

HOME
AND
AWAY **HOM**
AND
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AND **AWA**
AWAY

Eight Asian
Australian Artists

HOME AND AWAY

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Presented by 16albermarle Project Space

Curators

Dr. Luise Guest

Jennifer Yang

16albermarle Project Space, Sydney

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16albermarle Project Space acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional owners of the land on which we work. We pay our respects to elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.



Contents

6	Foreword John Cruthers
9	“Sometimes What Home Is ... isn’t that” Dr. Luise Guest
14	Memory is the medium Jennifer Yang
18	Artists Ida Lawrence Jessica Bradford Linda Sok NC Qin Pamela Leung Ruth Ju-Shih Li Shoufay Derz Tianli Zu
42	List of Works
44	Exhibition Personnel
46	Acknowledgements



Shoufay Derz
Ritual of eels: Loving the alien, ongoing since 2019
pigment print on fine art gloss paper
71.6 x 91.1 cm

Foreword

16albermarle Project Space was established in 2019 to introduce Australian audiences to the countries of southeast Asia through contemporary art. The idea grew out of my own enthusiasm for the contemporary art I saw as I travelled in the region from 2013, visiting museums, galleries and collections and meeting artists and collectors. Each country was different in terms of its history, colonial legacy and contemporary issues. But in each one contemporary artists were actively and passionately involved in addressing issues and representing people who often had little access to the political process.

As a long-time collector and adviser to collectors, I knew the power of art to engage people. And I knew first-hand the corresponding fascination in learning through art about the cultures and societies in which the art was produced. But I was also aware of the uncertainty of many Australians about our place in the region, which often led to anxiety and diffidence in terms of deeper engagement. Contemporary southeast Asian art and a venue to present it in Sydney seemed to offer an ideal opportunity to win over Australian audiences and facilitate connections – a cultural experiment supported by detailed interpretive materials, public programs and workshops, educational resources for schools, artist visits and art tours to key events in the region.

However, the reality was that we were situated in Australia. And even though our focus was southeast Asia, it was important to acknowledge and engage with Australian art. As a result we decided to program an Australian exhibition every year. In 2020 this was *Re/production: Australian art of the 1980s and 90s*, which explored post-modernism and postcolonial themes in Australian art. In early 2022 we presented *Goobalathaldin: Dick Roughsey and friends*, a survey exhibition of this little-known but important Indigenous artist from Mornington Island.

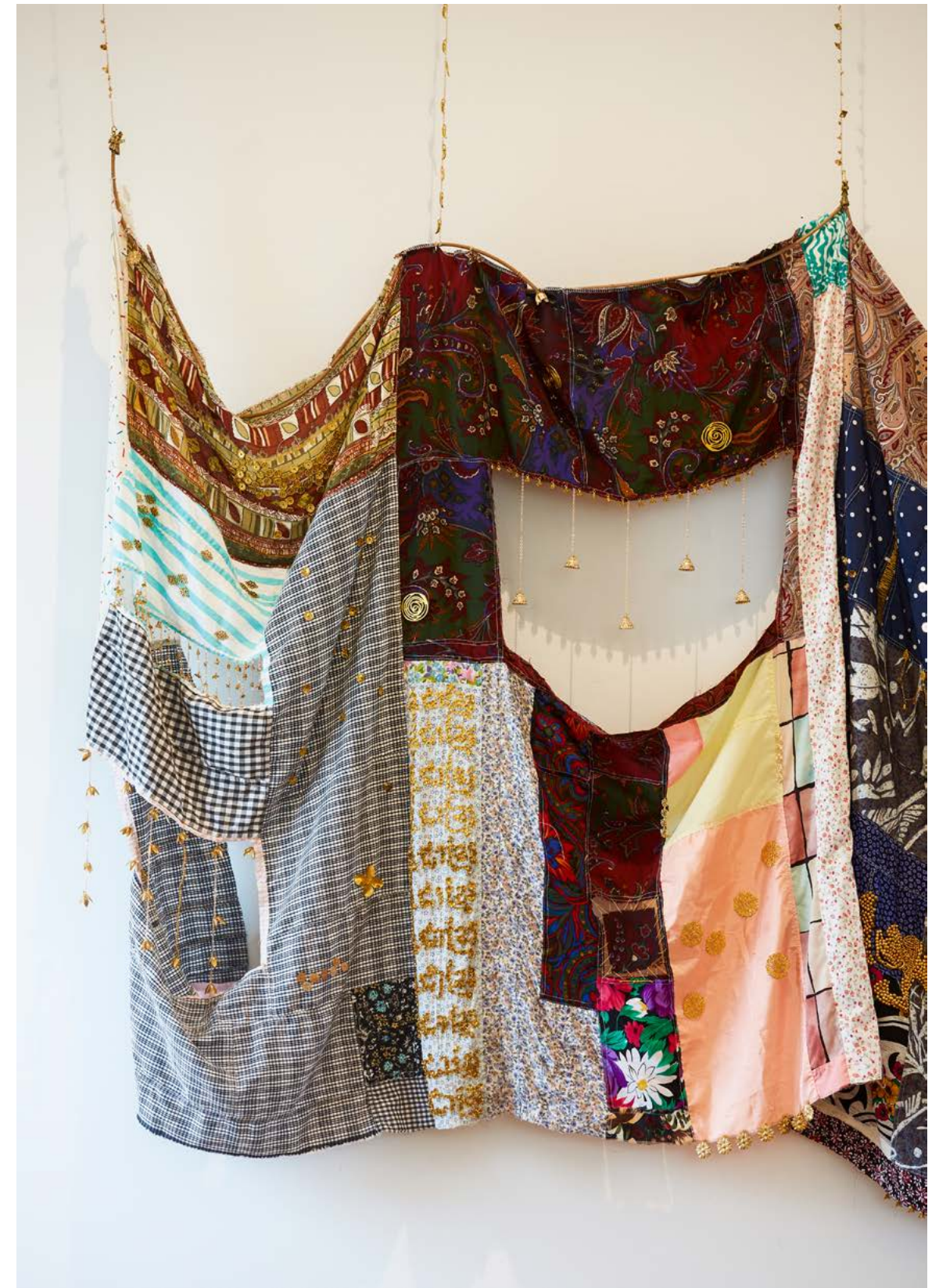
We're very proud of these exhibitions and the contribution they made to the discourse around Australian art. But an unintended consequence was that they took our focus away from the region and risked confusing audiences about who we were and what we did. So for the third 'Australian' exhibition, we decided on a show which connected Australia and the region, "home and away".

Each of the artists in this exhibition have East Asian or southeast Asian heritage, and have lived and worked in Australia and elsewhere. Chosen by curators Luise Guest and Jennifer Yang, they each reflect on their transcultural experiences through their conceptual intentions and through the materiality of their art practice. As Luise writes:

For the eight artists in Home and Away constructions of selfhood are built upon their family ties to Asia, and from their transcultural Asian Australian identities. Some were born elsewhere and migrated to Australia, others are Australian-born with parents who came as migrants. Some live and work in Australia and some have moved to a third country, navigating new diasporic uncertainties. Despite diversity, their work is connected by a common thread – they explore the elusive nature of 'home' from the perspective of the diasporic experience. What does it mean to live and work in many places, yet sense that 'home' is, somehow, always elsewhere? How does our increasing awareness of the fragility of our planet change our ideas about home?

Beautifully curated by Luise and Jennifer, *Home and Away* presents a model for future exhibitions, one that allows us to work with and support Australian artists while exploring the multivalent connections many Australians have with the region.

John Cruthers



Linda Sok
Mending fragments of a memory 2021 (detail)
fabric (assorted), metal trinkets, string, rattan, paint
dimensions variable



Pamela Leung
Agglomerate 2022–2023
 newspaper crochet sculpture
 200 x 220 cm

Tianli Zu
Fruit #1, #3 and #4 2020
 hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour
 100 x 100 cm each

“Sometimes What Home Is ... isn’t that”

*“Not the tamarind. But instead/ lemon
 Not nipa mats on floors for beds/ but rather frames
 Sometimes/ what home is ... isn’t that.”*

(Oliver de la Paz, ‘Chain Migration II: On Negations and Substitutions’)

In my 1960s childhood, whenever my mother had to fill in an official form she listed her profession as ‘home-maker’ – or sometimes as ‘home duties’, which sounded much less pleasant. It didn’t occur to me then to question what it meant, or how one ‘makes’ a home. All I knew was that I wanted one like those illustrated in my Ladybird First Readers, where Dick and Jane had a puppy, a kitten, a mother in an apron and a father with a pipe, neither of whom appeared to be drunk. ‘Home’, in those days, was the domain of women. Men were out doing things in the world.

In more contemporary times ‘home’ has become the focus of academic research in disciplines as diverse as sociology, anthropology, psychology, human geography, history, architecture, philosophy and fine arts. Is ‘home’ one place or many? A physical space, or a state of being that is actively constructed and reconstructed? What does home mean for us now, in this globalised, post-pandemic world of temporary havens and restless moves? Our relocations are sometimes small shifts across cities, sometimes major migrations across national borders, but always, no matter how voluntarily entered into, they represent dislocation and some degree of loss. We all carry within us an imaginary map of everywhere we have ever lived, loved or lost; cartographies of identity and belonging made up of battered, overlapping, overwritten fragments of time and place. Home is always with us, and within us – whether we are here, or there, or somewhere else. In multicultural Australia such personal geographies are complicated, encompassing migration, the crossing of oceans and borders, the learning of new languages and unfamiliar cultural norms, and the reinvention of self.

In our conversations with the artists in this exhibition, I have begun to think of the apparently opposing binaries of ‘home’ and ‘away’ as being not opposites at all, but a liquid state in which the one is always on the verge of transforming into the other. ‘Home’ is to be yearned for – but also sometimes resisted or rejected. This place of nostalgia, of refuge, of familial embrace, is also – and sometimes simultaneously – a source of regret, sorrow or remembered trauma. Home is not the consolatory myth

of the breezy (oh so white) Australian TV soap opera that lends the exhibition its ironic title. Rather home is, for many of us, something much darker and altogether more chimerical.

The eight artists in *Home and Away* reveal complex relationships to ideas of ‘home’. What does it mean to live and work in many places, yet to feel that ‘home’ is always elsewhere, ‘away’? There is a sense of yearning in how they each draw upon personal and cultural memory, and their ancestral ties to Asia, in works that reflect complicated histories of travel and (dis)location. The writer Kimberley Alidio suggests that we look to Black British scholar Stuart Hall’s notion of transcultural identity as a form of ‘always postponed arrival’,¹ an idea that was echoed in the slippages and ambiguities that emerged in conversation with each artist in the exhibition. NC Qin describes it as ‘living in an intersection’ – in the borderlands. Ida Lawrence suggested that for her ‘home’ was not geographically or nationally demarcated at all but was instead her studio: ‘my little universe, my world’. Eight artists, eight very different stories of place and time.

A conceptual framework that illuminates this problematic process of living across and between cultures, and emphasises its advantages as well as its difficulties, was developed by Chinese artist Chen Zhen (陈箴, 1955–2000).² Drawing upon his nomadic life and fluidly changing circumstances Chen, who moved from Shanghai to France in 1986, developed a model of transcultural thought that he named ‘transexpérience’ (*rongchao jingyan*). It refers to ‘the transcendental feelings related to the ephemeral nature of existence as well as to the experiences of those who emigrate and learn to establish bridges between different cultural traditions.’³ This is ‘a type of internal “loneliness of spirituality and the overlapping of experiences,” even perhaps a . . . “cultural homelessness” [whereby] you do not belong to anybody yet are in possession of everything.’⁴

Chen felt, he said, like a kind of amphibian in his new life in Paris. As scholar Alex Burchmore points out, he ‘linked transexperience with the Chinese term zou (走), meaning

“movement” or “to walk” but implying a broad range of connotations from searching, wandering and escape, to abandonment, desertion and seclusion. These associations are united in Chen’s aspiration for a “spiritual running-away . . . [a breaking] out of one’s own ‘cocoon,’ and [a desire to] to ‘break away from one’s own self’”.⁵

For Chen transexperience is a dynamic state filled with pulsating energy as one adapts to changed circumstances in a triple process that he named ‘Residence-Resonance-Resistance’. The past is always resonating in the present in a kind of liquid coalescence: as Kimberley Alidio elaborates, speaking of the diasporic experience, ‘the past and the future converge in the present, as do places of origin and migration.’⁶ If we were inclined to a Daoist world view (which certainly imbued Chen’s thinking), we might see this process as the transformative, constantly oscillating, mutually reciprocal universal forces of *yin* and *yang*.

The artists in *Home and Away* are, like Chen Zhen, making work that reflects their fluid circumstances, familial histories and ancestral connections. They enthusiastically embrace the expanding possibilities of their mobility while at the same time looking back to the experiences and encounters that have led them to this point. Home, it seems, is a palimpsest of past and present, memory and imagination, belonging and non-belonging. As Shoufay Derz told me some years ago, ‘I am interested in the hybrid feeling of foreignness and connectedness. I don’t know what it’s like to be certain of one’s cultural identity.’⁷

This exhibition, too, is a palimpsest – of materiality, imagery, ideas, texts and subtexts. Jessica Bradford’s miniaturised ceramic sculptures, for example, represent rock forms inspired by found photographs of Singapore’s iconic Haw Par Villa theme park. They are imbued with a nostalgic, blurry memory of a childhood far away, and with cultural references to the scholar rocks, or *gongshi* (供石), that represent a microcosm of the natural world within the Chinese garden. Beloved of literati scholars, the fantastical forms of these rocks, themselves often objects of artifice, are simulated in the theme park landscape. With its fabricated grottos and painted mountainscapes revealing bizarre dioramas of heaven and hell, Haw Par Villa is the ideal vehicle for the uncanny juxtapositions of personal and collective memory that Bradford explores.

Memory also imbues Linda Sok’s interconnected fragments of patterned textiles, pieced together like her family’s now-distant memories of fleeing the Khmer Rouge. *Mending fragments of a memory*, an evocative installation of discarded, repurposed textiles, utilises fabric scraps salvaged from her aunt’s job as a factory seamstress that had been sewn together many years before. The result is a cross-generational collaborative work, a means of sharing



Jessica Bradford, *Haw Par Villa rock study #35 (Statue) 2022*
bisque fired underglazed porcelain, 24 x 17 x 15.5 cm

language and culture. The ‘mending’ in the title is both literal and metaphoric, as the work reveals the hand-stitching of the artist, her mother, aunt and grandmother, an act of family connection that resists the ravages wrought by war and violence.

Since migrating to the USA Sok feels even more drawn to family, and her family’s stories of life in Cambodia. We are wrapped in and embraced by textiles, she says, whether they take the form of garments or the quilts that her grandmother and mother stitched; they represent closeness to the body, comfort and connection. Her work hangs in the gallery space like a curtain that partly conceals and partly reveals a distant view. Like other artists in *Home and Away*, Sok feels somewhat disconnected from her heritage and language. By re-joining these textiles, stitching them with gold trinkets and writing/oversewing barely visible Khmer text, she pieces together family stories, including their flight from the Cambodian genocide.

Difficult memories are similarly embedded in Berlin-based multidisciplinary artist Shoufay Derz’s cast bronze ox tongue – a viscerally brutal allegory of how it feels to be silenced by the lack of a common language with her Taiwanese mother and German father. That push and pull of foreignness and connectedness leads Derz to explore themes of the fragility of existence and the possibility/impossibility of communication across languages and cultures. Raised without a mother tongue, Derz grapples with a sense of being ‘neither this nor that,’ living in a place of contradiction. At once beautiful and repellent, placed atop a stack of paper, the tongue becomes a potent symbol of loss – of speech, language and culture. The work’s Japanese title, *Mü*, (or *Wu* in Chinese) means ‘without’.

Derz’s photographic and video works from the *Loving the alien* series grew out of a project that began on Sydney’s northern beaches and was then continued in Berlin. Longing for remembered smells of the bush and the beach, she imagines fragile, mysterious threads of connection and belonging that tie us to the natural world and to each other. With faces painted bright green, the participants in her disconcerting images resemble sprites or naiads, but in fact they represent the eels found in the original Australian waterway. They appear simultaneously at one with and alien from their environs, whether depicted in the wild bush around Manly Dam or the tamed landscape of Berlin’s parks and gardens.

Themes of connection and disconnection also underpin emerging sculptor NC Qin’s work in *Home and Away*. Her jade green, recycled glass *Moongates* are an intentional reference to her Chinese ancestry. Like Bradford’s artificial Singaporean mountainscapes made from porcelain, Qin’s glass *Moongates* are a cultural artifact seen from afar. The artist speaks of her identity as a ‘third culture kid’, born in Australia to Chinese parents. Today she works with the medium of glass to reflect on her ancestral Chinese culture from the distance of this further shore. Her second work in the exhibition interrogates the problematic nature of the relationship. Like Stuart Hall’s lament about the difficulties of connecting with his familial homeland of Jamaica – ‘It was the space I couldn’t occupy, a space I had to learn to occupy’⁸ – *Compass broken* symbolizes Qin’s struggle to connect with her Chinese family history. Its cracked surface and Daoist symbolic language represent what the artist describes as a generation who ‘grasp for the culture of their ancestors but find only a superficial sense of connection.’

Taiwanese-born ceramic sculptor Ruth Ju-Shih Li, similarly, has chosen to explore connections to culture with that most Chinese of materials, porcelain. Now working between Sydney, Taipei, and her studio in the ancient porcelain capital of Jingdezhen, her work emphasises its debt to a specifically Chinese material culture – porcelain exported globally from the imperial kilns was perhaps the world’s first global ‘brand’. In the *Self portrait* series, made from finest Jingdezhen porcelain clay, each small relief sculpture is a meditation on identity and selfhood. Inside the fragile reproduction of each ornate oval mirror frame, instead of the anticipated reflected image we see outstretched birds’ wings and the furled petals of invented flowers, universal symbols, a cross-cultural language that transcends words. Li describes her works as autobiographical, a celebration of renewal and natural cycles, exploring cultural confluences and intersections between humans and the natural world.



Shoufay Derz, *Loving the alien, Chaveli / open 2023*, from *Ritual of eels*
pigment print on cotton paper, 91.1 x 71.6 cm

The significance of language recurs in many works in the exhibition. Ida Lawrence’s gestural, painterly canvases with their idiosyncratic combinations of text and image allude to ongoing conversations. Overheard snippets of stories from strangers, friends and the artist’s family appear in her paintings. She constructs ambiguous narratives, tales, she says, of ‘(mis)understanding, (dis)connection, generosity, failure and surprise’. An astute observer of people and place, her works combine real and imagined events, texts and subtexts from her life in Australia, Indonesia and now in Germany. Her paintings reveal the elements of their construction, intentionally awkward as if they are a text in the process of becoming – an allegory, perhaps, of a life lived in many places.

For Pamela Leung, too, it is words – the endangered Traditional Chinese characters and Cantonese language – that she turns to in her determination to resist the loss of culture. She asks: is ‘home’ any longer recognisable when its distinct language and culture is steadily erased? In installations, neons and performance works Leung examines how the loss of a unique Hong Kong identity exacerbates the pain of being separated from her own history. Her ongoing project, *Agglomerate*, is a collaborative work begun with her 94-year-old mother and continued with participants from the Hong Kong diaspora across

the globe who contribute long strings made from Chinese newspapers to the artist. These newsprint strings, originally featuring the Traditional Chinese characters used in Hong Kong and Taiwan, in contrast to the Simplified Chinese that Mao Zedong introduced in Mainland China, are crocheted into a woven mat of unreadable text. Leung describes the work as ‘an act of resistance against dispossession and dislocation’, an artifact of an increasingly invisible and endangered cultural and linguistic history that connects her with the global Cantonese diaspora.

In contrast, Tianli Zu’s chosen ‘language’ is a technique derived from Chinese folk art. As a child during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, her grandmother taught her simple papercutting techniques. Later, as an art student in Beijing she travelled to rural Shaanxi Province where, seated in tiny rural homes, she learned papercutting from women who knew the traditional methods. In the late 1980s and 1990s in China, contemporary artists transformed aspects of folk-art such as papercutting, wood block printing and embroidery into contemporary art practices in a process described by art historian Wu Hung as ‘distilling materiality’ and ‘translating visuality’.⁹ Today she juxtaposes her memories of long ago rural China and representations of folk tales with a contemporary multidisciplinary practice in which her papercuts often incorporate light, sound, video and installation to become immersive experiences.

Zu thinks of her papercuts as representing forces of *yin* and *yang*: form and void, light and dark, presence and absence; all these allude to the mutual interdependence of these cosmological relationships and to our own with our increasingly fragile natural world. The three works in the exhibition were made in the first year of the global pandemic, when borders were closed, we were all locked

down in our homes, and Zu was far from her children in the UK. Representing a pomegranate, a strawberry and a peach, they symbolise respectively fertility, love and longevity, becoming a metaphor of the artist’s love for her absent children in a dangerous world.

For the eight artists in *Home and Away* constructions of self are built upon fluid ‘Asian-Australian’ identities. Some were born elsewhere and migrated to Australia, others are Australian-born with parents who came as migrants. Some live and work in Australia and some have moved to a third country, navigating new diasporic uncertainties. There is a leitmotif of loss underlying many works, juxtaposed with a strong desire for connection with cultural heritage, with language and with the natural world. And in the work of each artist, the physical, material properties of their chosen media and techniques are imbued with multiple meanings. We might choose to see these artists as connected by their common experience of ‘Asian Australian-ness’, and of course this is true. However, *Home and Away* explores the ambiguities and nuances of such transcultural identities, and their works invite us to (re)consider notions of ‘home’ in our contemporary world of porous borders, geopolitical tensions and climate change anxiety. The artists are joined by fragile, cobweb-like threads of interconnected ideas about ‘home’: where it is, what it might be, what it means to belong, or not to belong. So – it’s complicated. In the words of Filipino poet Oliver de la Paz:

“Without the noise of home I learn /
to hear my body’s own sound.”¹⁰

Luise Guest
November 2023

Notes

¹ Kimberley Alidio, ‘What Home is, Isn’t That’, *Poetry Foundation*, 24 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/160722/what-home-is- isnt-that> [accessed 12 October 2023]

² Born in Shanghai in 1955, Chen Zhen grew up in a French-speaking medical family during the Cultural Revolution. He studied at the Shanghai School of Fine Arts and Crafts (1973), where he started teaching in 1976, and later, in 1978, at the Shanghai Drama Institute, where he specialised in set design and began teaching in 1982. When he moved to France in 1986 Chen Zhen experienced culture shock. His work then developed according to a transcultural philosophy that he named ‘Transexpérience’.

³ Laia Manonelles Moner (2022) ‘Chen Zhen, Transcultural Dialogues under Construction’, *Third Text*, 36:1, 1-17, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2022.2027668.

⁴ Alex Burchmore (2023) *New Export China: Translations across Time and Place in Contemporary Chinese Porcelain Art*. Oakland: University of California Press. p.6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kimberley Alidio, ‘What Home is, Isn’t That’.

⁷ Luise Guest, ‘Speaking in Tongues: the art of Shoufay Derz’, *CoBo Social*, 21 September 2020

⁸ Stuart Hall, cited in Claire Alexander (2009) ‘STUART HALL AND ‘RACE’, *Cultural Studies*, 23:4, 457-482, DOI: 10.1080/09502380902950914

⁹ Wu Hung, 2012. ‘Negotiating with tradition in contemporary Chinese art: Three’, Hong Kong: M+ [Online] https://www.mplusmatters.hk/inkart/paper_topic10.php?l=en

¹⁰ Oliver de la Paz, ‘Diaspora Sonnet in the Sage Desert When Grandmother Tries to Sleep.’



Ida Lawrence, *Batas suci* 2022
acrylic on polycotton, 155 x 120 cm

Memory is the medium

There is something to be educated in the age-old, maybe tired, distinction between a house and a home. When we say that a house is not a home, we are not simply negating the equivalence between the two. We mean to say that a house is not *quite* a home; that home is something more: a physical structure that is inhabited and given meaning, enfolded into a human frame of reference so that it is greater than the sum of its structural parts. A home is where memory collocates with physicality, where it is made material. To see home through the window of memory is to contemplate the ways in which ‘home’ can be done up and undone, how it might slip away from us and return in other forms, and to acknowledge its incompleteness and multiplicity—that home is still in the making.

Home and Away presents the work of eight artists who each consider Australia some form of home but bear multiple affiliations to places elsewhere. Amusingly, the exhibition shares its title with an Australian television soap opera that I have never watched, but that has become somewhat iconic in a superficial global imagining of (white) Australia. It might be ambitious to suggest that we are dismantling this image...indeed, much of the exhibition’s planning coincided with the ugly rearing head of settler sovereignty during the recent Australian referendum, and now...its particularly horrific reverberations overseas in the tightening stranglehold on Gaza. But, in the modest spaces we have opened for conversation with artists, *Home and Away* has become something of a departure point—an unstable ground from which we have leapt off to open up more complex discussions around a post-national concept of home, fractured through experiences of migrancy, movement and linguistic and cultural difference. Yet the

subject of diaspora itself is uneven and contested. The cultural theorist May Ien Ang, for example, conceives of diasporic identity as a ‘prisonhouse’.¹ Writing as an Indonesian with Chinese heritage, Ang asks if one can ‘say no to Chineseness?’, that is, an essentialised racial identity mobilised as a marker of distinction outside of the mainland.² In doing so, she points to the ways in which the paradigm of diaspora as a supposed challenge to nationalism collapses in on itself, creating its own mythical centres, structures and “homes”. These are problems incurred, as anthropologist James Clifford has observed, in the ‘centring of diasporas around an axis of origin and return.’³ Might we instead return our focus to the present conditions, experiences, conceptual intrigues of these artists? Conditions which are not defined by a distant, imagined connection to a territorial centre or “home” to be “away” from, even as they register the influence of open memories which bleed, build, and mutate across national borders?

The practices displayed in *Home and Away* are laborious and longitudinal in form. These are modes of working which destabilise the idea of home as a singular and stationary point in time and space in their structure and tempo. Tianli Zu cuts intricate patterns into paper by hand in a time-intensive exercise in patience and negotiation. It is a practice she has grown up with, studied in Shaanxi and now continues in Australia. Working with a medium that is both fragile and resilient, NC Qin collects shards of recycled glass to reform them into her *Moongates*, recalling the aesthetics of jade and the philosophical principles of Daoism, through a precarious and lengthy process of glass production learnt and practiced in Australia. In other cases,

the works displayed form part of longer-term collaborations. Shoufay Derz’s performance-photo-video project, *Ritual of eels: Loving the alien* 2019 began with a tour of Gulgadya Muru at Manly Dam and has now travelled with the artist to Berlin, where friends and strangers continue to join in the making of the work. Pamela Leung crochets together Chinese language newspapers gathered by a cross-continental Hong Kong diaspora community in her ongoing project titled *Agglomerate*. To interact with such practices is to revisit the past as open and unfinished business; to think of remembrance as an active commitment and memory as a conscious “doing”. The diasporic condition is perhaps not so much about being away, as it is about a continual, residual and very much material making of home and memory—a process in which old connections are lost or creatively re-figured across new interfaces. As I look toward the wide-ranging material practices brought together in *Home and Away*, I speculate: what is the texture of memory, its colour and shape? How does it feel underneath your fingers? Does a memory end or resolve? When memory takes material form, is it ours to know and keep? And finally, in thinking about the recursive and paradoxically generative patterns of memory—its openness and ongoing-ness—is the location and description of memory about the presence or the absence of an original...origin...or home?

Accumulations

The idea that material or medium might accumulate memory is taken up by Linda Sok in her textile installation, *Mending fragments of a memory* 2021. Here, fabric operates as an extended metaphor: to partake in the act of weaving is to interlace multiple threads, or strands of ideas, in the warp and weft of fibres to create a wholly larger and more complex form. In *Mending fragments of a memory*, Sok patches together old scrap textiles collected by her aunt from her job as a factory seamstress, which were reworked into items of clothing and functional household objects. Draped loosely in a way that hints at figures and forms veiled underneath, Sok’s work is a reminder that fabric lives with us—it swathes our bodies, cloaks us and rests upon and wraps around our skin. In this way, woven material is a witness to the body, its sensations, motions and traumata. What might we be looking at when we gaze upon fragments which once formed part of a bedsheet, or a well-loved blouse? Sok both invokes and augments fabric’s mnemonic faculties through the addition of a tender detail: the gold trinkets sewn into the fabric resemble the jewellery Sok’s grandmother once stitched into the lining of her clothing to fund her escape from the Khmer Rouge regime. It is a story the artist has inherited through conversations with her grandmother, translated by her mother and now pieced together in Sok’s work. And yet Sok’s act of mending recognises the impossibility of

completeness or a return to a perfect original. Just as we speak of the knitting together of a fabric of love, or society, or the universe, we also refer to its loosened seams, its tearing apart, the way it frays at the selvages. As Sok feeds the remnants of these translated conversations—histories she inherits but never fully comprehends—back through Google Translate, she allows room for loss and mistranslation as she repaints Khmer text onto the underside of the fabric. Hiding the text beneath gold embroidery, Sok seeks a kind of protection offered only in the preservation of metaphorical distance and in the act of concealment. Sok is, of course, conversant with broader scores of national history, human migration and displacement, and the horrors of a genocidal regime; but a space is held for the intimate passage of fabric and its attendant metaphors of love, loss, bodily experience, along matrilineal family lines.

For Ruth Ju-Shih Li, medium is a point of access into shared temporalities. In a conversation about the practical affairs of storage, Li assures us that she would not be upset if something were to happen her works. It is an observance of ephemerality as a spiritual philosophy which informs her more recent experimentations with site-specific installations of unfired clay. There is an understanding here that clay joins together moments in time; it holds time in its very composition, in its grit and minerals. The lapse between unfired and fired clay—earth in the ground and refined porcelain ware; clay and clay remoulded—is only momentary in the grander rhythms of geological time. In *Home and Away*, however, the artist presents two earlier



Tianli Zu, *Fruit #1* 2020
hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour, 100 x 100 cm

bodies of work, created two years apart. The *Self portrait* series 2019 consists of five of palm-sized ‘mirrors’, made in Li’s studio in the porcelain capital of China, Jingdezhen. Delicacy is invoked in the material qualities of Jingdezhen porcelain—there is a connection to the legacy of the fine porcelain wares of imperial China—but the mirrors bear a sense of humility and ordinariness in their small stature. Li imagines what a non-representational self-portrait might look like in a material language that is familiar to all. With the disruptive impact of a global pandemic, Li has had to adjust to working away from her studio in Jingdezhen. In this period of disconnect, her free-standing works, *Distant memories* 2021 and *In between* 2021, were moulded from Australian black clay. There are shared motifs which recur across both series—the forms of bird wings and talons, flowers and botanical tendrils—which are simultaneously familiar yet fantastical. In choosing to conjure flowers from her own imagination, Li avoids trapping them within codes of floriographic meaning; there is no prerequisite knowledge for the comprehension of these floral and faunal emblems. They instead constitute an ambiguous or what Li has described as a “universal” visual language. But a kind of indexical relation exists still in her sculptures; and is made ever more apparent in the way the purity of unalloyed porcelain from Jingdezhen dialogues with the organic shapes moulded from black Australian clay. Each work in their material constitution remembers a place, intimate feeling, and movement; their transformation into substance is an invitation to share in this sited reflection of self.



Ruth Ju-Shih Li, *In between* 2021
black clay, porcelain, glaze, custom metal stand
22 x 28 x 20 cm (30 x 28 x 20 cm with stand)

Translations

Ida Lawrence’s three paintings form a series of observations which explore the detours of conversation and the desires, resentment and sentiments hidden in dialogue. *Mau ke mana* from her *Basa-basi* (chitchat) series pictures the critically endangered Bali Myna bird in flight as a motif repeated until it morphs into a non-figurative form and the original reference is lost. It is a technique Ida takes deliberate interest in—a kind of telephone Pictionary which mimics the patterns of imperfect translation, the passage of secrets and rumours, the same word spoken until it becomes nonsensical, or a phrase repeated until it is void of meaning. *Mau ke mana* (where are you going?) is a common utterance in Bahasa Indonesia, a seemingly empty signifier to which you might simply respond with a vague gesture to “over there” (*ke sana*). Form and text travel together across the canvas until the answer arrives at the very end of the linear journey of our gaze. Lawrence is calling our attention to the alternate functions of language: as ritual and mnemonic instinct; a call and response that is embedded in social procedures and relationships. In *Batas suci* 2022, Lawrence riffs on words painted at the entrance of mosques she visited in Java—a “sacred boundary” marking the point where one is expected to remove their shoes. Language here is an authority: movement from one space to another is enacted linguistically, socially, spiritually, and habitually in the absence of a physical demarcation. Lawrence plays with these invisible boundaries. Line floats, splinters, wriggles in space; line reinforces the horizontality of the support and line also disrupts this parallelism, it tries and fails to contain. A third painting, *Relations* 2022-23, was made in Berlin, after Lawrence visited family in Australia; there is a shift in point of reference, or rather an oscillation between memories accumulated across locations. Again, Lawrence’s translation of what she describes as ‘something between a memory and situation’ into painterly form is lucid. The canvas is a ground for this process; Lawrence pictures the memory-situation in the pooling greens and blues of her grandmother’s hedge, the passive-aggressive redaction of 𐤅𐤇𐤍𐤁 (someone), and the sprawling, shrinking cursive which quietly inches up the vertical length of the canvas, like an undergrowth of soft bitterness and petty grudges you have to crane your neck to see. Memory pulses in the quotidian motions of language.

This act of reconstruction is taken up also by Jessica Bradford in her ongoing *Haw Par Villa* (2014-) series. Bradford begins with an interest in Haw Par Villa, a Chinese cultural theme park in Singapore. The park, which still stands today, was once a fond childhood memory for Bradford, who grew up in its vicinity. Built in the 1930s by Burmese-Chinese tycoons, it was later acquired by the state and underwent several rounds of redevelopment and renovation in the 80s. Bradford is conscious of a national

history of a constructed “Singaporean-ness” and its distinct brand of state-administered multiculturalism which plays out in the development of the park and the gradual accentuation/exaggeration of its “Chinese” aesthetics. These are narratives which interlap with Bradford’s own attempts to make sense of the confluence of national, ethnic and civic identities she slips between as someone with mixed race heritage. Having spent years collecting orphaned images of the site, Bradford meticulously translates these photographs into forms spanning drawing, sculpture, installation and video. Following photo theorist Susan Sontag, Bradford conceives of the photograph as a talismanic object: the desire to ‘access distant things’—a forgotten memory or lost heritage perhaps—is overlaid onto the photograph as an indexical trace.⁴ In *Home and Away*, Bradford’s tracings of the sediments of memory and history are continued in her *Haw Par Villa rock studies* series. The miniature bisque porcelain sculptures are replicas of the *shanshui* forms photographed in the park by the artist herself. Without their photographic accompaniments, the sculptures bring into focus the artifice of the notion of an authentic “Chinese-ness”, expressed in the echoic circles of self-reference between landscape/rockscape and art/painting. Pale and washed-out with pastel underglazes, the sculptures recall the concrete dioramas of the theme park, which were repainted white to become blank slates for new designs. There is a sense of the hurtling pace of architectural change in Singapore and the overriding of memory in the physical re-design of space in Bradford’s methodical attempts to re-vision the original Haw Par Villa. And yet it is an imperfect process. Imagination and contrivance are necessary elements in Bradford’s translations of the

dioramas into the flattened plane of the photographic image, and again into three-dimensional form. Haw Par Villa becomes a site for the interplay of national narratives, family memories and vernacular histories—existing multifariously and elusively in official documentation, tourist materials, family photographs and Bradford’s own memory.

To return now to the idea of home in my concluding remarks is perhaps self-defeating. Somewhere down the line, home has become a dead metaphor—a word we borrow only to try and find a way of troubling it. What has excited me most about the artists gathered together in this exhibition is not a deferral to a home or origin in the conceptual underpinnings of their work, but the ways in which their artmaking practices so intently mediate our ideas about the functions and patterns of memory, language and landscape. An exhibition such as this offers us the privilege of a cursory glance at what are mostly long-term and time-intensive artmaking practices. These are practices which are so intimately anchored to presence, the present, and the procedure of making that it seems compulsory to describe them in nominalised verb-form. Memory has been and is the medium. It accumulates, is translated and continually enacted into form in the work of these eight artists. And memory, imperfect in nature, emboldened by its fictive dimensions and possibly freed from its originations, charts its own impossible cartographies.

Jennifer Yang
October 2023

Notes

- ¹ Ien Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm,” *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): p 241.
- ² Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness?” p 242.
- ³ Originally in James Clifford, “Diasporas,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p 266. Quoted in Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness?” p 234.
- ⁴ Jessica Bradford, “Haw Par Villa: Representations and Remediation of Singaporean Culture,” MA Dissertation, The University of Sydney, 2016, p 31—32. Last accessed 6 November 2023. <https://hdl.handle.net/2123/22498>. Bradford quotes Sontag in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p 109.

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Ida Lawrence

b 1988 Sydney, Australia



Ida Lawrence is an astute observer of small, apparently insignificant moments of the everyday that assume a poetic significance in her work. Her paintings are often inspired by snippets of conversation overheard and remembered, and by odd, apparently random events – the quirks and idiosyncrasies of ordinary people, their connections and disconnections. Her painting practice begins with writing a story rather than making a sketch – and her words in a notebook or in a Word file are then transformed in an intuitive, expressive visual language of line, mark, image and colour. The fragments of text remain – often elusive and mysterious, tantalising us with possible meanings.

In *Home and Away* Lawrence shows two paintings that refer to her experience of Indonesia, where she has regularly visited Bali, Jakarta and her father's Central Javan village of Kliwonan, and one new work produced specifically for this exhibition. *Basa basi* translates as 'chit chat' or 'small talk', and *mau ke mana* means 'where are you going?'. This is a friendly, mostly rhetorical question often asked of the artist by relatives, friends and strangers in Indonesia – an indication of the very human desire to connect. The repeated image of the bird, degrading across the canvas until it is almost abstract, suggests how our experiences of transit and travel inevitably alter us, while the net-like pattern in the background and the fallen feather are a little ominous. *Batas suci* refers to the term 'sacred boundary', written on the steps of mosques in Java to indicate where one must remove one's shoes. Lawrence asks: "Where is the boundary between sacred and secular? How do we humans make these distinctions?" As she began work on *Relations* in her Berlin studio Lawrence was thinking about the Australian part of her identity, remembering apparently trivial conversations about everyday minutiae that reveal the often-humorous cross-currents of family life and relationships. The suggestion of a window framed by lace curtains with the view beyond occluded by an overgrown hedge, provides a poetic metaphor for the distance between 'home' and 'away'.

Painter Ida Lawrence weaves stories of her Indonesian and Australian families and the interactions and absurdities of daily life through juxtapositions of colour, pattern, imagery and text. They are informed by research, observations and the tragi-comedic experiences of a life lived between Australia, Indonesia and Germany where she currently lives and works in Berlin. Lawrence has been based in Indonesia at different times, including 2010-2013 while studying dance with the Darmasiswa Scholarship at the Indonesian Arts Institute, Yogyakarta. Ida is a member of Woven Kolektif, a group of artists who formed through their shared connections to Indonesia and Australia.



Ida Lawrence
Basa basi (Mau ke mana) 2022
acrylic on polycotton
155 x 120 cm

Jessica Bradford

b 1987 Singapore



Jessica Bradford is a Singapore-born multidisciplinary artist who works across painting, ceramics, video and installation. She explores her mixed-race heritage and questions representations of an ‘authentic’ cultural or national identity. Her work in *Home and Away* riffs on the artificial landscape of an eccentric, iconic Singaporean theme park, Haw Par Villa. Once called Tiger Balm Gardens, Haw Par Villa was built in 1937 by millionaire Aw Boon Haw and is now marketed as “a treasure trove of Asian culture, history, philosophy and religion” – albeit in a somewhat Disneyfied version. Bradford’s small porcelain and stoneware forms were based on archival amateur photographs taken by visitors to the theme park. Just as the faded photographs, reproduced many times and degraded in the copying process, are a blurry image of the actual landscape, so too the identity of the transcultural artist is brought into question as a kind of simulacrum.

The landscape of Haw Par Villa emulates the artifice of Chinese gardens, with a mountainscape of fake Chinese ‘scholar rocks’, the *gongshi* that members of the Chinese Imperial bureaucracy liked to place on their desks to remind them of the fantastical forms of the natural world. With its grottoes and mountainscapes revealing bizarre dioramas of ‘The Ten Courts of Hell’, Haw Par Villa is the ideal vehicle for the uncanny juxtapositions of personal and collective memory that Bradford explores. Miniaturised and replicated in clay that is intentionally fired only once rather than glaze-fired, there is a wistful nostalgia in these forms. They represent the blurring effect of childhood memory, an acute sense of loss – and an awareness of the absurdity of essentialising nationalist myth making.

Born in Singapore, Jessica Bradford is a multidisciplinary artist based in Sydney/Gadigal Land. She has held solo exhibitions at Galerie Pompom, Firstdraft and MOP Projects. Bradford’s work has been included in curated exhibitions at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery (2023), 4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art (2019), Delmar Gallery (2017), Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (2015), Fairfield Museum & Gallery (2014) and Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest (2013). Bradford holds an MFA by Research from Sydney College of the Arts, and was a recipient of the Australian Postgraduate Award. She has been a finalist in the Ramsay Art Prize, John Fries Memorial Prize, the Tim Olsen Drawing Prize and the Jenny Birt Award.



Jessica Bradford
Haw Par Villa rock study #25 2018
bisque fired underglazed porcelain
12.5 x 18 x 8 cm

Linda Sok

b 1993 Sydney, Australia



Linda Sok's work in *Home and Away* explores her ancestral ties to Cambodia and recalls her family's memories of fleeing the Khmer Rouge genocide. Rather than remembered trauma, however, she is focused on healing and intergenerational connection in works such as *Mending fragments of a memory*. The textiles she pieces together in this work were originally fabric scraps brought home by her seamstress aunt. Stitched together by her mother and grandmother to make new garments, quilts and blankets, they are imbued with tactile nostalgia. The work hangs like a draped curtain that partly reveals and partly conceals, mirroring the fragmented narrative of family history that Sok is – literally – piecing together. Textiles, she says, whether garments or quilts, are always close to the body. They provide comfort and connection in times of distress and homesickness.

The 'mending' in the title is both literal and metaphoric, as the work reveals the stitching of the artist, her mother, aunt and grandmother, an act of family connection that resists the ravages wrought by war and violence. Sok remembers speaking with her grandmother about the family's flight from Cambodia in a mix of Khmer and English, with her mother translating. Oversewn and barely visible Khmer text represents her generation's fading memories; linguistically and culturally disconnected from their heritage they rely on translation to speak with their relatives. The gold trinkets sewn onto the piece recall how her grandmother stitched gold jewellery into the lining of her clothing as they escaped and made their way to Australia. Sok describes her feelings about her complex identity and her struggles to restore a connection with Khmer culture: "It means to be in-between. It means to be both and neither... but it also means to have the best of both worlds. It means solidarity with other Asian Australians, but also a longing for a homeland."

Linda Sok is a second-generation descendant of survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime, a genocidal period in Cambodia's history which forced her family to flee Cambodia. By accessing fragments of this traumatic past, she attempts to recontextualize lost traditions and culture to allow living descendants to process the history through a decolonized contemporary lens. With careful considerations for cultural objects, rituals, traditions and their materiality, her practice manifests in sculptural installations. Linda has exhibited in institutions such as Center for Craft (NC), Artspace (NSW), Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre (NSW), Firstdraft Gallery (NSW), Institute of Modern Art (QLD) and Gertrude Contemporary (VIC). She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from UNSW Art & Design with First Class Honours and the University Medal in Fine Arts. Linda is currently an Artist-in-Residence at the Lower East Side Printshop in New York.



Linda Sok
Mending fragments of a memory 2021
fabric (assorted), metal trinkets, string, rattan, paint
dimensions variable

NC Qin

b 1992 Sydney, Australia



Compass broken refers to the ancient Chinese Daoist compass, showing the symbols of each of the mythical guardian beasts that rule the cardinal directions – the Tortoise of the North, the Tiger of the East, the Phoenix of the South and the Dragon of the West. But this contemporary compass is cracked: it symbolises a generation of children born to Chinese immigrants who yearn to understand the culture of their ancestors but can find only a superficial sense of connection.

For NC Qin the work represents her experiences as a ‘Third Culture Kid’, born to Chinese parents in Australia and raised here, searching for an elusive identity. After high school she spent a year studying in Beijing, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, before completing her undergraduate degree in Sydney and then moving to the USA for postgraduate study. She describes her sense of cultural and linguistic dislocation as like “living in an intersection”, of being “neither this nor that”. Her work with cast glass mirrors the paradox of feeling not quite Australian and not quite Chinese – at once strong and fragile, glass is beautiful but also dangerous. In Qin’s skilled hands it shifts from opacity to transparency, signifying the uncertainties of the diasporic experience. When *Compass broken* cracked during the high-temperature firing process Qin decided that the fissures running across the surface were absolutely fortuitous and contributed to the meaning of the work.

NC Qin is a Sydney-based Chinese Australian artist. Her sculptural installations feature a signature use of glass and primarily explore the performative, psychological and emotive relationships within the interpersonal and intrapersonal space. She has exhibited in the National Art Glass Museum, Griffith Regional Gallery, Sydney Contemporary Art Fair and in the sculpture walks Rookwood HIDDEN and Fisher Library. In 2019, she exhibited work internationally at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Architecture in Oxford, UK. In 2020, she was awarded the National Emerging Art Glass Prize and her work has been collected into the National Glass Museum, Australia. In 2021, she was commissioned with her first solo exhibition in Gallery Lane Cove as part of the Lunar North Confluence.



NC Qin
Compass broken 2020
cast blackwood crystal glass, LED lights, steel, perspex, marble
44 x 56 x 43 cm

A moongate in a Chinese garden delineates one ‘room’ of the garden from the next. It frames each successive vista to resemble traditional ink-and-brush *shan shui* landscape paintings. The apparently natural world of the garden, with its willow trees, lakes, waterfalls and twisted rocks is a landscape of artifice, a simulation of nature, in which every element is designed to express the cosmic harmony between the forces of *yin* and *yang*. Replete with symbolism, moongates refer to Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian cosmology governing the relationship between earth, heaven and everything in between, including humankind. The square (*cong*) and the circle (*bi*) represent the cosmos: round heavens above and square earth beneath. The moon is associated with the feminine *yin* correlative, and the moongate thus also signifies fecundity and birth.

NC Qin’s three *Moongates* reference the artist’s ancestral connection to China. Made from green, cast recycled glass that resembles jade, they are a cultural artifact seen, as if in a slightly blurred reproduction, from a far-away Australian shore. Qin’s clever use of glass exploits its paradoxical properties: the demanding casting process renders transparent glass fragments semi-opaque, and the resulting objects are both strong and fragile. In these works Qin uses material that would otherwise be discarded, giving it a new life. Her use of rough, industrial materials around each sculptural form is very intentional, representing the contrast between tradition and modernity. Positioned in the gallery space in such a way that the viewer is invited to look through and beyond each moon-shaped opening, we are called to reflect on our potentially catastrophic destruction of the yin-yang balance of nature. As we find in the Daoist text, the Zhuangzi: “When *yin* and *yang* go wrong, heaven and earth are hugely disturbed.”



NC Qin
Moongate 1 2022
cast recycled glass, steel, perspex,
wood, plaster
73 x 85 x 21 cm

NC Qin
Moongate 2 2022
cast recycled glass, steel, perspex,
wood, plaster
89 x 76 x 21 cm

NC Qin
Moongate 3 2022
cast recycled glass, steel, perspex,
wood, plaster
76 x 83 x 20 cm

Home and Away Eight Asian Australian Artists

Ida Lawrence • Jessica Bradford • Linda Sok • NG Qin
Pamela Leung • Ruth Ju-Shih Li • Shoufay Derz • Tianli Zu

The artists in *Home and Away* invite us to consider notions of home in an uncertain world of porous borders, geopolitical tensions and climate change anxiety. Their attachments to home are built upon ancestral ties to Asia juxtaposed with fluid Australian identities that are continually deconstructed and reconstructed. Some were born elsewhere and migrated to Australia, others are Australian-born with parents who came as migrants. Some live and work in Australia and some have moved to a third country, navigating new diasporic uncertainties. They embrace their mobility, as they interrogate their own real and imagined journeys.

We all carry within us imagined maps of everywhere we have lived, loved and lost – a palimpsest of overlapping, overwritten fragments of time and place. In multicultural Australia such personal geographies are complicated, encompassing migration, the crossing of oceans, the learning of new languages and unfamiliar cultural norms, and the reinvention of self. Unsurprisingly, references to Asian material culture are recurring themes in the work of these artists. A subtext of loss underlies many works, juxtaposed with a strong desire for connection with heritage, with language, and with the natural world. And in the work of each artist, the material properties of their chosen media are pregnant with meaning. 'Home,' it seems, is both nowhere and everywhere. It is always with us, and within us – whether we are here, or there, or somewhere else.



Pamela Leung

b 1951 Hong Kong



Pamela Leung asks, is ‘home’ recognisable when its history, language and culture is being steadily erased? She turns to language – to Cantonese and to the endangered Traditional Chinese written script – in her determination to resist the loss of culture. In installations and performance works Leung examines how the increasingly rapid loss of a unique Hong Kong identity exacerbates the pain of being separated from her own history. The mixed English and Traditional Chinese characters in her neon *Hello, 你好嘛?* highlight the complex nuances of cultural exchange and identity, conveying both the uncertainties of the immigrant operating in a second language and the overwhelming desire to communicate and to belong. The neon, of course, references the gaudy street signs for which Hong Kong was once renowned, and which are steadily disappearing, despite efforts to preserve them.

Agglomerate, in contrast, is a collaborative work that employs the hand-made domestic craft of crochet. Instead of wool or cotton, Leung’s work is crocheted from long strings made by fellow members of Hong Kong’s diaspora from Chinese newspapers printed in Traditional Chinese characters. This continuing project was initiated as a collaboration with Leung’s 94-year-old mother, who taught her how to crochet, and now involves many participants in different countries. ‘Agglomerate’ can be a verb, a noun or an adjective – it refers to things that are clustered or growing together, but not coherent. Here, it references the longing for home and the familiar in a world that has become strange: Leung attempts to knit together a new, hybrid reality. The newspapers, no longer readable, represent the intentional erasure of a distinct Hong Kong identity, and the silencing of oppositional discourses.

Pamela Leung is a Hong Kong-born artist based in Sydney who explores themes of identity, immigration and cultural hybridity through a range of media including sculpture, installation, video, sound, painting and performance. Her work challenges dominant cultural narratives and promotes connection and empathy through collaboration and collective action. Leung’s use of the color red is a symbolic representation of different perspectives and a unifying force, inviting viewers to move beyond cultural differences and embrace our shared humanity. Her work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions worldwide, and is held in private and public art collections.



Pamela Leung
Hello, 你好嘛? (Nei Hou Ma) 2023
neon
35 x 68 cm

Ruth Ju-shih Li

b 1992 Taipei, Taiwan



Living and working between Sydney, Taipei and her second studio in the ancient porcelain city of Jingdezhen, Ruth Ju-Shih Li explores ephemeral beauty, grasping for the ineffable. She describes her practice as akin to a form of meditation, and these increasingly abstract works emerge intuitively from remembered situations, emotions, feelings and thoughts, translated through her hands into the medium of the clay. Describing clay as “the most human material and the most universal”, Li thinks about how clay appears in the creation stories of so many cultures. In Chinese mythology the lonely goddess Nüwa moulded figures from clay dug from the riverbank and gave them life and the ability to procreate. In Greek mythology Prometheus created humans from clay. And In the biblical Book of Genesis God creates Adam from “the dust of the ground”. The link between clay and flesh seems a universal phenomenon; the sensual tactility of working with soft, malleable clay for Li becomes a spiritual practice.

Distant memories and *In between* were produced during the period of the global pandemic, and in Sydney’s longest lockdown. Unable to work in her studio in Jingdezhen, Li has instead used mineral-rich, dense Australian black clay, dug “straight from the earth here” in these works. The contrast between the matte black and the slight translucency of the white porcelain lends these works a sense of mystery. The furled petals and exuberant curling stamens recall the formal arrangements of Meissen or Sèvres porcelain flowers under glass domes in eighteenth-century salons, but like Li’s *Self portrait* series the disembodied black birds’ wings suggest a more sinister undercurrent, as porcelain flowers were often placed on graves.

Ruth Ju-Shih Li finished her Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) at the National Art School, Sydney in 2013. She explores different ways of narrating both traditional and multicultural concepts of beauty, transcendence and the sublime as a cross-cultural language into the spiritual. The layering of imagery becomes a metaphorical representation of the self to consider the transitory nature of human existence. Li has exhibited widely in Sydney and internationally in Taiwan, China, Korea and Thailand. Notable recent exhibitions include the Korean International Ceramic Biennale, a solo exhibition at the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taiwan and a group exhibition at the Kyoto Ceramic Centre, Japan. Li’s work is held in the collection of the Taoxichuan Museum, Jingdezhen, China, New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taiwan, and in many private collections. She was a finalist in the North Sydney Art Prize in 2017, won the Emerging Artists Prize in 2019 and received the Special Prize at the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale International 2020.



Ruth Ju-shih Li
Distant memories 2021
black clay, porcelain, pigment, glaze, custom metal stand
24.5 x 20.5 x 15 cm (32 x 21 x 15 cm with stand)

Living and working between Sydney, Taipei and her second studio in the ancient porcelain city of Jingdezhen, Ruth Ju-Shih Li explores ephemeral beauty, grasping for the ineffable. Imbued with a transcultural language of spirituality and the sublime, her work evokes the transitory nature of human existence and our fragile, precarious connection to the natural world. By choosing to work with porcelain clay, Li alludes to the long history of porcelain production in China, exported throughout the world – and specifically from the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen. Apart from being perhaps the first global ‘brand’, porcelain became inextricably associated with Chineseness itself, an indication of China’s capacity for industrial-scale production long before the European Industrial Revolution. Li explores this association with national identity in nuanced and subtle ways, juxtaposing her technical virtuosity with references to both Chinese and European art history.

The tiny, exquisite relief sculptures in the *Self portrait* series take their form from ornate antique mirror frames, but instead of the anticipated reflection we see instead a fanciful array of invented flora and outstretched birds’ wings. There is a sense of rococo abundance, and of the feminine – the cloistered world of the women’s ‘inner chamber’, perhaps – yet these works also suggest the possibility of death and decay. In the manner of a seventeenth-century Vanitas, the architecture of each tiny birds’ wing is detached from its body, and it seems as if the petals of flowers that are not quite roses, nor peonies, nor chrysanthemums (Li is anxious to avoid the clichés of floral symbolism) are about to fall. Made from the finest white Jingdezhen porcelain, these ‘self-portraits’ appear almost impossibly fragile. And, after all, white is the colour of mourning in China.



Ruth Ju-shih Li
Self portrait I 2019
 Jingdezhen porcelain
 12 x 10 x 5 cm

Shoufay Derz

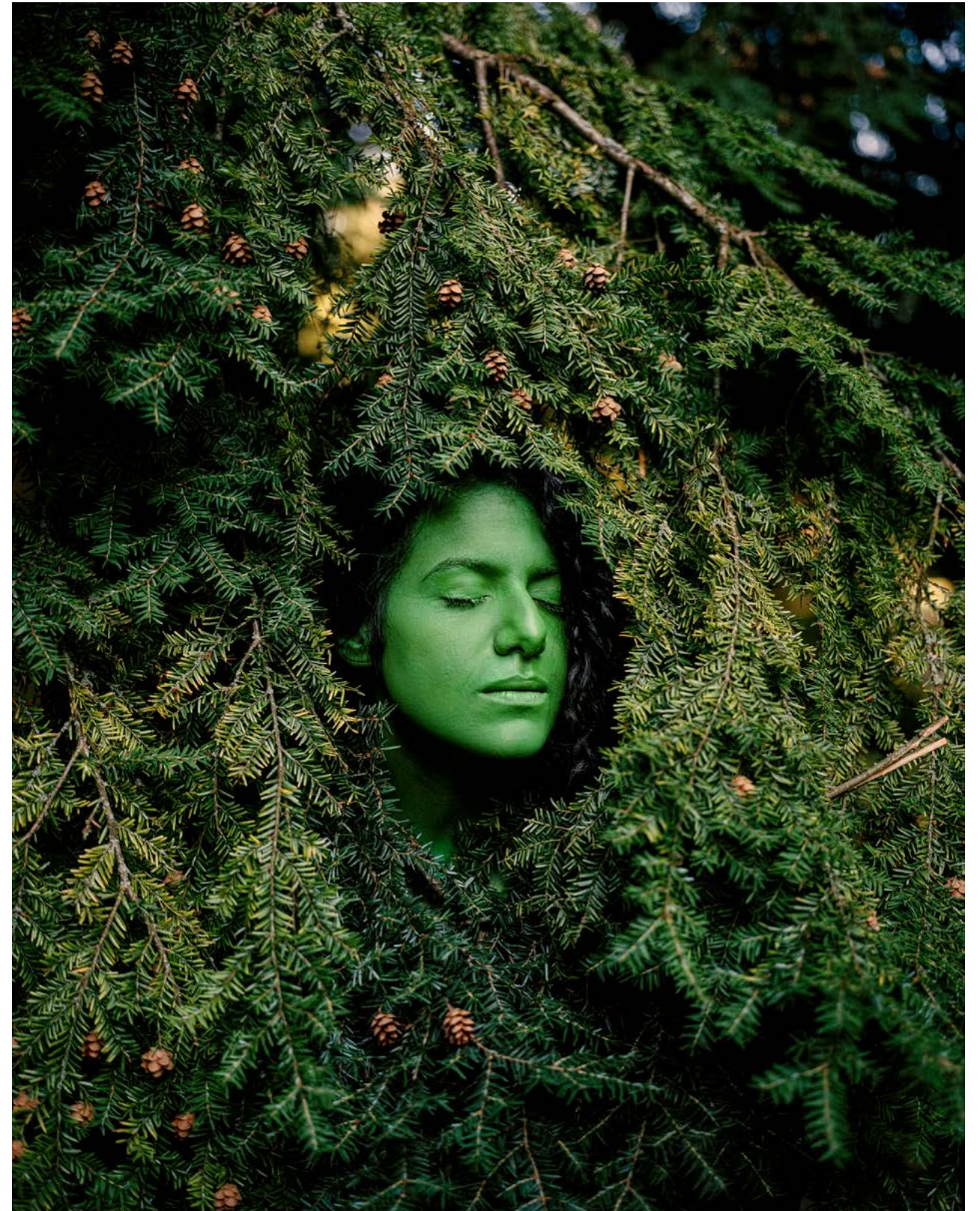
b 1979 Sydney, Australia



The *Loving the alien* project, from which the prints and video shown in *Home and Away* have been selected, developed from an ambitious idea that brought indigenous history, water research scientists and artists together at *Gulgadya Muru*, a wild area of Sydney's Manly Dam Reserve, in 2019. As one of the participating artists Derz investigated the Indigenous history and ecology of the area before deciding on a relational project in which she would invite friends and family to share a meal (including Taiwanese braised tea eggs) and to participate in an artwork. Her participants were painted a bright, chromakey green before she photographed them submerged in the water, their heads visible between the lily pads like the naiads of Greek mythology, the nymphs who presided over bodies of water. The image was prompted by First Nations stories of eels in this bushland waterway. The 'eel' references the artist's fascination with these mysterious creatures that have eluded scientists' attempts to discover how they procreate. Derz describes the eel as "a magical creature of unknown origin".

Shortly after the Manly Dam project, Derz travelled to Berlin to undertake a residency; when Covid-19 struck and international borders closed, she was forced to remain there. Feeling a heightened sense of precarity and foreignness, she continued the project using Berlin's parks and gardens rather than the Australian landscape. Her subjects appear like sprites in the forest, eyes opening and closing in a symbolic language. By photographing her individual participants in this way, she hopes to make space for the unknown, the mysterious, the uncanny. Derz grasps for the ineffable, for things that cannot be spoken. Longing for remembered smells of the bush and the beach, she imagines fragile threads of connection and belonging that tie us to the natural world – and to each other. For Derz the figure of the 'alien' represents the possibility of transformation. But it also alludes to the 'illegal alien', the undocumented, the unwelcome, the foreigner – the 'other'.

An artist of Taiwanese and German descent, Shoufay Derz lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Sydney, Australia. She holds an MFA by research from UNSW and a PhD from the University of Sydney for the thesis *Towards the Unknown: The Visual Poetics of the Ineffable*. Derz has exhibited her works in China, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea and New Zealand. Solo exhibitions include 'The Face of the Deep' at GAG projects, Adelaide (2019), 'In Memory of water' at the Manly Art Gallery and Museum (2018) and 'The wish' at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (2016). In 2017 she was visiting scholar at The New School – Parsons, New York. In 2019-20 she was part of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien International Studio Programme granted annually to one artist across Australia through Creative Australia.



Shoufay Derz
Loving the alien, Btiha / closed 2023, from *Ritual of eels*
pigment print on cotton paper
91.1 x 71.6 cm

Multidisciplinary artist Shoufay Derz is acutely aware of the slippages and ambiguities of language, and her work is informed by her hybrid cultural and linguistic family background. With a German father and Taiwanese mother, but growing up in Sydney speaking the language of neither parent, Derz thinks about the gulf between what is said, and what remains unsaid. Her severed cow's tongue cast in bronze alludes to the visceral experience of being rendered mute, literally speechless and unable to communicate. 無 *Mu* is a Japanese or Korean term (in simplified Chinese it is *wu* 无) meaning 'not have', 'without' or 'to lack'. Displayed on a stack of blank paper rather than the conventional plinth, the work suggests the negation of both written and spoken language. Profoundly influenced by Buddhist philosophies, Derz thinks deeply about the gaps between speech and silence, action and non-action, reality and imagination, past and present.

The dismembered bronze tongue seems paradoxically both fleshy and metallic, simultaneously repellent and fascinating. It recalls gruesome fairy tales, and also refers to a childhood memory of the artist's father cooking a German dish of ox tongue. Derz says she was both fascinated and horrified by the idea of her own tongue tasting and eating the tongue of another creature. The textural surface of the cow's tongue, its bumps and fissures, reminds her of a landscape. But this is a topography of loss – of speech, taste, language and culture.



Shoufay Derz
無 *Mu* 2019
cartridge paper and bronze tongue
60 x 60 cm

Tianli Zu

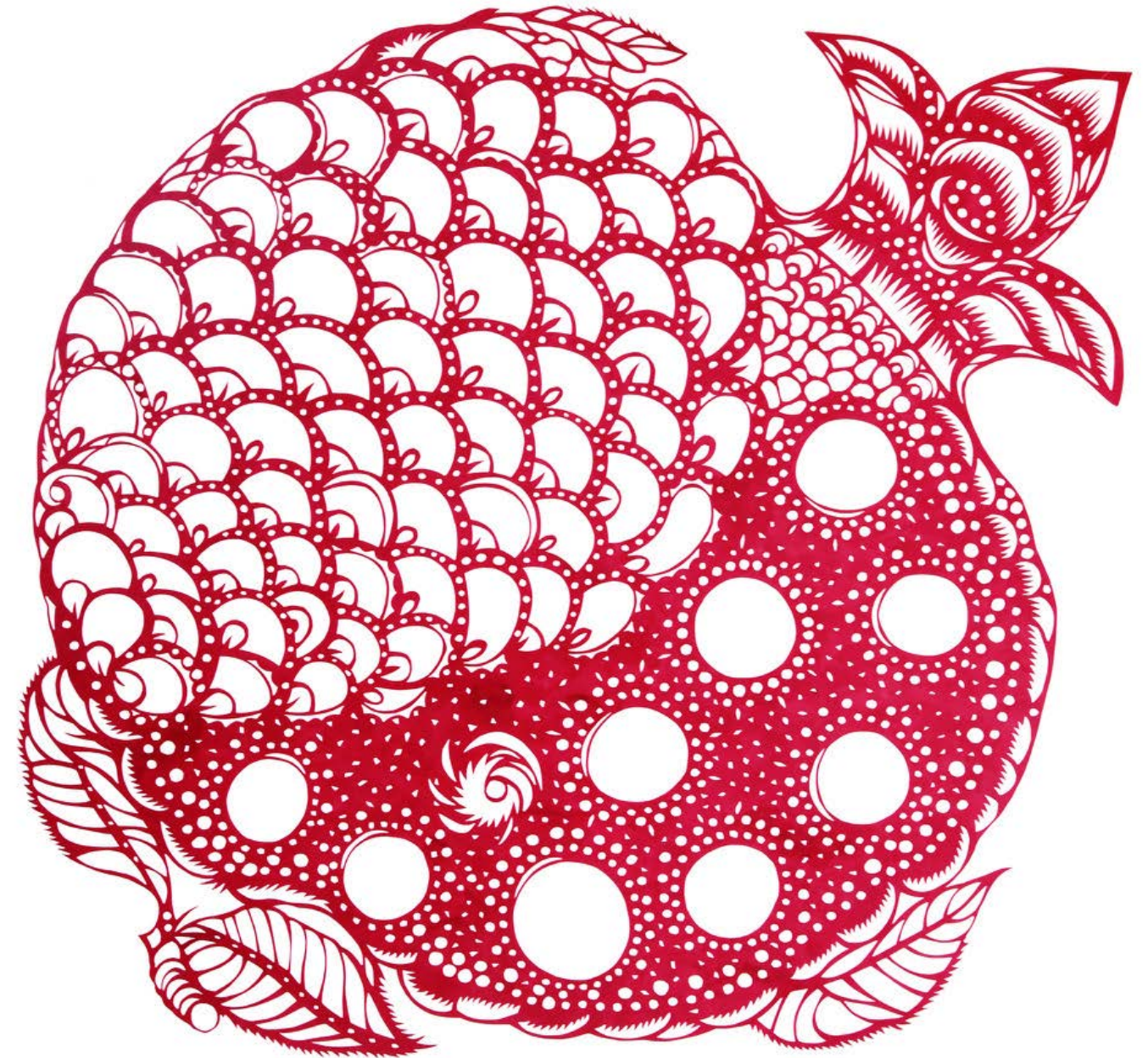
b 1963 Beijing, China



During a childhood marked by the trauma and chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Tianli Zu's grandmother taught her simple papercutting techniques. Later, as an art student in the 1980s at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, Zu travelled to remote villages near the Yellow River in Shaanxi Province, the birthplace of Chinese civilisation. Seated in tiny rural homes she learned papercutting from women who knew the traditional methods, listening to their – often bawdy – explanations of the imagery and symbolism they depicted, derived from folklore and mythology. Today, Zu uses these techniques in her multi-disciplinary practice, interweaving Chinese tradition with contemporary concerns including environmental issues, species extinction and the global impact of the pandemic. Zu thinks of her papercuts as signifying the Daoist mutuality of yin and yang. In each work the form and void, negative and positive, light and shadow, and presence and absence all allude to the interdependence of these cosmological relationships.

Zu describes her work as “drawing with knife and scissors”. It is like a dance between the artist and her paper. Her work in *Home and Away* juxtaposes Chinese beliefs relating to health, longevity and the sharing of food with her own experiences. Cut by hand from mulberry paper, then painstakingly coloured with up to fifteen layers of red watercolour, they create a sense of joyful abundance. The *Fruits* series was made during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Zu was separated from her children by the closure of international borders. The strawberry, pomegranate and peach, symbolising respectively love, fertility and longevity, represent the artist's maternal care for her absent children in a dangerous world. They allow her, she says, “to say the things I cannot say in other ways”.

Tianli Zu currently lives and works in Sydney. She graduated from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts and later gained an MFA from the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney and a PhD from the University of Sydney. Zu creates large-scale papercuts by hand and cinematic animation projections that weave through history and the present, using shadow and light in powerful dynamic installations. Her work captures experiences of places and cultures through intuitive and metaphysical means. She employs art to engage and comment on complex social phenomena, culturally, philosophically and psychologically. Zu has been a finalist in the Archibald Prize, the North Sydney Art Prize and the Hazelhurst Art on Paper Award. Her work was exhibited in the Salon Des Refuses and featured several times at Martin Place and the heart of Chinatown for the Chinese New Year Festival in Sydney.



Tianli Zu
Fruit #3 2020-2021
hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour
100 x 100 cm
103 x 103 x 0.4 cm with acrylic frame

List of Works

<p>Ida Lawrence</p> <p><i>Basa basi (Mau ke mana)</i> 2022 acrylic on polycotton 155 x 120 cm</p> <p><i>Batas suci</i> 2022 acrylic on polycotton 155 x 120 cm</p> <p><i>Relations</i> 2022-2023 acrylic on polycotton 155 x 120 cm Produced with the support of the Berlin Program for Artists</p>	<p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #42 (The fossil of a tree as a stone)</i> 2022 bisque fired underglazed porcelain, stoneware 13 x 11 x 12 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #43 (Mountain II)</i> 2022 glazed stoneware 18 x 27 x 9 cm</p> <p><i>Haw par villa rock studies (miniatures/souvenirs)</i> 2022 ceramics dimensions variable</p>
<p>Jessica Bradford</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #22</i> 2018 bisque fired underglazed porcelain 11.2 x 20 x 7 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #25</i> 2018 bisque fired underglazed porcelain 12.5 x 18 x 8 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #26</i> 2018 bisque fired underglazed porcelain 11 x 21 x 6 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #32</i> 2018 bisque fired underglazed porcelain 8.7 x 16 x 6 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #35 (Statue)</i> 2022 bisque fired underglazed porcelain 24 x 17 x 15.5 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #38 (Spirit mountain)</i> 2022 pastel, bisque fired porcelain 14 x 20 x 10 cm</p> <p><i>Haw Par Villa rock study #39 (Dias)</i> 2022 glazed stoneware 6.5 x 12 x 9 cm</p>	<p>Linda Sok</p> <p><i>Mending fragments of a memory</i> 2021 fabric (assorted), metal trinkets, string, rattan, paint dimensions variable</p> <p>NC Qin</p> <p><i>Compass broken</i> 2020 cast blackwood crystal glass, LED lights, steel, perspex, marble 44 x 56 x 43 cm</p> <p><i>Moongate 1</i> 2022 cast recycled glass, steel, perspex, wood, plaster 73 x 85 x 21 cm</p> <p><i>Moongate 2</i> 2022 cast recycled glass, steel, perspex, wood, plaster 89 x 76 x 21 cm</p> <p><i>Moongate 3</i> 2022 cast recycled glass, steel, perspex, wood, plaster 76 x 83 x 20 cm</p>
<p>Pamela Leung</p> <p><i>Hello, 你好嘛? (Nei Hou Ma)</i> 2023 neon 35 x 68 cm</p>	

<p><i>Agglomerate</i> 2022–2023 newspaper crochet sculpture 200 x 220 cm</p>	<p><i>Loving the alien, Btihal / closed</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p>
<p>Ruth Ju-Shih Li</p> <p><i>Distant memories</i> 2021 black clay, porcelain, pigment, glaze, custom metal stand 24.5 x 20.5 x 15 cm (32 x 21 x 15 cm with stand)</p> <p><i>In between</i> 2021 black clay, porcelain, glaze, custom metal stand 22 x 28 x 20 cm (30 x 28 x 20 cm with stand)</p> <p><i>Self portrait I</i> 2019 Jingdezhen porcelain 12 x 10 x 5 cm</p> <p><i>Self portrait II</i> 2019 Jingdezhen porcelain 12 x 10 x 5 cm</p> <p><i>Self portrait III</i> 2019 Jingdezhen porcelain 12 x 10 x 5 cm</p> <p><i>Self portrait IV</i> 2019 Jingdezhen porcelain 12 x 10 x 5 cm</p> <p><i>Self portrait V</i> 2019 Jingdezhen porcelain 12 x 10 x 5 cm</p>	<p><i>Loving the alien, Btihal / open</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p> <p><i>Loving the alien, Chaveli / closed</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p> <p><i>Loving the alien, Chaveli / open</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p> <p><i>Loving the alien, Stephanie / closed</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p> <p><i>Loving the alien, Stephanie / open</i> 2023, from <i>Ritual of eels</i> pigment print on cotton paper 91.1 x 71.6 cm edition 1 of 5</p>
<p>Shoufay Derz</p> <p>無 <i>Mu</i> 2019 cartridge paper and bronze tongue 60 x 60 cm</p> <p><i>Ritual of eels: Loving the alien</i>, ongoing since 2019 pigment print on fine art gloss paper 71.6 x 91.1 cm edition 1 of 5</p> <p><i>Ritual of eels: Loving the alien</i>, ongoing since 2019 video, 61 mins edition 1 of 3</p>	<p>Tianli Zu</p> <p><i>Fruit #1</i> 2020 hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour 100 x 100 cm</p> <p><i>Fruit #3</i> 2020 hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour 100 x 100 cm</p> <p><i>Fruit #4</i> 2020 hand-cut Chinese mulberry paper, painted with watercolour 100 x 100 cm</p>

Exhibition Personnel

Dr Luise Guest | Curator

Dr Luise Guest is a writer, curator and academic, living and working on the lands of the Gadigal people. Her research focuses on the work of contemporary women artists in Asia, most particularly in China. Her book *Half the Sky* (Piper Press, 2016) was based on interviews with more than 30 Chinese women artists, and she has contributed to publications including the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, the Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art, *Yishu*, Australasian Art Monthly, Randian, CoBo Social and Artist Profile. Guest was an academic advisor for *Stepping Out: Female Identities in Contemporary Chinese Art* at the Lillehammer Museum, Norway; Kunstforeningen GL STRAND, Denmark (both 2022) and Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria (2023). Curated exhibitions include *Half the Sky* at Red Gate Gallery (Beijing) and Hotel Art Stage (Hong Kong) in 2016. Most recently she curated *Her Secret Code: Tao Aimin and Nüshu* at Vermilion Art, Sydney. Her research interests include issues of gender and national/transnational identity in Chinese contemporary art, and the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on contemporary art in Asia. She is currently working on a book about women artists who subvert the male-dominated ink painting tradition.

Jennifer Yang | Curator

Jennifer Yang is an Eora-based art historian, arts writer, and curator. In 2022, she completed her Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Diploma of Language at the University of Sydney with First Class Honours and the University Medal. Jennifer has previously curated *Our Grandfather Road* (2022) at 16albermarle Project Space. Her writing appears in Artlink, Memo, New Mandala, Art & Market's Check-In, Trans Asia Photography Journal, and Southeast of Now (latter two forthcoming). Her research interests include photographic cultures, migrancy, and transnational and feminist histories in Southeast Asian contexts. She is due to commence her PhD candidature at the University of Sydney in 2024.

16albermarle Project Space | Exhibition Venue

Established in October 2019 by Australian art adviser/collector/curator John Cruthers, 16albermarle presents contemporary southeast Asian art in an intimate space in innercity Sydney. Our aim is to connect Australian audiences to southeast Asia through art and encourage their deeper engagement with the countries of the region. Alongside this cultural agenda, we also promote the artists showing here and sell the artworks to return funds to the artists, most of whom live from the sale of their work. We have staged 17 exhibitions to date, with artists and artworks from Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines and Singapore. The focus is on younger and mid-career artists with established practices and reputations in their home countries whose work has not been seen in Australia. Exhibitions are accompanied by public programs, catalogues and educational materials for HSC and IB students. School visits are encouraged. Artworks are available to view online and all catalogues can be downloaded for free.



NC Qin
Compass broken 2020 (detail)
cast blackwood crystal glass, LED lights, steel, perspex, marble
44 x 56 x 43 cm

Published in association with the exhibition

Home and Away

Eight Asian Australian Artists

22 November – 16 December 2023

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