysia, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/content/30120>.

³ The term "Peranakan" is derived from the Malay word *anak* meaning child or offspring. By itself, it does not specify a particular ethnicity or origin but has been used to refer to the descendants of early Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia in early 1800s. These settlers have been described as "*orang Cina bukan Cina*" (Chinese that isn't Chinese), which has emerged from generations of intermarriages and the blend of Chinese and local cultures, distinguishing them from the descendants of later waves of Chinese immigrants in the region. My great grandmother was a proud Peranakan woman who instilled in my mother the distinctive tastes and customs of the culture, which have been passed down to me as well.

⁴ "Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025," Ministry of Education Malaysia, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013, <https://www.moe.gov.my/menumedia/media-cetak/penerbitan/dasar/1207-malaysia-education-blueprint-2013-2025/file>. "Every child will be, at minimum, operationally proficient in bahasa [language] Malaysia as the national language and language of unity, and in English as the international language of communication. This means that upon leaving school, the student should be able to work in both a bahasa Malaysia and English language environment. The Ministry will also encourage all students to learn an additional language."

⁵ noun: *lingua franca*; a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different.

⁶ Nyonya/nonya is how Peranakans refer to themselves. Baba for men and Nyonya for women. My great-grandmother was a nyonya, etc.

⁷ Linda Chee, *Being Baba: Selected Articles from The Peranakan Magazine* (Marshall Cavendish Editions, The Peranakan Association of Singapore, 2015).

⁸ "Scientists in Singapore complete DNA study on Peranakans" CNA, July 15, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eEwDk630sI>

⁹ Rachael Lum, "*Ancestral Lights: Ipoh's traditional lantern maker*," Malaysia Airlines website, September 2019, <https://goingplaces.malaysiaairlines.com/ancestral-lights-ipohs-traditional-lantern-maker/>

¹⁰ Kebaya is a type of traditional blouse made from lightweight fabrics secured in the front by buttons or brooches.

¹¹ Void decks are open communal spaces found on the ground level of housing blocks in Singapore and serve as gathering places for residents to socialize, relax, and participate in day-to-day activities. The spaces belong to both no one and everyone simultaneously.

¹² Also known as tomb-sweeping day, families would visit tombs of their ancestors with offerings.

¹³ According to Chinese belief, during the seventh month of the Chinese calendar (typically sometime in August) gates of hell are opened up and the hungry ghosts are free to roam the earth. Sometimes your ancestors may be granted permission to come visit as well.

¹⁴ Family members often get together to participate in preparing offerings like these for our ancestors.

¹⁵ Early eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian missionaries in China may have played a role in translating these terms, which propagate the notion that non-Christians end up in Hell.

¹⁶ Huping Ling is an historian and prolific award-winning writer whose research focuses on Asian American studies, including immigration and ethnicity, assimilation and adaptation, family and marriage, feminism, employment patterns, and community structures.

¹⁷ Huping Lee, *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community* (Temple University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, originally from Durham, North Carolina, is an American art historian, art theorist, art critic, author, professor, and curator.

²⁰ Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

²¹ Tim O'Neil, "A Look Back at Hop Alley, St. Louis' small but busy Chinatown," St. Louis Post Dispatch, August 3, 2022, https://www.stltoday.com/news/archives/a-look-back-at-hop-alley-st-louis-small-but-busy-chinatown/article_14ce3e42-3f01-56ce-98a1-64fbe20026f1.html.

²² "Singapore War Crimes Trials" web portal is supported by the National Heritage Board's (NHB) Heritage Participation Grant and the Singapore Academy of Law. The website highlights and tracks cases related to the many atrocities committed during the second world war in Singapore, including the infamous Burma-Siam Railway. "Singapore War Crimes Trials," accessed April 23, 2023 <https://www.singaporewarcrimetrials.com/>.

²³ The definition of Affect Theory varies across different academic fields. In art, affect theory suggests that emotions from viewing an artwork are important in understanding its meaning and can shape viewers' experience and interpretation of the piece.

²⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (Granta Publications, 2013).

²⁵ The chorus of haunting voices was inspired by *Thinking of History*, 2022, sound work composed by Monika Weiss, based on a sentence chosen from the book *There is no soundtrack: Rethinking art, media, and the audio-visual contract* by Ming-Yuen S. Ma, after she invited me to include my voice as part of her piece.

²⁶ "The Asian Crisis: Causes and Cures," International Monetary Fund, June 1998, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/1998/06/imfstaff.htm>.

²⁷ A traditional Peranakan appetizer that typically requires several hours of preparation.

²⁸ Rebecca Solnit, "Listen up, women are telling their story now," *The Guardian*, December 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/dec/30/-sp-rebecca-solnit-listen-up-women-are-telling-their-story-now>.

²⁹ Rosemary C. Salomone, *The Rise of English: Global Politics and the Power of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

³⁰ Christine Ro writes, "A particular status is attached to English that sounds as if it comes from countries that are wealthy, majority white and mostly monolingual. According to this limited view, multilingual countries like Nigeria and Singapore have less 'legitimate' and desirable forms of English (even though English is an official language in both)." Christine Ro, "The pervasive problem of 'linguistic racism,'" June 3, 2021, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210528-the-pervasive-problem-of-linguistic-racism>.

³¹ "Trump: We Speak English Here, Not Spanish." CNN, September 16, 2015, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNjcAgNu1Ac>.

³² Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ OCA was founded as the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) and was rebranded in 2013 to be OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates and advocate on behalf of all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

³⁵ I also looked at Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Porte-Parole Mouthpiece*, 1993 where he places a device over mouths of immigrants making them look almost cyborg-like, highlighting their perpetual strangeness. He describes the artwork on his website "The screen displays the image of the user's lips as they narrate their story: the immigrant's actual testimony is replaced by a moving image of his mouth and the sound of their voice."

³⁶ Directly translates to "small drops made into oceans, small pieces made into mountains." I believe *great waves from tiny ripples grow* would be a similar quote.

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