

Cathy Lu's 'Interior Garden' at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco

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20 January – 17 December 2022

In the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*,¹ Evelyn Wang, an immigrant mother, has the power to travel the multiverse where her alter egos lead different lives. Her ability comes with a caveat: to jump universes she must first force herself to do something she instinctively recoils from – eat a lipstick, give herself papercuts, sit on a butt plug, and so on. She must stomach, if not seek out, this bodily shock in order to become her other selves, to recalibrate. Here, the body under duress, pried open and stuffed with foreign objects, is a vivid analogy for the tension of holding multiple cultures in one body. Bay Area artist Cathy Lu takes this haptic analogy and makes it literal. A second-generation immigrant herself, Lu is no stranger to the shock of cultural shifts. In her ceramic and mixed media work, often layered with Chinese and Chinese American references, she reproduces this shock as a haptic excess. The manipulation of touch and its relation to immigrant affect sets Lu apart from other artists who use ceramics to explore Chinese stereotypes in the United States, such as, for example, Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Stephanie H Shih.

In Lu's solo exhibition at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, 'Interior Garden', the unsightly is transformed into a scenic route. Four installations form a 'garden trail' of hills, waterfall and pond, as in a traditional Chinese garden. Unlike the latter, however, damaged bricks, drains, bargain stools and fake ants make up the bulk of Lu's scenic signifiers. Each of the four stops creates a confused state where it is hard to tell lustrous from vulgar, hardy from fragile, or high-end from cheap. The visitor finds themselves constantly recalibrating what is instinctual, as Evelyn does in the film, torn between the urge to touch and the urge to flinch.

Survival against the odds is the focus of *Pile* (2022), a heap of bricks cordoned off with traffic cones. The singed bricks pay homage to the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, and the rapid rebuild of Chinatown by its people using the charred bricks, defying

¹ *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) is written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (collectively known as 'Daniels')

the city's plans to evict the population. Sourced from the scrap yard of Recology (the main recycle facility in San Francisco), these clinker bricks, like the inhabitants of Chinatown, are here to stay, even if under the radar, and under duress. Contrasting with this toughness are the dejected, flaccid traffic cones that are failing to contain what is inside. They are certainly powerless against the ants and cockroaches, which, on closer inspection, are made of porcelain and whose fragile shells toy with our perception of them as resilient, invisible or even vile.

Surprisingly, for a paean to the brave, *Pile* does not cling to a celebratory tone. Insects aside, other signs of life in the debris are deliberately unsettling. Clay fruits and vegetables, dyed fleshy pink and made to look plump or wrinkly, come close to burn wounds. Planted haphazardly in the pile, their unruly life is echoed in pots of (real) *gai lans* [Chinese broccoli, or kale] and scallions, situated around the gallery, grown from food scraps. In fact, in Lu's work, the will to live often teeters on the edge of the grotesque. She loves making 'bad fruits', especially peaches, the immortal fruit of China, that is now exploited as a suggestive emoji. She loves to make them overly rich or engorged and gives them wormlike nails or mouldy spots in fanciful colours. As a result, her fruits revel in a kind of twisted beauty that both repels and seduces.

The provocation 'if something is not a little repulsive, is it really beautiful?' crops up again in *Drain* (2022), a shallow pool fitted with not one but twelve drains. Painted copper and laid into yellow tiles, the ceramic drains look like bacterial growths on petri dishes. They are not just utilitarian but are, in Lu's own words, 'actually nice'. She is referring to the intricate openwork on the drain covers, a feature she noticed on drains in China and decided to replicate. The design and craft lavished on the drain covers, along with their sheer redundancy, alert us to something awkward but appealing.

In *Peripheral Vision* (2022), bodily shock conveys presence, though this presence is itself shaken. Three walls of giant ceramic eyes are hooked up to tubes that drain a pale yellow fluid from the corner of each eye, creating a waterfall of tears. There is nothing pure or timid about these tears; rather, they are like a leak in the house: loud, yellow, collected in plastic buckets and re-used. One might even detect the pungent smell of the onions Lu used to stain the water, or infer some affinity to the drains in the next room. The weeping eyes belong to women whom the artist looks up to: Ruth Asawa, the yellow power ranger, her grandmother... So when she described the work as a manifestation of 'yellow tears' (that is, against the notion of 'white tears'), she may well be thinking about affect and its display in Asian women versus white women – specifically, how easy it is to discredit the former (literally relegated to 'peripheral vision'). In that sense, the installation creates a space for Asian women to show their pain, and for others to witness it, but it also rejects the simple identification of tears with innocence. The eyes, craggy with pores and spots, are like Lu's bad fruits; they do not beg us to see or get close to their grievance, but *dare* us to.



Cathy Lu, *Peripheral Vision*, 2022, mixed media (ceramic, yellow onion water, water pumps, clear tubing, scallions, assorted plastic and ceramic containers, plastic stools and cinder blocks), courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco

‘Interior Garden’ inevitably raises the question of ‘whose’. Whose interior is on display? Is it the artist’s, the city’s, our own, or that of a collective Chinese American consciousness, if such a thing exists? For curator Hoi Leung, at least, the show acts as a safe space for shared healing among Asian peoples and other people of colour after two years of isolation and reopening. The same impulse is evident in the show’s Chinese title, where ‘utopia’ (*wu tuo*) is substituted for ‘interior’.

At first glance, the most ‘utopic’ part of the show greets us in the final room, where Lu parts with the earthly focus of the other works to focus on myths and dreams. Here, the artist turns to *Nüwa*, the goddess who in mythology made humans from clay, as her muse. In *Nüwa’s Hands* (2022) the deity’s arms, abstracted into a curve hanging in midair, becomes the metonym for her life-giving power: the entire length of it becomes a nursery for peach pits and her signature wormy nails. On the other side of the room, a pair of ceramic *American Dream Pillows* (2020) rest on long benches, ready to receive the next sleeper. The strength of both pieces comes from what is *not* depicted: the content of dreams and creations. The divine hands, according to Lu, act as ‘borrowed scenery’ (*jie jing*), a trick in Chinese garden design where instead of forcing a whole new scene onto an existing site, one incorporates (‘borrows’) what is already there. This could be light, weather, or even foot traffic. Infinitely adaptive, *Nüwa’s Hands* recruits us, the visitors, to be the clay people in the creation tale. A different legacy informs the ceramic pillows: during the Tang and Song period, pillows are made in the shape of animals, toddlers or buildings to help to ward off evils and ring in good fortune, and

it was believed that they had the power to alter not only one's dreams but the dreamer's fate and afterlife.² Because of this reliance on the invisible, the show at its most utopic also becomes most elusive.



Cathy Lu, *American Dream Pillow, Green Beauty Mask*, 2020, mixed media (porcelain, moving blankets and cinder blocks), courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco

Lu's work is strongest when it challenges the simplistic notion of utopia, an effect deftly achieved through the use of hyper-physicality. If not for what Leung calls 'physicality that is resistant to belong', the show would have felt too easily recuperative, since so much of Lu's action is about foregrounding refuse/the refused.³ The ever-so-subtle hint of anxiety expressed through colour and texture maintains our criticality concerning the supposed idyllic life. Nowhere is this anxiety more apparent than in the ceramic pillows, where the American Dream and prospects of assimilation are converted into a bodily encounter. On one of the pillows, a pair of hands hold up a beauty mask, a self-care item that simultaneously hides its wearer's face *and* marks it as alien – one that no doubt takes on a different reading in a pandemic that elicited irrational hatred of Asian peoples. In the other pillow, a hole-filled headrest is propped on bananas, a slang term for whitewashed Asians. The bananas, glazed

² Dehao Suo 索德浩, 'Classification and Evolution of Ceramic Pillows and Other Related Issues 陶瓷枕的分类、演变及相关问题', *Wen Wu Chun Qiu* 文物春秋 no 2, 2004, pp 23–26

³ Hoi Leung, curatorial statement displayed in Cathy Lu's 'Interior Garden' exhibition, Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, San Francisco, California

in swirls of teal, pink and brown glaze, evoke the beauty of *san cai* (three-coloured) wares, but they also evoke things that are soft, pulpy and bruised, like rotten fruit.

By staging things that we cower from, but cannot look away from, Lu leans into a soft-body horror similar to what Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma call ‘cringe aesthetics’. While the term refers to television dramedies depicting *social* situations in which the embarrassment or vulnerability of the character is awkward to watch, it is Havas and Sulimma’s definition of ‘cringe’ as a *bodily* feeling that causes the viewer to wince or shrink away, particularly when a taboo or norm is violated, that is most relevant to Lu.⁴ To be exact, cringe is not limited to a single feeling but is a roster of (minor) shame and disgust, on the one hand, and masochistic curiosity, on the other. As Katja Kanzler observes, cringe is not necessarily abject or ugly per se, but a splintering of feelings where the viewer, unable to decide on a reaction, finds themselves completely empathetic one moment and abruptly pulls back the next.⁵ In Lu’s work, cringe is inserted into racial politics as she uses it to trigger anxiety towards touch, contact and proximity. Sewer, vermin and turpid water – terms historically used to deride Asians and to paint a racist image of Chinatown hygiene – are juxtaposed with ceramics, a symbol of taste and delicacy. ‘Do not touch; it is dirty’ becomes synonymous with ‘do not touch; it is fragile’. The heightened state of cringe, for which haptic is the key, is thus at work on two levels in Lu’s work: first, it marks the shock of cultural shift felt *by* the immigrant; second, it exposes the anxiety felt *toward* her.

Although ‘Interior Garden’ was in production for two years, the original idea arose earlier, in 2016, when the Trump-inspired MAGA (‘Make America Great Again’) movement chanted a return to a ‘great past’. The very idea of a pure, unsullied origin disintegrates in Lu’s garden. As Mel Y Chen observes in *Animacies*, Asian and queer subjects are often cast as toxins in a country that subscribes to ‘immunity nationalism’, where the white body is at war with ‘an unnaturally external force that violates (rather than informs) an integral and bounded self’.⁶ To build an interior garden with scraps, drains, ants and rotting fruit, then, is to pit the reality of survival against the xenophobic fantasy of an edenic origin.

I met Lu on the hottest day of the year. A tour of the show soon turned into a walk in the streets of Chinatown while sipping *boba*. We waved at a child in front of a corner store – where buckets and basins reminded me of the ones used in *Peripheral Vision* – and passed by an antique shop that claims to import from *Jingdezhen*, home to the famed blue and white ware, and where Lu spent a month in sweaty rooms learning from local artisans. As we ducked into the cool lobby of the Hilton where her show is located on the third

⁴ See Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma, ‘Through the Gaps of My Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television’, *Television & New Media*, vol 21, no 1, 2020, p 83

⁵ Katja Kanzler, ‘The Cringe and the Sneeze: Structures of Feeling in *Veep*’, *Humanities*, vol 10, no 4, 2021, p 114

⁶ Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2012, pp 192–194

floor, she told me about the history of the venue. The Chinese Culture Center is something of a concession, it turns out. According to historian Him Mark Lai, in 1963, when the City refused to use the land between Kearny and Washington Streets for a museum, culture centre or other public facilities, concerned citizens and the San Francisco Greater Chinatown Community Service Association Organization lobbied for a deal that would instead feature a twenty-seven-story Holiday Inn with 20,000 square feet to house exhibitions and other programming.⁷ We both joked that a bit of Chinatown is and will always be wedged into this American hospitality chain, and I wondered if the entire exhibition may in fact be seen as a ‘borrowed scenery’.

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⁷ See Him Mark Lai, ‘A History of the Chinese Culture Foundation and the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco’, a downloadable pdf (www.cccsf.us/files/ugd/dfd1a1_77563fdbd18a49bf8aea30c1d333a420.pdf) on the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco website www.cccsf.us