

SCRATCHING AT THE MOON





Michelle Lopez
Ballast & Barricades, 2019/2023
(foreground)

Bruce Yonemoto and Norman Yonemoto
Asexual Clone Mutation (for our father), 1995
(background left)

BEAUTIFUL ENTANGLEMENTS

ANNE ELLEGOOD AND ANNA SEW HOY

CIRCLING A COMMUNITY

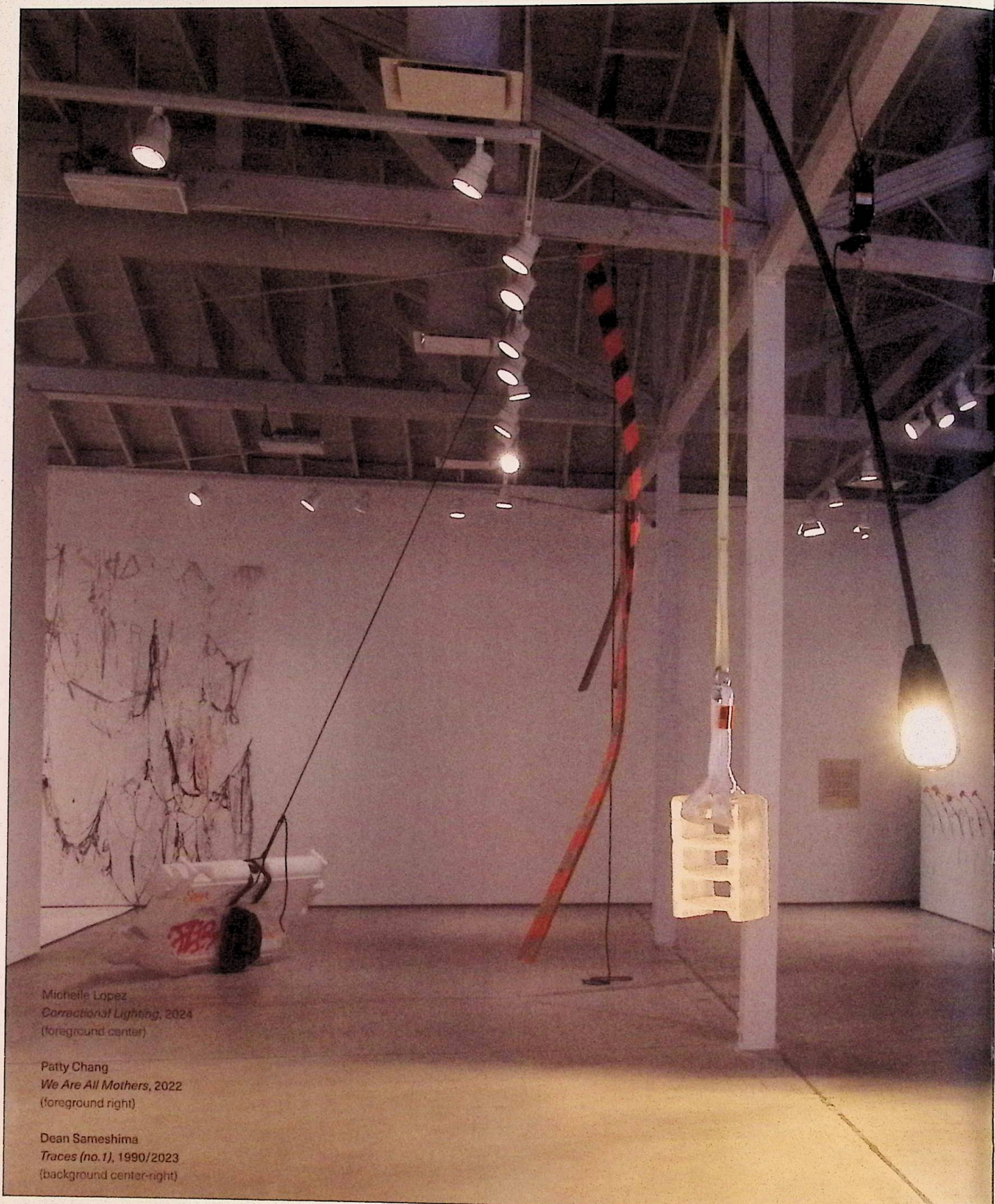
The impetus for *Scratching at the Moon* came during the summer of 2020, when the country was galvanized by the growing movement in support of Black lives and the national uprisings against police violence. We were early in the coronavirus pandemic, reckoning with its resulting waves of loss and global unrest. Asian Americans had become the targets of a dramatic uptick in racialized violence, directly attributable to Donald Trump's "Chinese flu" rhetoric, which deliberately placed blame and stoked racial tensions. With so many people of color under threat, there was a rise in collective organizing and coalition building.¹ Communities came together in order to uplift one another, strengthen bonds, and survive this singular global emergency.

During this time, Anna Sew Hoy began to imagine an exhibition of Asian American artists with indelible ties to Los Angeles that would make visible the communities and relationships in which she had participated since returning to the city in 2002. This exhibition would also highlight the diverse stories of the Asian diaspora—undeniably "American" stories that tell of its innumerable contributions to the culture of the United States and counter the hurtful untruths being deployed to further marginalize Asians of all backgrounds.

Sew Hoy was inspired by Young Chung, an artist who in 2010 opened Commonwealth and Council, a gallery "championing practices by women, queer, POC, and ally artists to build counter-histories that reflect our individual and collective realities," in the words of its founders. Chung formalized a practice of space-making for artists outside of the mainstream when Danielle Dean and Gala Porras-Kim, both of whom had exhibited in Chung's previous home-based gallery, asked Chung for representation. Thirteen years later and in partnership with Kibum Kim, the gallery has grown to become one of the most respected in Los Angeles, integral to building the careers of its artists who are now in solo exhibitions around the world.

Scratching at the Moon is also inspired by Amy Yao, who in 1993 while in high school started the band Emily's Sassy Lime with her sister Wendy Yao and friend Emily Ryan. Part of the riot grrrl feminist punk movement that began in the Northwest in the early 1990s, Emily's Sassy Lime voiced their experiences as Asian American female-identified youth through their music. Amy went on to co-found China Art Objects, a germinal Los Angeles gallery in the burgeoning Chinatown art scene of the late 1990s. In 2004, Wendy created Ooga Booga, also in Chinatown, a store whose wares included artist-made zines and editions, designer clothing, mixtapes and seven-inches, and which hosted countless performances, readings, and musical events by young artists who would go on to have active careers in the years that followed.²

China Art Objects and Ooga Booga are vestiges of the hyper-local yet sophisticated art scene in Los Angeles. Since the early 1960s, homegrown communities of artists have been fed by renowned art schools such as ArtCenter, CalArts, Otis, UC Irvine, UCLA, and USC Roski. The Light and Space movement got its name from a 1971 exhibition at UCLA, building on the practices of the previous decade by artists such as Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, Mary Corse, Fred Eversley, Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian, and De Wain Valentine, all of whom explored perception through material choices and installation. The multidisciplinary and provocative works by Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and several others—many included in the seminal *Helter Skelter* exhibition



Michelle Lopez
Correctional Lighting, 2024
(foreground center)

Patty Chang
We Are All Mothers, 2022
(foreground right)

Dean Sameshima
Traces (no. 1), 1990/2023
(background center-right)



at MOCA in 1992—explored an L.A. landscape replete with alienation, dispossession, and violence. The Hammer's 2005 exhibition *Thing* further solidified Los Angeles as a hotbed of sculptural practices, focusing on a young generation of practitioners. Artist-run spaces such as Deep River—founded in 1997 by Rolo Castillo, Glenn Kaino, Daniel Joseph Martinez, and Tracey Shiffman—have been showcases for artists to support one another's practices, especially those that were experimental and rarely embraced by the commercial gallery system. Performance and installation art flourished at CalArts in the 1970s with the establishment of the Feminist Art Program—originally developed by Judy Chicago at Fresno State College and transplanted to CalArts—and the founding of the Woman's Building by Chicago, graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven. Sew Hoy's first Los Angeles studio was on North Spring Street in the old Woman's Building, where its silkscreened manifesto remained visible on the wall by her studio.³

The histories of these activities across Los Angeles—and the schools, spaces, and individuals they represent—serve as the larger context for *Scratching at the Moon*. The exhibition remembers and honors these local scenes and the communities that created them, from the punks sharing space in Chinatown to the abundant queer culture of Silver Lake—all increasingly under threat by gentrification and the encroaching international art market. Since the 1990s, groups of commercial galleries have popped up like mushrooms in different areas of Los Angeles, from Culver City and Chinatown to Mid City and Hollywood to, most recently, the Melrose Hill neighborhood. Over time, L.A.'s artworld has become international, with large global galleries prioritizing opening local outposts, often at the urging of their artists, who are eager to exhibit in what is now considered a leading center for visual arts in the United States.

PEDAGOGY AND MENTORSHIP

Within institutions, the necessary work to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility often falls heavily on people of color, who are caught between the idea that they can create change from within and the fear that they might be apologists for inherently racist structures. As a way to bring this experience to a larger consciousness and process the responsibility being thrust upon them, a group of teaching artists consisting of Ei Arakawa, Patty Chang, Pearl Hsiung, Amanda Ross-Ho, Sew Hoy, Shirley Tse, and Amy Yao came together as FXR (FAC XTRA RETREAT). In February 2023, at REDCAT in Los Angeles, they created a performance of the same name using online DEI training modules that are omnipresent in academia as a template to create a polyphonic, satirical, yet sincere extravaganza about the experiences of artmaking and pedagogy while being Asian.

While FXR was a response to a specific pressure being felt in higher education, it also reminds us of the common embrace of teaching and the role of mentorship among artists in *Scratching at the Moon*. Simon Leung, Yong Soon Min, and Bruce Yonemoto have spent their careers dismantling bias and uplifting young artists in the California public university system. In fact, the Department of Art at UC Irvine (part of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts), where all three have taught for decades, has been a locus for important work on the role of identity in artistic production and the politics of representation. At Irvine they worked alongside artist-thinkers Martinez, Catherine Lord, and others to bring necessary diversity to the contemporary art field, pedagogy, and the student population. Though youthful in spirit, Leung, Min, and Yonemoto are considered respected elders to younger artists, and their influence on the lives and practices of many in this exhibition has been manifold, providing artists with their first teaching opportunities and invitations to exhibit, and inspiring and modeling through their lived example of using art to create change.

Most of the other artists in the exhibition are also educators. Their practices are defined by myriad modes and methodologies of working, and they impart to their students a broad understanding of what being an artist can look like. With collaborative models like the Feminist Art Program and Womanhouse, courses such as Min's Issues in Autobiography, and Leung's emphasis on critical theory to draw from, the art schools in Southern California—where established artists often teach for decades—argue for the value of an energetic and sustained dialogue between the generations, while demonstrating that there is no single way to live the life of an artist.

THE BLEED OF IDENTITY

Scratching at the Moon attempts to advance concepts of identity beyond the ways in which they were discussed in the 1990s. Foundational to our thinking is the writing of Julietta Singh. In her book *No Archive Will Restore You*, Singh replaces stock labels of personhood tied to ethnicity, class, and “style[s] of thought” derived from Eurocentric models of modernity with the idea that *being* is on a continuum with the environment and other living things. Defining a “body archive”—an “assembly of history’s traces deposited in me”—Singh describes a body in flux:

While the skin is a visual sign of the body’s exterior limit, [...] bodies extend into space well beyond the skin. Molecularly, we spread into the “outside” world, mingling with it in ways that are not apparent to us [...] We also shed ourselves over time. This body is not the body it was then and is already becoming another body.⁴

Along this continuum, we are invited to become embodied, unbound, entangled, decolonized, and queered.

The assertion that our bodies contain the sum of our immigrant experiences—of being *othered* in countless ways—parallels the way we think about the work in the exhibition. Taking many forms and deploying varied materials, the artworks selected can be considered the “body archives” of the artists’ lives. The work may manifest an inner conflict, as in Min’s *Defining Moments* (1992), in which images of the artist’s face and body are inscribed with references to contentious spaces. In several panels, the letters “DMZ,” Korea’s demilitarized zone, are written on her forehead. Other “defining moments” include the 1992 uprising in Los Angeles after the beating of Rodney King by police and the April 19 Revolution in South Korea in 1960, a student rebellion that toppled the government of President Syngman Rhee. Min’s pioneering work explores the complex understanding of home and country when one has two homes and is oppressed in both, while seeking to delineate a space for the “third world woman.” Bodies in distress, constraint, or uprising are inscribed across her visage, visualizing the inheritance of trauma. Min’s body becomes a contested landscape, operating between borders and generations.⁵

Young Chung takes black-and-white photographic portraits of the artist’s Korean American family—biological and chosen—creating a body archive that functions as an examination of self through images of others. Looking straight into the camera, bodies embellished with stamps of ladybugs and seahorses that Chung provided, the subjects appear candid and confident, as if an antidote to the all too common trope of immigrants in distress. Inspired by Catherine Opie’s powerful portraits of members of the LGBTQ community, Chung’s series *Not By Birth* (1996/2023) argues for the imperative that Asian Americans represent themselves and tell their own stories, providing a forthright and poised visibility. *Ssaem*, one of the works in the series, is an unconventional and captivating portrait of Min, Chung’s close friend and former professor.⁶

Amanda Ross-Ho has spent years considering notions of “inheritance,” whether the birthright of becoming an artist as the only child of artist parents—Lauren Ross, a photographer and social organizer, and Ruyell Ho, a painter and commercial photographer—or the literal bestowal of art and objects from her parents’ studios. Ross-Ho’s own studio contains piles of prints, negatives, and portfolios of both parents’ work, which she has been archiving with museological care. Especially prized are the tiny black and white prints that her teenaged father took in 1955 while immigrating by ship from Shanghai to California.

In 2008, Ross-Ho organized an exhibition of her father’s paintings at the USC Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena. For *Scratching at the Moon*, she delves into the strange and vibrant pictures Ho took in the late 1970s and early ’80s to create a portfolio of “product photography” to secure commercial jobs. These jewel-toned images feature surreal juxtapositions of items found in the family home, pairing a broken lightbulb with an egg yolk, for example, or portraying hat pins pushed through a pear resting on aquarium sand. For *Untitled Prop Archive (THE PORTFOLIO)* (2024), Ross-Ho has painstakingly sourced and collected a version of each item in her father’s photos and presents them on an enlarged replica of a wooden table from her childhood home, as if exhibiting precious objects in a historical museum. On the wall is *Untitled Waste Image (HEAVY DUTY)* (2024), a monumental light box of an image taken by her father while on a commercial shoot, the photographer acting as a stand-in for a



Left
Young Chung
Ssaem, 1996/2023

Yong Soon Min
Springtimes of Castro and Kim, 2009
(foreground)

Below
Amanda Ross-Ho
Untitled Prop Archive
(*THE PORTFOLIO*), 2024
(foreground)

Amanda Ross-Ho
Untitled Waste Image
(*HEAVY DUTY*), 2024



professional model yet to arrive on set. In this new project created for the exhibition, Ross-Ho embraces the great responsibility of caring for her inheritance, using her father's body of work as the seed from which to grow an understanding of his experiences as an immigrant striving to succeed amidst relentless obstacles.

ENTANGLEMENT AND INTERCONNECTIVITY

An omnipresent concern of many artists included in *Scratching at the Moon* is the specter of environmental collapse. As we witness unfathomable damage and the resulting plight of refugees from earthquake, flood, and drought, the entanglement of place, plants, animals, and peoples is central. The practices of Patty Chang, Miljohn Ruperto, and Vishal Jugdeo remind us of the interconnectivity of all things, heightening our understanding that what happens to one of us happens to all of us.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* has been instructive for the way she offers examples of refugees now creating a life within the American industrial wasteland, asserting that we are already living through end times and arguing that we will continue finding ways to do so. Pointing out that valuable matsutake mushrooms grow in the wake of the destruction of forests, Tsing reports on recent Hmong refugees making their livelihood by harvesting the matsutake in the national forests of the Pacific Northwest and selling them to Japanese exporters as delicacies that fetch a high price. Their story is a hopeful example of the layers of endings and opportunities in the wake of entropy or collapse.⁷

Chang's *We Are All Mothers* (2022) grew out of her research with wildlife pathologist Aleksija Neimanis and ecofeminist writer Astrida Neimanis. A work of collaboration and interdisciplinarity, Chang asks how art and the humanities can support scientists working at the forefront of climate issues. Featuring a video detailing the necropsy of a porpoise, the artist experiences an unexpected empathic connection with the animal when breastmilk is found in one of its stomachs, a discovery suggesting that perhaps its mother nursed it to provide comfort, knowing that her offspring was in danger and providing life at a moment of death. The extensive collaboration also revealed the necessity of caring for scientists so that they can continue the grueling work of witnessing and documenting the extinction of species. Chang's request that Aleksija place her hand on each porpoise's corpse before performing the necropsy created a space for cross-species ritual, empathy, and care.

Longtime friends Jugdeo and Ruperto have collaborated for the first time in their video *Cut Line* (2024), created for *Scratching at the Moon*. The work brings together the specific history of Jugdeo's family who immigrated to Guyana from India in the 1800s with Ruperto's philosophical investigations into how the diasporic postmodern experience can offer alternatives to inherited Western ideas such as linear time and the created hierarchies between humans and other living beings. Including footage of the Guyanese landscape with images produced using animation and digital simulation, the three-channel video installation examines the migration experience and the multifaceted nature of identity.

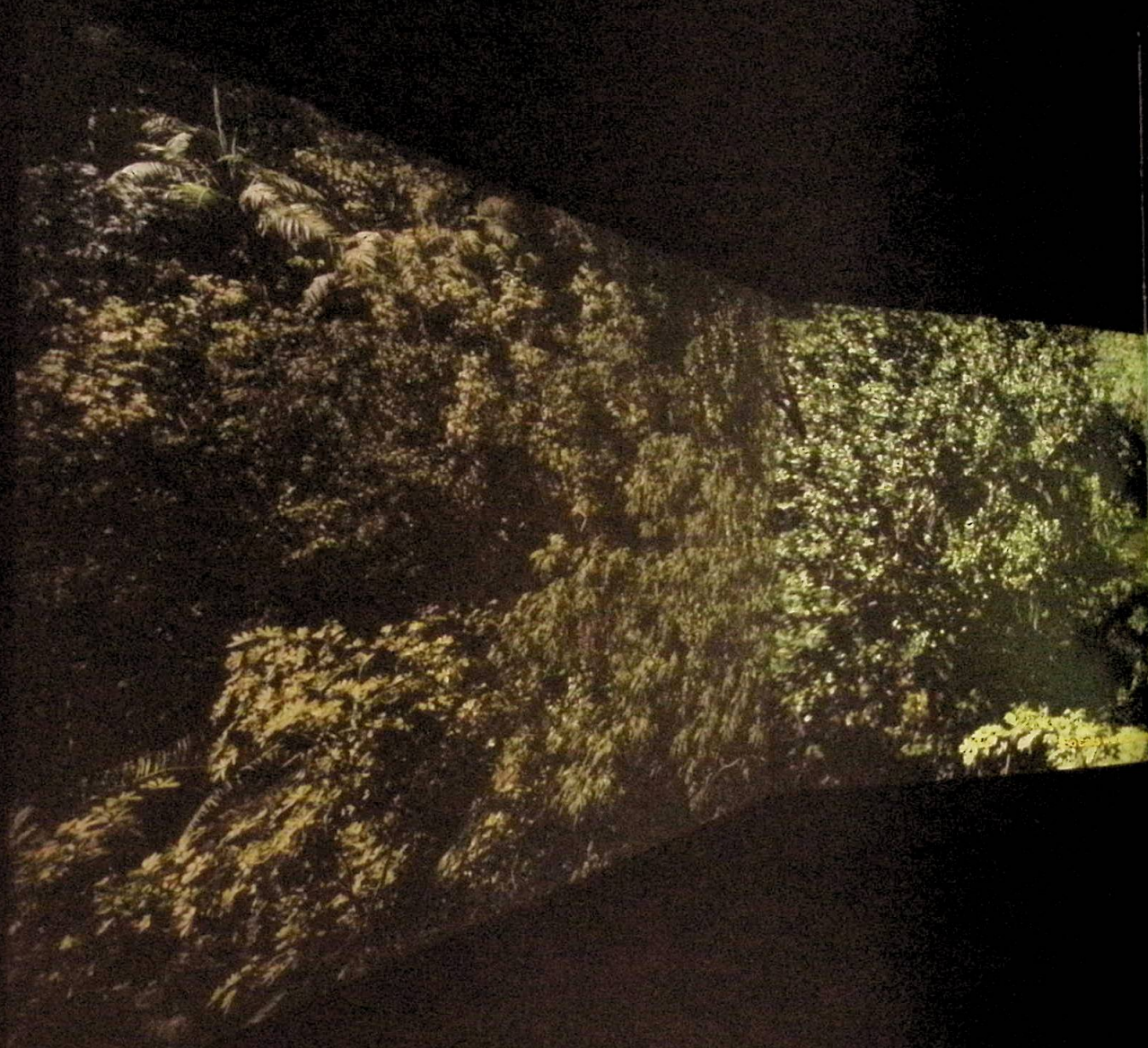
Cut Line—utilizing the insights of historian and geographer Vikram Tamboli—also shows us how documentation and contemporary forms of image-making can critique the disciplines of anthropology and history as inherently colonialist. The work asks probing questions about the responsibility of the storyteller and scholar, and the ways in which the very act of research leaves an imprint on its subject. The entwining of the subjective with the purportedly objective must be acknowledged so that alternative forms of scholarship may emerge against imperialist impulses of domination and control.

STAGES OF MUTABILITY

The artists in *Scratching at the Moon* have forged their own paths with a resiliency birthed from an understanding of what is required to endure while relegated to the margins. Several artists' practices are defined by their discursive and research-based approaches. Works might be introduced in successive parts, or iterations, while subjects can emerge and recede as their foundational ideas are explored over time. Dean Sameshima has investigated desire and loss over the course of his career in works that take the form of photography, painting, and printed matter. Simon



Bruce Yonemoto
Hanabi Fireworks, 1999



Vishal Jugdeo and Miljohn Ruperto
Cut Line, 2024



Leung creates ambitious projects requiring close collaborations that span many years. Partnerships also occur with spirits, as in Na Mira's folding of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's body of work into their own. Community and conversation are refreshingly prioritized, providing an alternative, generative model to the idea of the artist as a sole practitioner creating discrete artworks. Our identities depend on our interconnectedness with others, and these practices foreground our mutual reliance and recognition.

Leung's ongoing project *The Side of the Mountain*, begun in 1998, is an opera in three acts made for video. For *Act 2* (2024), created for the exhibition, Leung collaborated with composer Lucas Stoneham. Concerned with the intimacy of colonized people, Leung sets the action in the 1936 Fitzpatrick-Leland House, located at the intersection of Mulholland Drive and Laurel Canyon, where the central characters are a wealthy Vietnamese American woman and her Mexican American domestic helper. Through this relationship, Leung dissects the complex layers of gentrification and class within migrated peoples in Los Angeles.

From Silver Lake in the 1990s and 2000s to Berlin over the past decade, Sameshima has documented the fleeting and endangered spaces of male desire. For *Scratching at the Moon*, he presents works from his *being alone* series (2022), shot in black and white with a smartphone while visiting porn theaters in Berlin. Also included in the exhibition are selections from his *Traces (no. 1)* series (1990/2023), taken in massage parlors and gay bars in Silver Lake and Hollywood. Sameshima focuses on the stains, crumpled bedsheets, and empty rooms, rather than on the people who frequent these spaces—the romantic subject left to the imagination of the viewer.

Mira situates their practice in deep listening, observing synchronicity, and embracing chance operations. The artist, whose great grandmother practiced shamanism during the Japanese occupation of Korea, uses methods such as automatic writing and meditation to allow signs beyond the rational world to guide their research. Their encounters with the unseen merge with cultural and historical understandings developed through travel and deep study, always from a queer feminist perspective. For the past several years Mira's work has focused on a spiritual and psychic collaboration with the late artist, writer, and filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose unrealized work *White Dust from Mongolia* became the impetus for *Dust* (2022–ongoing), a series of film and video installations. Mira continues this body of work with a new video installation for *Scratching at the Moon* titled *Hotel* (2024), in which a figure—perhaps an anonymous guest, the artist, or a ghost—runs the looping spirals and seemingly endless curves of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. As the figure moves in and out of visibility, Mira's poignant explorations of loss, displacement, and fragmentation of memory unfold, guided by the traces of ancestors.

UNSTABLE OBJECT, RESONANT MATERIALS

If our bodies contain an archive of experiences, journeys, and relationships, then do things like a worn pair of jeans or commodities such as rice also contain an archive? Artists in *Scratching at the Moon* consider the subjectivity of stuff and make works that unpack the symbolism held in the material culture that surrounds them. There is often an abiding interest in contemporary materials, at once ubiquitous and precise, such as carnations, bird cages, highway lamps, and chain link fencing. In the exhibition, cultural materials manifest into specific forms that question and subvert, offering an alternative to mainstream ideologies.

The work emerges in unexpected configurations—previously unknown containers for an archive rather than a predetermined final product. Michelle Lopez and Anna Sew Hoy both engage and refute the histories of minimalism and process art in different ways. Bruce Yonemoto and Amy Yao deconstruct the symbols of pervasive pop culture to reveal the tension between its ability to engender desire and belonging and its often subtextual racist messaging.

In her sculptures, Sew Hoy works on several different forms concurrently, deploying overlooked items from daily life—old clothes, the stuff of electronic communication—to point to the bodies that use them and our reliance on mass-produced goods. *Multitude Wall* (2023) is at once monumental and delicate, consisting of dozens of collared business shirts commonly worn in the office. At a time in which many continue to work remotely, even after the pandemic, the office shirt has, for some, become nearly as obsolete as the daily commute. In this sprawling

work that takes the form of a semi-transparent room divider, the fabric has been cut away from each shirt to leave only the collars, seams, and cuffs to create a collection of moving, sagging line drawings in space, pinned and layered into a web.

For the *Growing Ruins* series (2021–ongoing), Sew Hoy enters into a dialogue with entropy and transformation by firing metal cages and clay together to create a scene of intense distress. The materials wreak havoc on one another, cracking and slumping. Once pulled from the kiln, Sew Hoy rehabilitates the resulting site of ruin—the cage warped and no longer effective, the clay fractured—into an ad hoc shelter and space for thriving in maximalist joy. The site evolves through her addition of re-worked found materials such as bottle caps, fabric scraps, drywall, plastic bits, and a sneaker. Bleak and hopeful futures vie with one another in these dynamic environments.

Through her use of materials associated with the urban landscape—cinder blocks, traffic barricades, street lamps—Lopez critiques the Western industrialist imperative of unrelenting growth and the coupling of political power with capitalist structures of consumption, exploitation, and ownership as a validation of success. Her sculptures consist of fragments placed in precarious balance—at once mutually reliant in order to remain afloat and juxtaposed as if in competition for their ability to endure—suggesting the failure of our current economic and political systems to deliver on their promises. Lopez’s inclusion of such industrial materials as aluminum, iron, lead, and glass takes up the visual language of minimalist sculpture and imbues it with social commentary—bending and crumpling their pristine surfaces to create forms that reject the resolution of these past sculptural movements and better reflect our lived experience. The sculptures selected for *Scratching at the Moon*—including *Correctional Lighting* (2024), a new large-scale work replete with a cast-iron highway lamp incessantly buzzing, and a reconfiguration of elements from her *Ballast & Barricades* series (2019/2023)—explicitly reference the materials used to control human behavior or create makeshift shelters at a moment when the crisis of the unhoused is acutely visible in all our major cities. Hovering over the viewers, these works transform ubiquitous urban fragments into forms simultaneously grand and hauntingly banal, warning of the next economic or political collapse.

Yonemoto grew up in the seemingly idyllic period of the 1950s in California, and much of his work grapples with the ways in which American popular culture trafficks in idealism and yearning while perpetuating blatant stereotypes and structural forms of inequity. Of Japanese descent, his work navigates the experiences of many first and second generation immigrant families: the double-consciousness at play when the desire to be part of the world you were born into is at odds with an awareness of being perceived as an outsider. Since the 1970s, his works in photography, video, and sculpture have examined how mass media and advertising impact our sense of personal identity. His three-channel video installation *Hanabi Fireworks* (1999) begins with the psychedelic morphing of the logos of major Hollywood film studios moving across the screens, eventually exploding into a dramatic sequence of fireworks that conjures the spectacular displays of Independence Day or Disneyland parades, yet were captured during public celebrations in Japan. Bridging East and West, references to Hollywood, American nationalism, and the Japanese tradition of fireworks festivals join forces to manipulate the viewer into a hypnotized gaze. Yonemoto responds to the recent increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans in his *Cover the Earth: Not of Skin or Color* series (2023), which combines traditional lacquer techniques from East Asian cultures with the more toxic resin widely used in the United States to create a hybrid material then poured over vintage globes. Creating a new skin for the world, material traditions can be understood as both a link between cultures and a perfect storm emblematic of the complexities of global identities.

Yao similarly skewers American culture's claims of inclusivity and equality as she takes up current events, world politics, and the international flows of capital. From her early days in a punk band to her current sculptural works that lay bare the primary role of Asian commodities in the global marketplace and the attendant political gamesmanship, she treads into these territories with an outspoken yet poetic voice. The combination of fake rice and pearls with the real things in her work *Doppelgängers* (2016) references widespread claims by the United States government that Chinese manufacturers are creating fake products—accusations fueled by fears of the Chinese economy outpacing that of the U.S.

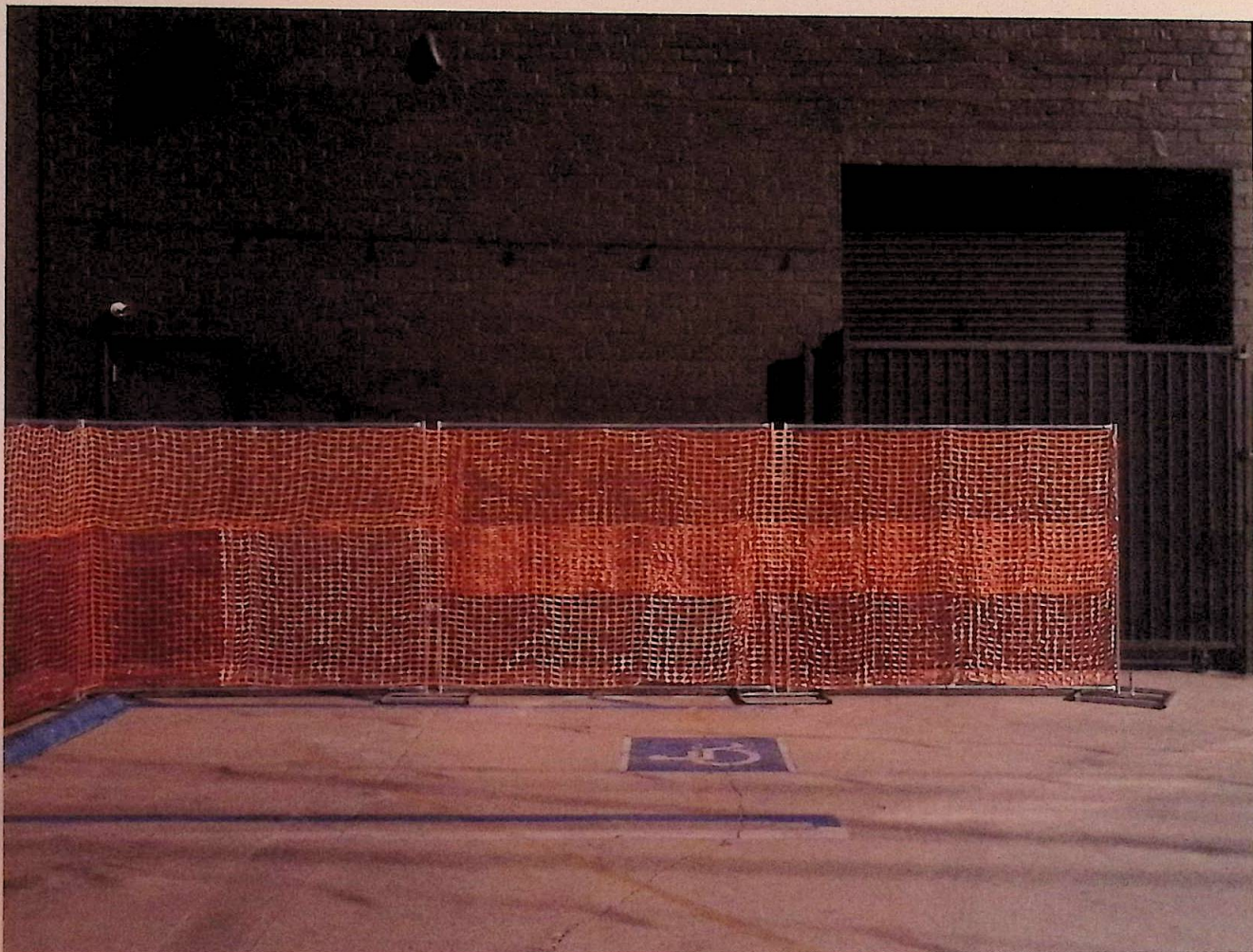


longblo...

Simon Leung
*Act 2: An Opera by Luke Stoneham
and Simon Leung, 2024*



id, hair



Amy Yao
Foreign Investments
(Bottarga in Costa Mesa), 2017/2024

The artist's works often call attention to the misunderstandings that arise because of differing cultural values—for example, the ways in which a product is treasured in one culture but considered alien or repugnant in another—and how these values can change over time, across generations, compelled by the traversing of bodies across continents. Given the cross-pollination and calls for new hybrid forms within and between our increasingly globalized societies, the synthetic silk in the large outdoor installation *Foreign Investments (Bottarga in Costa Mesa)* (2017/2024) asks questions about how we deem the use of a specific material authentic to a culture. Used to cover a chain link fence of the sort commonly deployed to demarcate property lines or shield a construction site, the silk becomes a means to beautify a commonplace barrier while also obscuring visibility, suggesting that surface decoration can be used to hide the omnipresent gentrifying machine that lies behind it. Strangely seductive, Yao's works are trenchant investigations into the hypocrisies all too common in our current political landscape.

THE BODY ARCHIVE

Superficial understandings of identity have looked to the color of one's skin and other outward signs in order to categorize and rank, a practice of differentiation resulting from an alienated and removed gaze upon the Other that perpetuates disconnection. However, each person's internal processing of their own experiences of displacement, cross-cultural existence, misidentification, marginalization, and outright discrimination creates a far more complex sense of identity that is held within their body. The stories embedded in *Scratching at the Moon* through the works on view trouble and expand our understandings of identity—Asian American and otherwise—as something fixed in time and place. While *Scratching at the Moon* seeks to remediate some of the lack of representation and visibility for Asian American artists in the contemporary art field—and within contemporary art museums in Los Angeles in particular—it also seeks to pull apart that very category by celebrating the diversity and multiplicity within it. The term "Asian American" has always been too broad, holding the immigrants of dozens of countries under its umbrella. What comes to the fore is the process by which each individual incorporates the history of their own life and that of the people around them into a unique perspective useful in reckoning with the world. If we take for granted that we each exist across borders and generations, we might envision a future of surviving generously together in mutual support through the next political crisis and climate disaster, as well as the next celebration. We have survived and thrived up to this point in time and we are able and equipped to continue to bear witness together through our words, thoughts, and actions. *Scratching at the Moon* is the result of bearing such witness to the beautiful entanglements of mutual infection and affection across Asian American communities and the artworks that blossom in these environments.

1. The AAPI Arts Network—an emergent coalition of self-identified Asian American and Pacific Islander visual artists, curators, educators, writers, and patrons—was formed in Los Angeles in response to the rise in anti-Asian bigotry and violence during the pandemic.

2. While the storefront has closed, Ooga Booga remains an online shop. During *Scratching at the Moon*, Wendy Yao and Ooga Booga were invited to participate in ICA LA's Bookshelf Residency program, making their products available for sale and organizing accompanying public programs.

3. In 2018, the Woman's Building was designated as a Historical Cultural Monument by the Los Angeles City Council.

4. Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2018), 29–32.

5. For an analysis of how Min's work "profoundly embraces the position of Third World female artistry," see Soojung Hyun, "Yong Soon Min's *Defining Moments: Gendered Space of Decolonization in the Pacific*," in *Expanding the Parameters of Feminist Activism*, ed. Gillian Hannum and Kyunghee Pyun (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

6. When invited to participate in *Scratching at the Moon*, Chung—who always brings others into the spotlight—suggested that Yong Soon Min be featured instead, noting her abiding influence as a mentor and their ongoing relationship. Min agreed, and we also convinced Chung to show *Not By Birth*.

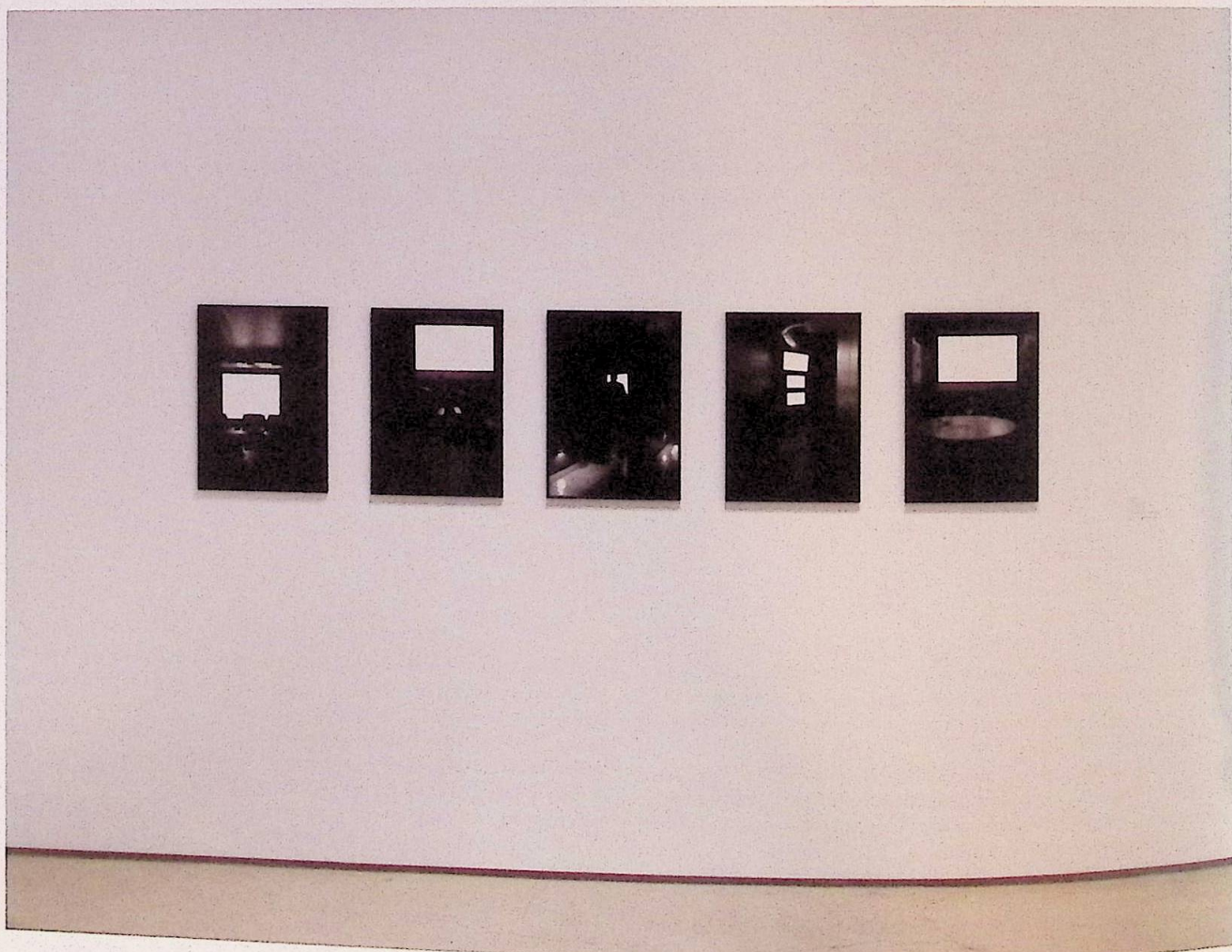
7. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Below
Dean Sameshima
being alone, 2022

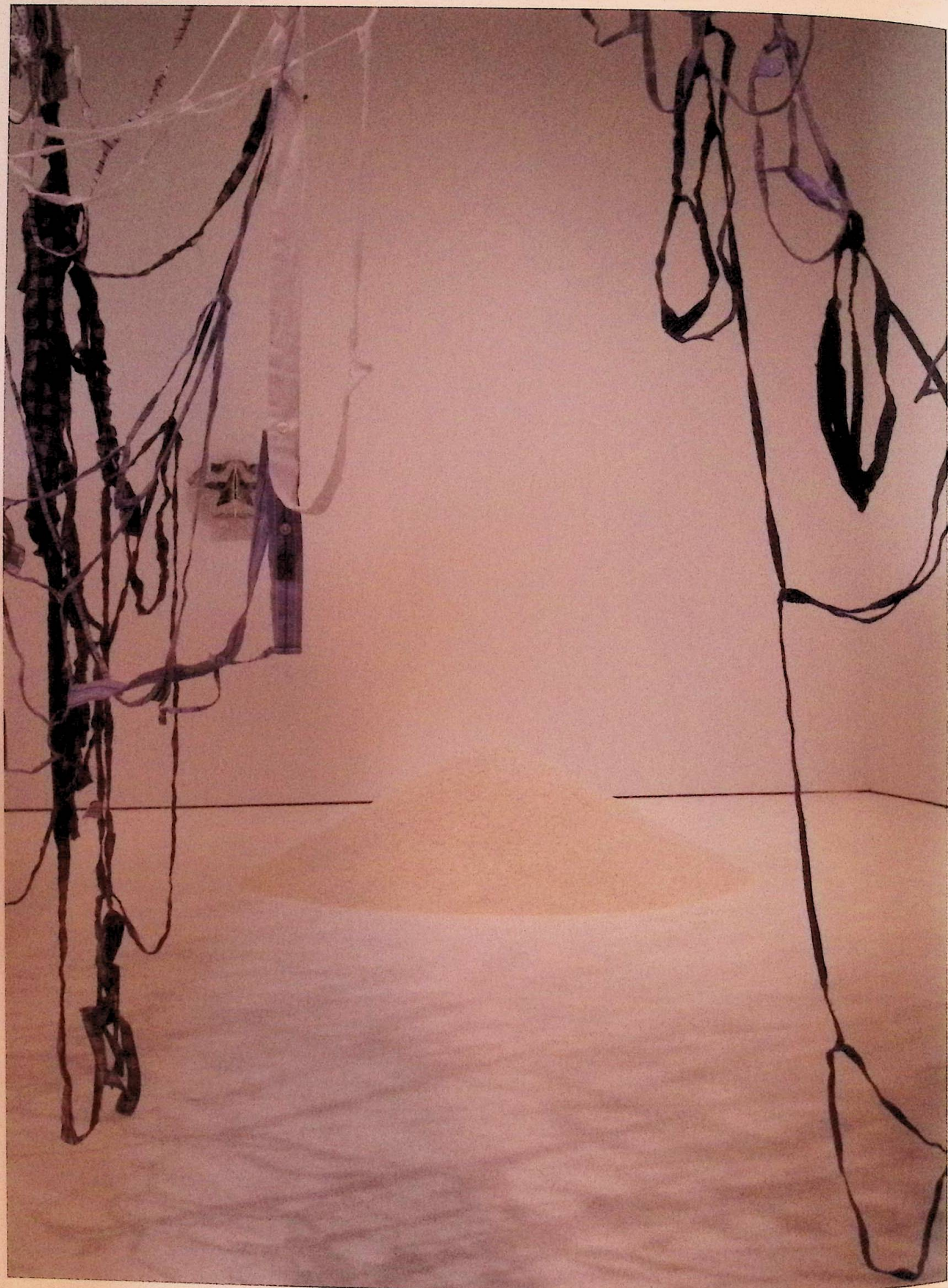
Right
Anna Sew Hoy
Multitude Wall, 2024
(foreground)

Anna Sew Hoy
Heavy Sun and Commotion, 2022
(left)

Anna Sew Hoy
Hard Swamp Ecstatic Return, 2022





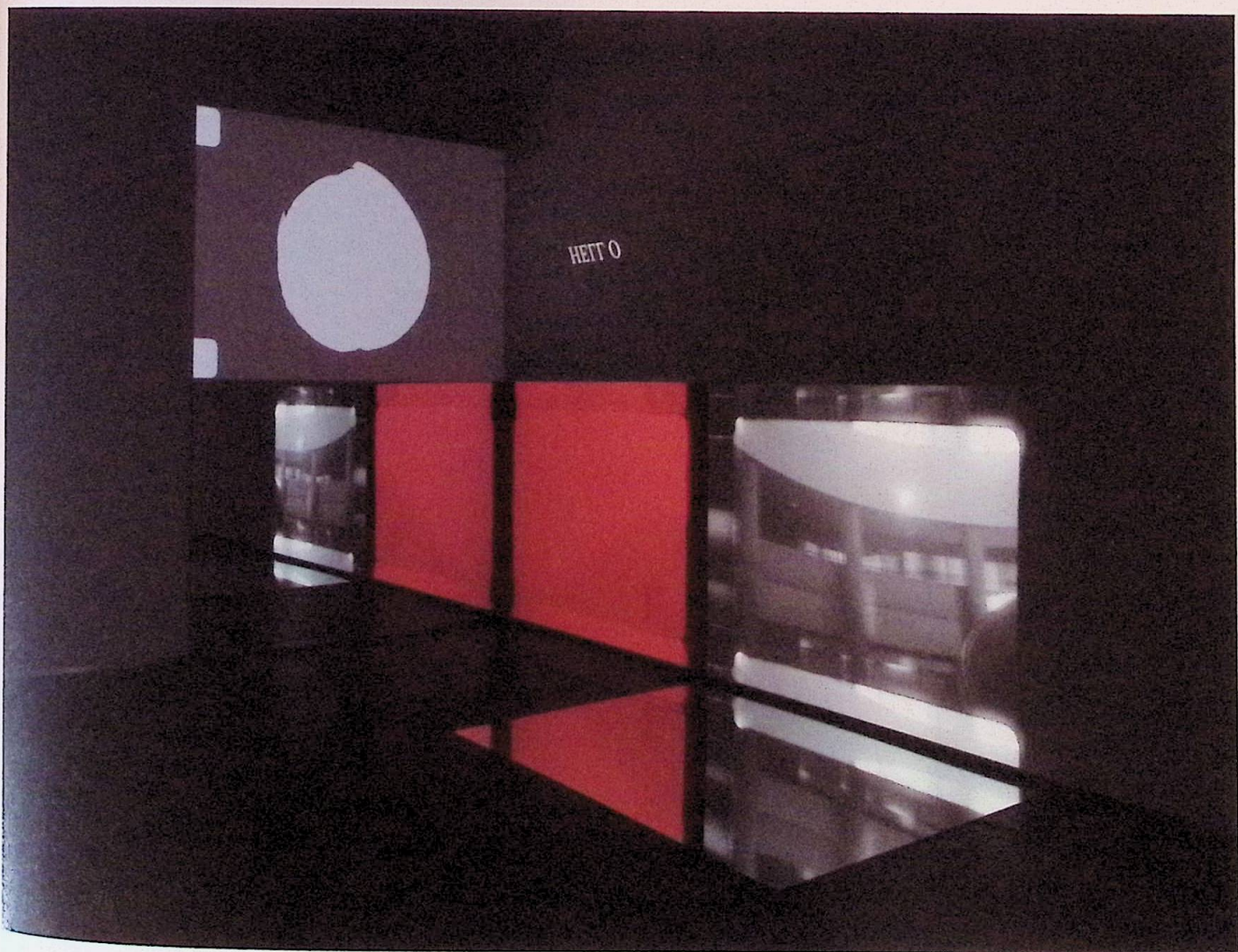


Left
Amy Yao
AZN Clam (Shine Bright), 2023
(background)

Amy Yao
Doppelgängers, 2016
(floor)

Anna Sew Hoy
Multitude Wall, 2024

Below
Na Mira
Hotel, 2024





b. 1953, Bugok, South Korea. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

It is hard to overstate the importance, and the singularity, of Yong Soon Min's voice. Outspoken in her advocacy for Asian American art, she has always been clear-eyed in her analysis of the issues faced by artists like herself, particularly at a time when few other Asian American artists were as visible or as prolific as Min. Not only did her work as an artist expand previous notions of what Asian American art could look like, but her work as an activist, curator, and educator has sought to reframe how—and on whose terms—Asian American artists were seen. "To find a place for yourself in this culture is a political act. To understand 'I have a right to be here and to be who I am,'" she declared.⁷ Through her own struggle to find a place for herself as a Korean American woman, Min became increasingly political. Beginning in the 1980s, she has been as involved with U.S.-based activist groups and organizations (such as the Asian American Arts Alliance and Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network) as with those outside the U.S., supporting causes from the Minjung movement in Korea to third world solidarity.

Min's sensitivity to the histories of revolution and resistance that preceded her own is evident in the piece *Springtimes of Castro and Kim* (2009), which appropriates a poster portraying the two bygone political figures in rosy solidarity, offered in a stack as part of *Scratching at the Moon* for viewers to take and make of the faded symbolism what they will. Also included in the exhibition is one of Min's most iconic works, *Defining Moments* (1992). The six-part photo series begins with an image of the artist's torso with "HEARTLAND" inscribed over her chest and "OCCUPIED TERRITORY" over her arms, and a succession of dates swirling out from her navel. These dates hold significant political and personal history for the artist: 1953 marks the end of the Korean War and the year of Min's birth; 4/19/1960 was the peak of the April Revolution in Korea, during which mass protests led to the eventual overthrow of Syngman Rhee's government, and the year Min emigrated to the United States; 5/19/1980 refers to the Gwangju Massacre, a turning point in the artist's political awakening; and 4/29/1992 memorializes the Los Angeles Uprising as well as the artist's birthday. Densely layered with texts and images referencing each of these events, *Defining Moments* invites interpretations as dense with meaning, from an outcry against the oppression of her people, to a rebuke of the use of Korean women's bodies as territory, to the continuity of the self despite the presence of trauma. As hinted by the letters "DMZ" scrawled across her forehead in the ensuing photographs, Min is the culmination of those defining moments, embodying a kind of metaphysical "demilitarized zone"—torn between being shaped by history and shaping it herself.

— Caroline Ellen Liou

⁷Min quote is from the "Mixing It Up-I" symposium, University of Colorado, Boulder, April 1988. In addition to A4 and Godzilla, among the organizations and institutions that have benefited from Min's insight and engagement over the years are GYOPO, KAWAWA (Korean American Women Artists and Writers Association), the Korean American Art Museum, Minor Injury, and SEORO Korean Cultural Network.

Left
Yong Soon Min
*Springtimes of Castro
and Kim*, 2009

Pages 182–87
Yong Soon Min
Defining Moments, 1992

MY BODY LIES

HEARTLAND

5/19/80
11/29/92
4/19/90
4/19/92
11/29/92
4/19/90
4/19/92
11/29/92

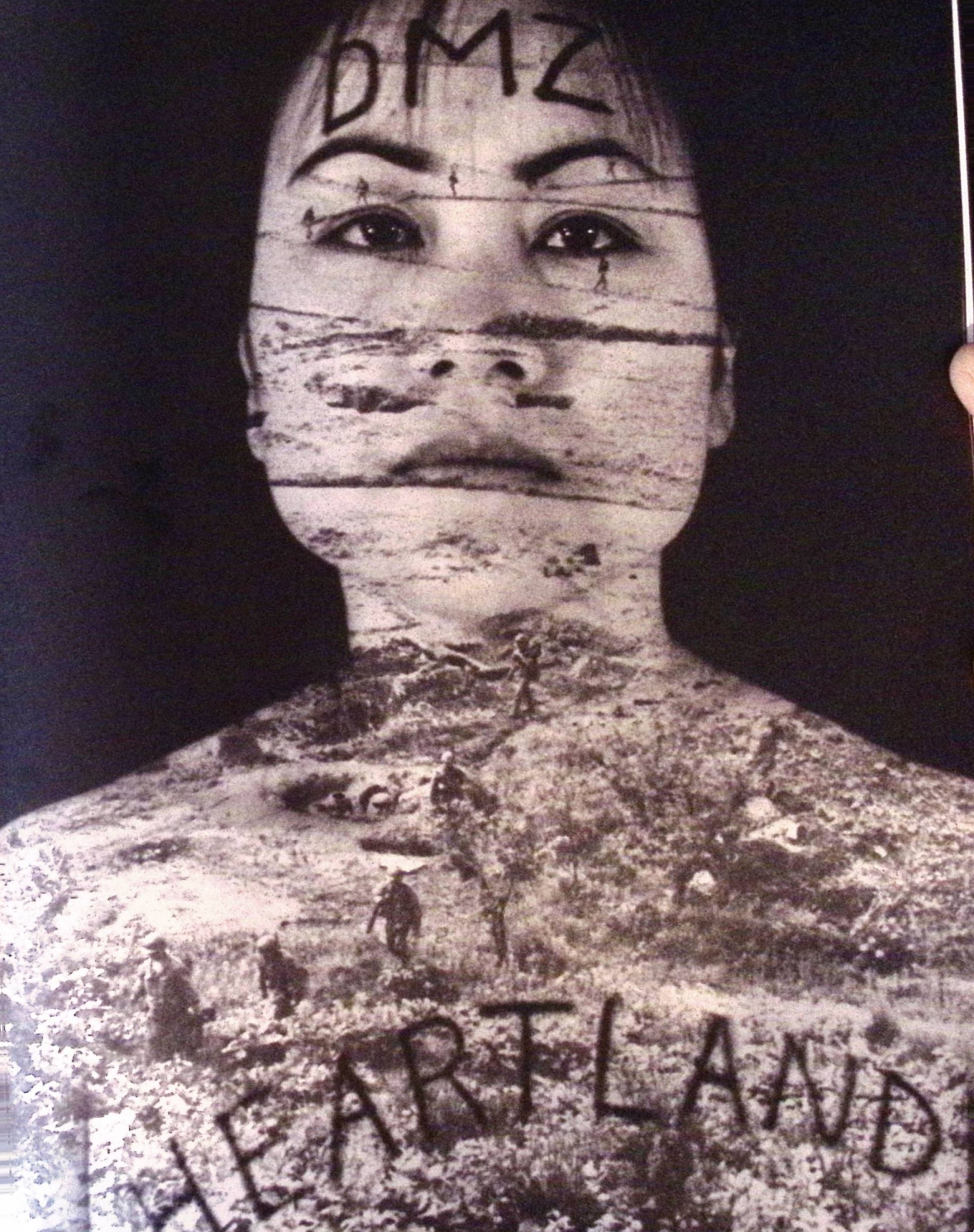
OVER THE OCEAN

MY BODY LIES OVER THE SEA

MY BODY LIES OVER THE DMZ

OH BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME

BRING BACK BRING BACK OH BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME



DMZ

HEARTLAND

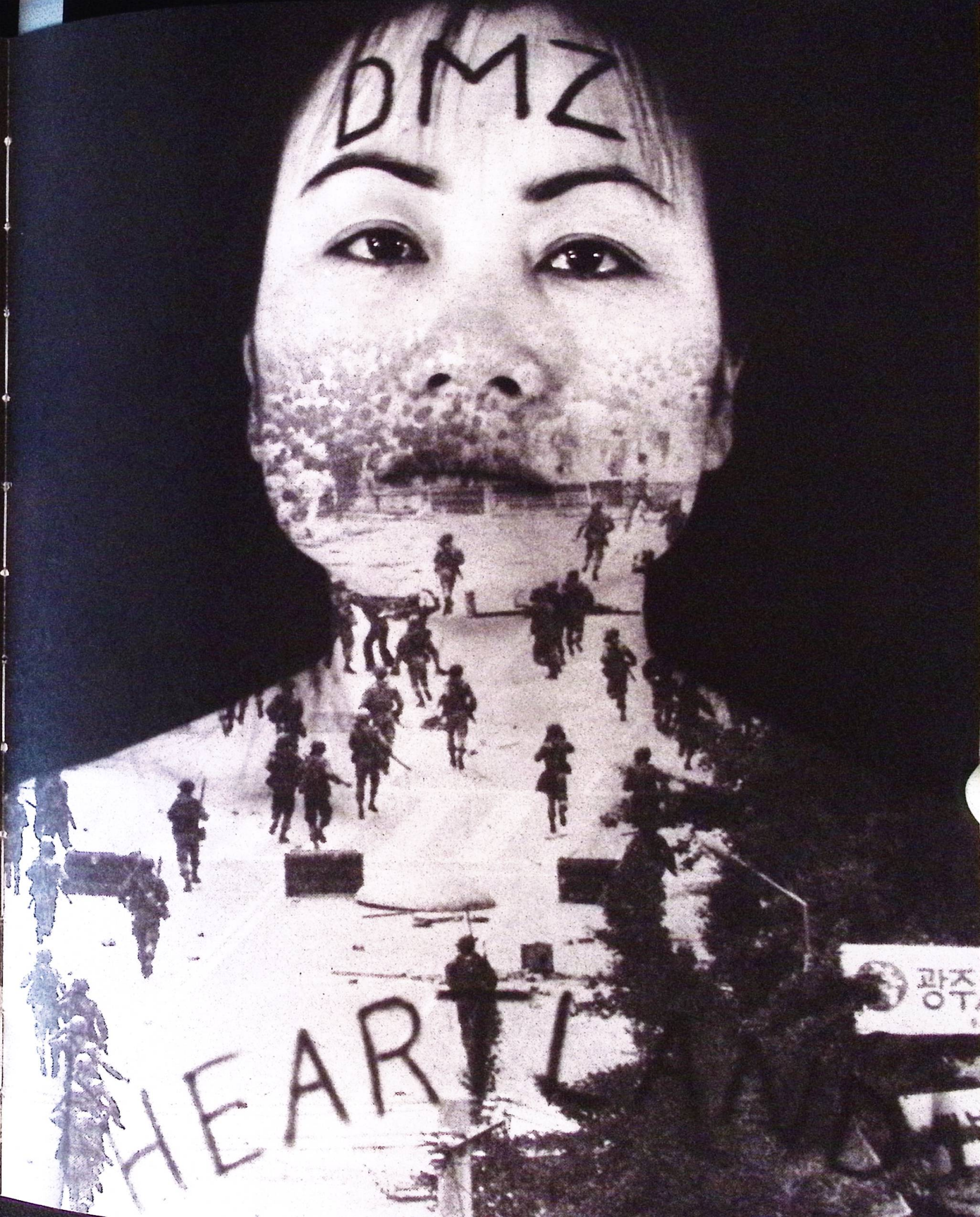


ART

DMZ

HEAR

광주
OT





Historic rally in Koreatown

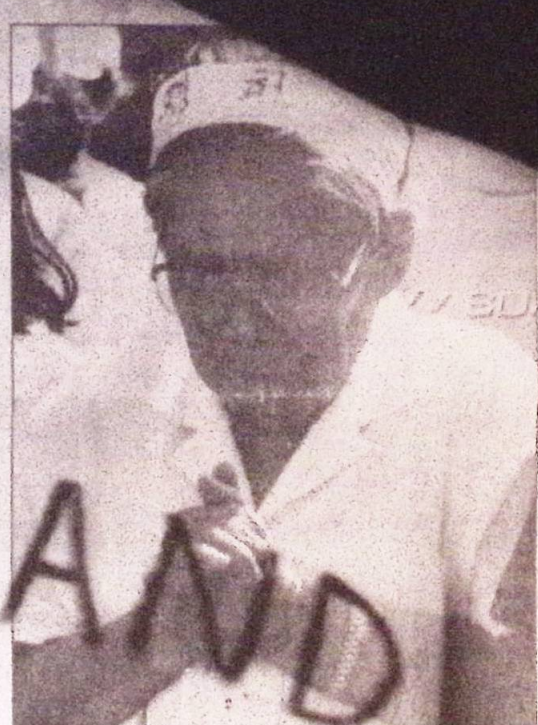
...er supporters attend a community rally and



HEARTLAND

Gettin' busy

Volunteers from the community spring out of their homes to join a massive clean up effort



Prayer for peace

An elderly woman wears a white headband



DMZ

NO ORDINARY LANDSCAPE

**THIS ONE IS RECOGNIZED BY MOST KOREANS AS
MT. BAEKTU AND ITS HEAVENLY LAKE
A LANDMARK LOCATED NEAR THE CHINESE BORDER IN
NORTH KOREA**

**THIS SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS LANDSCAPE IMAGE IS
POLITICALLY CHARGED IN THAT THE OPPOSITION
MOVEMENT IN SOUTH KOREA HAS CLAIMED THIS PLACE TO
SYMBOLIZE ITS QUEST FOR REUNIFICATION.
NOTWITHSTANDING OFFICIAL NORTH KOREAN CLAIMS THAT
THIS IS KIM IL SUNG'S BIRTHPLACE, IT IS ALSO THE
LEGENDARY BIRTHPLACE OF THE KOREAN PEOPLE AND
NATION. THIS ORIGIN MYTH ATTRIBUTES TO THIS
LANDSCAPE EXPANSIVE NOTIONS OF
A MOTHERLAND AND A FATHERLAND
IN SHORT AN IMAGINARY HOMELAND THAT IS SITUATED**

OVER MY HEART



b. 1972, Seoul. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

Young Chung's chosen pronouns are telling; the plurality of we/us/ours suggests a renunciation of the individual in favor of recognizing the collective, blurring the boundaries between the self and the Other. It comes as no surprise, then, that any description of what Chung *does* is equally boundless: somewhere between artist and gallerist (or "space operator" as Chung insists, somewhat self-deprecatingly), having exhibited for a decade before opening Commonwealth and Council in 2010. To characterize the gallery as an experiment or as an extension of the practice, however, is beside the point. Rather, these monikers—of "artist" or "gallerist"—happen to function as viable containers to hold the tenets that Chung carries closely, allowing for opportunities to learn from and grow alongside a network of people interested in asking similar questions, while providing a structure around which to create and support a community.

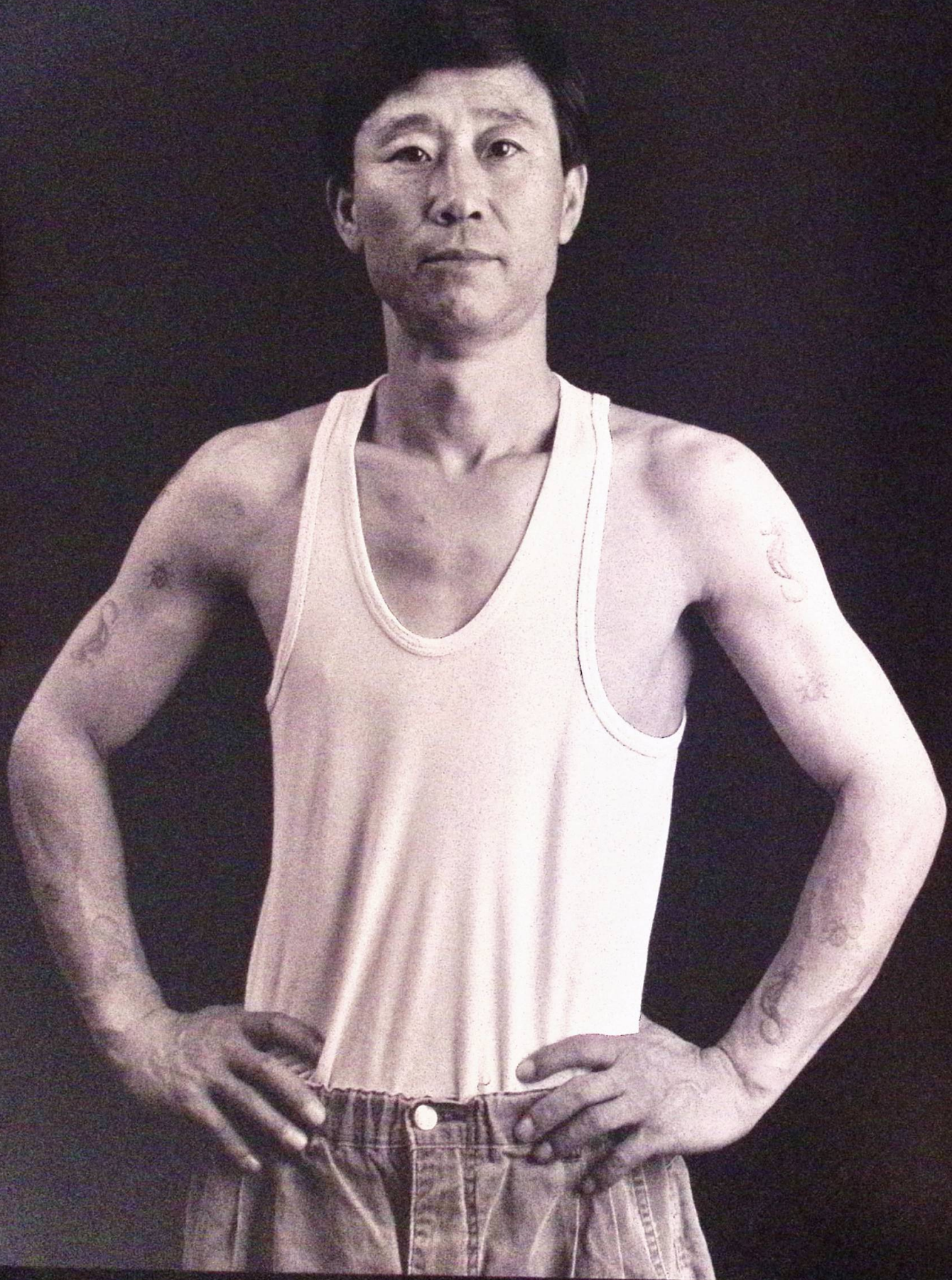
Fittingly, Chung's contribution to *Scratching at the Moon* also centers community. Titled *Not By Birth* (1996/2023), the portraiture series is one of the artist's earliest bodies of work, created while taking classes taught by Yong Soon Min and Catherine Opie at the University of California, Irvine. There, Chung's artistic inquiry centered around the question, "How does the subjective position affect the construction of identity?" The academic discourse around representation and identity politics during the time is visible in the series' straightforward, black-and-white style, presenting images of people who could plausibly be family members—elderly aunts, perhaps, or teenaged cousins. Each one faces the camera head-on with an undeniable sense of self-possession, their postures ranging from languid to confrontational. Each one, too, displays a small tattoo—either of a ladybug or a seahorse—with some discreetly placed, and others covering entire faces and necks. Though slight, these tattoos begin to dispel the mirage of objectivity as implied by the photographs. After all, what kind of family has the same tattoo? And is this even a real family? By interrupting the viewer's assumption of reality, the series not only exposes but also interrogates their latent desire for authenticity, coherence, and narrative.

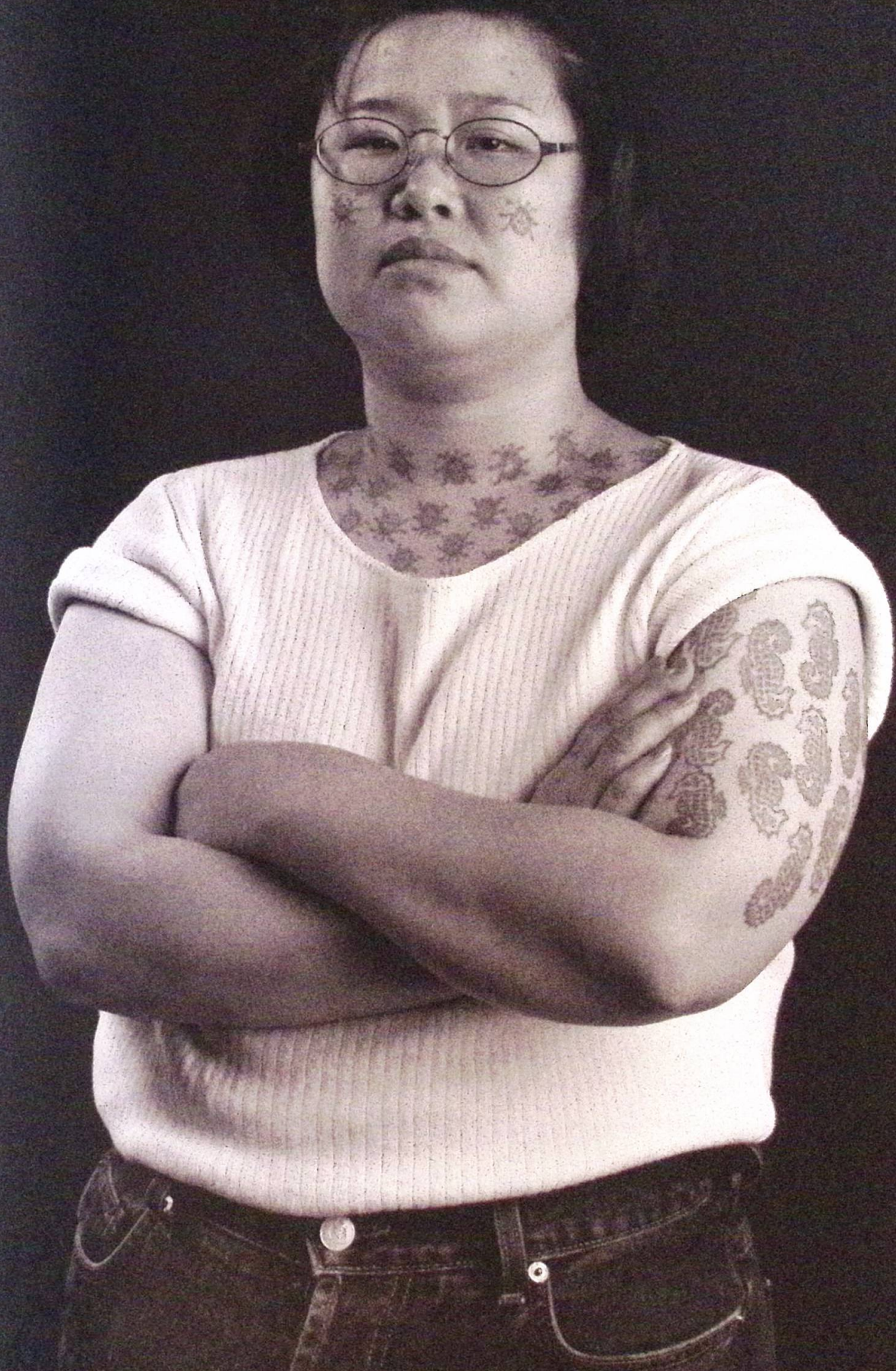
Some of the individual artwork titles, such as *Mamasan* and *Papasan*, seem to indicate a familial relationship to the artist, legible at least to those with a knowledge of the Korean language. Others, like *Ssaem*, remain more inscrutable; even if viewers are able to decipher the title as an informal term for "teacher," they may not know that the portrait depicts the artist Yong Soon Min or understand the depth of the relationship between the professor and student. What is not revealed to the viewer is that *King (Saigu)* depicts Chung's father, who was wounded during the 1992 L.A. Uprising, or "Saigu" (4–29) in the Korean American community. Though the event was seen as divisive between Korean and Black communities, inflamed by media narratives that sought to pit one racialized group against another, it was also a catalyst for Chung to embrace differences and seek commonalities with others. In this way, Chung's work functions in dialogue with Min's work in *Scratching at the Moon*. Here, Min's exploration of identity, and her acknowledgement of the cultural and political movements that have shaped her, becomes part of the lineage inherited by her student, to be continued in another body of artwork. In contrast to Min's self-portrait series, which proposes an understanding of the self as defined by historical moments, Chung's series—which is also, arguably, a kind of self-portrait—recognizes the relational nature of selfhood, extending outside of the self to bring family, friends, and strangers alike into its fold as equal subjects. Like family, identity is not just what is given, but what you make of it.

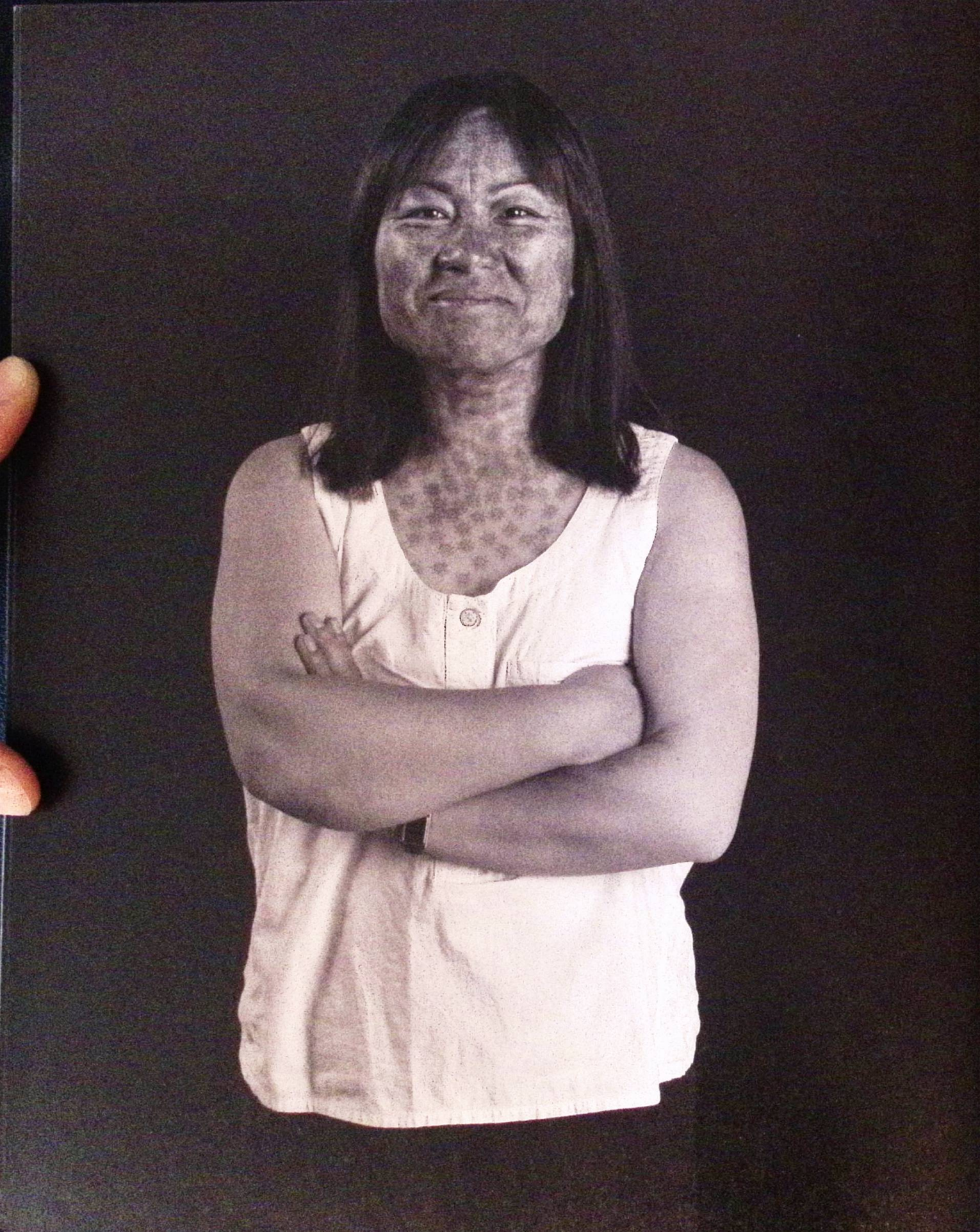
— Caroline Ellen Liou

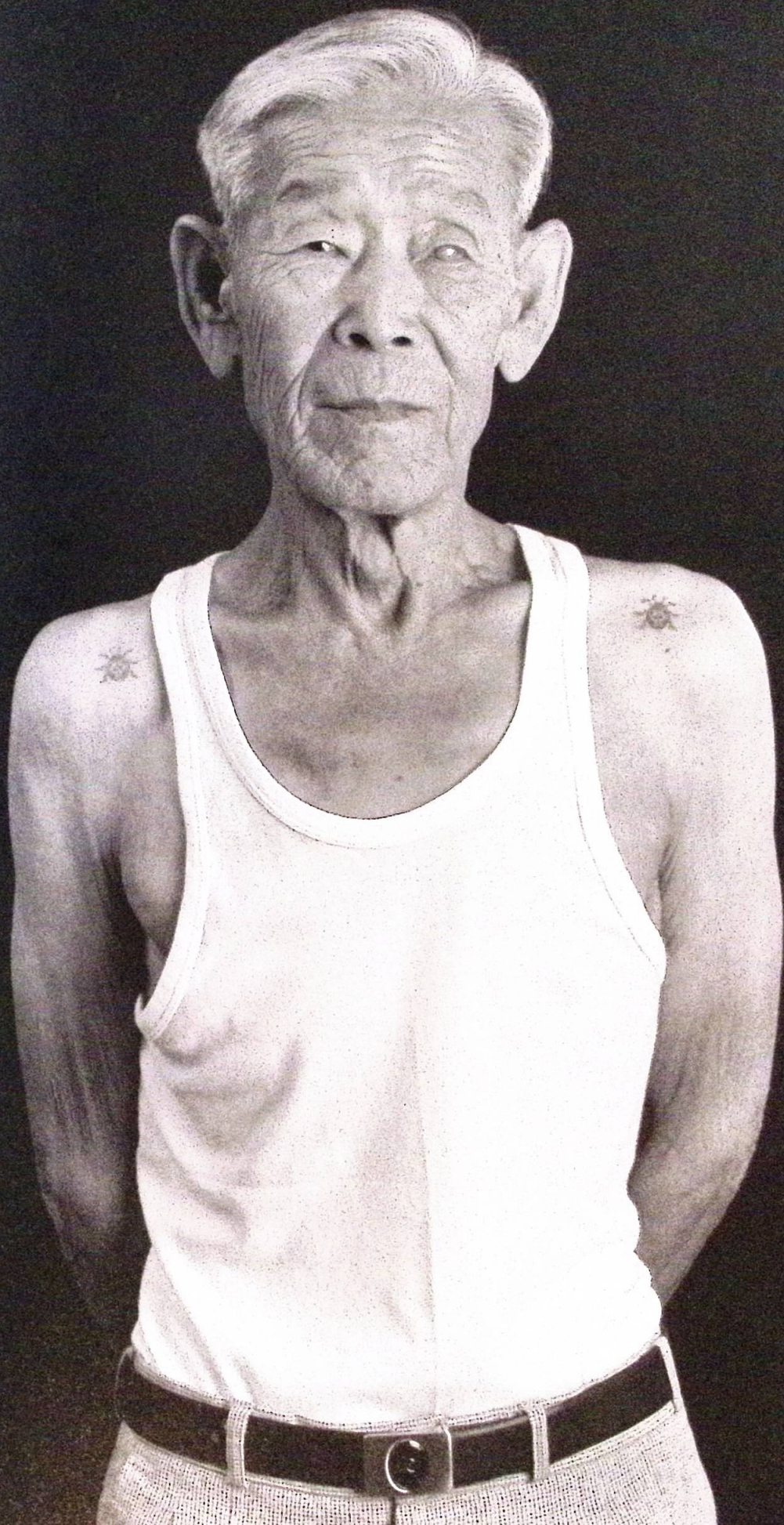


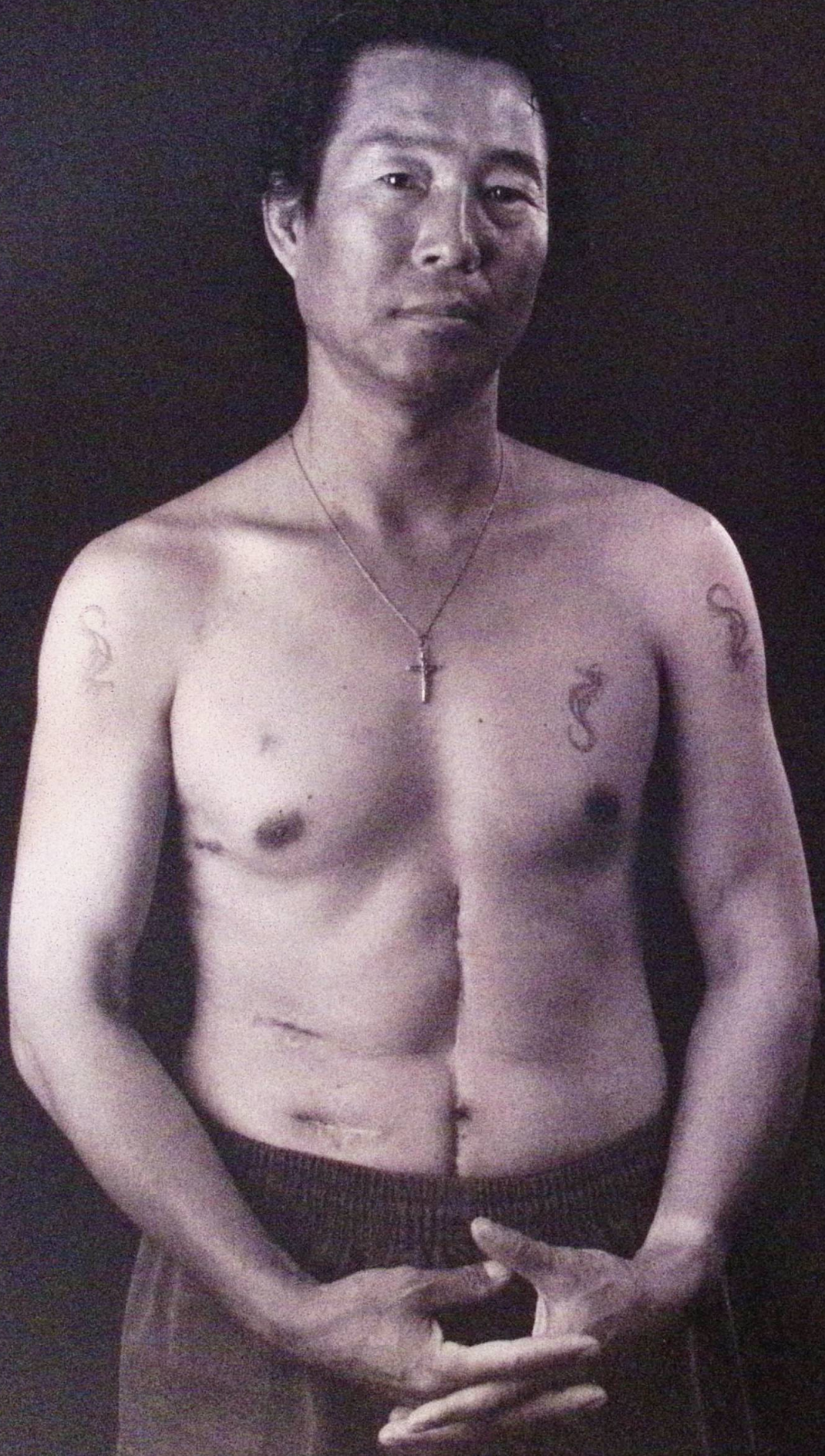














Conversation:

PATTY

CHANG

YOUNG

CHUNG

and

YONG SOON

MIN

PATTY CHANG

I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you both met. Young, how did Yong Soon influence your developing self at that time?

YOUNG CHUNG

Yong Soon, I remember spotting you. I was like, "Who's this older sister teaching in the department at UC Irvine?" I noticed your presence way before I took your Issues in Autobiography class.

YONG SOON MIN

The first time I remember meeting Young was at a film screening of *Osaka Story: A Documentary* by Toichi Nakata. I had brought Nakata to UC Irvine to screen his film about a boy who had a Japanese mother and Korean father and they owned a pachinko parlor. The boy found out that his father had a whole other family in Korea. That was fascinating to all of us, actually, this double family thing. I remember when the film was over, Young was sitting in the back row, hiding, and I thought, "He's so quiet. He's so shy." That was my first impression of him. Much later, when he took my class, he connected with a few people.

YC

Cirilo Domine, Nguyen Tan Hoang, and Vicente Golveo.

YSM

Yes, three gay Asian American guys who were accepted into the grad program. I think Young felt warm enough around them to open up himself.

YC

What I learned from Yong Soon was the magic of bringing people together and then sharing that with others. I really respect and honor Yong Soon for teaching me how to do that for myself and people around me. I was probably the only undergrad that Yong Soon included when she had brunch or dinner, when artists were in town, and it was really meaningful for me. At that time, I was in school to become an artist, and I've always had a tremendous respect for Yong Soon's commitment. She told me early on that she was not a commercial artist, that she was in it for social change.

YSM

By the time I entered the Whitney Independent Study Program, I was already politicized by the third world project and other movements. There's so much work that I could refer to, such as my work with Godzilla in the early 1990s.¹

YC

I know you were at Berkeley with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.² Were you two the only Asian American students at Berkeley at that time?

YSM

Theresa and I met when we both graduated in 1975 from UC Berkeley with the Eisner Prize for Video and Film. She was two years older but graduated with me because she majored in English, but also got an art degree. Getting the grant came with an exhibition at the university's Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and a \$500 cash prize. When we showed up at that opening, she was the only other Asian American woman and the only other Korean American woman, so we just gravitated towards each other.

YC

You guys were like the pioneers, right? I mean, there weren't a lot of Asian American artists out there.

YSM

No, there weren't at that time. So that was really amazing.

YC

My early works at UC Irvine were all about catharsis and therapy, healing and childhood trauma. They were prompted

1. Godzilla was a New York-based collective advocating visibility and participation for contemporary Asian American artists, writers, and curators excluded from art world exhibition and discourse. See Howie Chen, ed., *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, 1990-2001* (Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2021).

2. Cha was born in 1951 in Busan, South Korea, and emigrated with her family to Hawai'i and then San Francisco in the early 1960s. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, she created several film and video works and, in 1980, moved to New York City, where she was an editor

by Yong Soon's class *Issues in Autobiography* and how important it is to speak from that place of difference, just to complicate everything. Yong Soon's politicized position of making work gave me permission to be more playful in my own practice. I did not want to be a spokesperson per se for a collective experience. I did a lot of photography, so I really wanted to fuck with representation. I had no allegiance to authenticity, I just wanted to complicate that easy read, the easy consumption of these images. I think Yong Soon and her trajectory as an artist allowed me the space to do that. I was in my early twenties, so what did I know? But her example kind of set me free. I didn't have to make work about trauma all the time, but I could trust that everything is informed by that experience. You know, it's like a subject positioning, I guess—making dangerous representations of working class Asians sucking on nipples, or whatever. I wanted to mess with it. Looking back now I don't know how responsible that positioning was, but I think it gave me a lot of freedom.

YSM

Issues in Autobiography, this class I taught just once, was an incredible way to let people open up in class and in general. Students learned to talk about themselves as a means to talk about others, as well as larger issues. April 29 is my birthday and I remember that April 29, 1992, is the date of the L.A. riots. Young's father owned a store in South L.A. and he was shot there during the riots. I was up at the University of Southern Maine where I was doing a residency for three months that ended on April 29th. Then I left Maine for the city. I remember that it was absolutely quiet when I was driving down to New York, and I realized that the major stores had been closed early so that there wouldn't be any riots there. That was one of the important events that happened.

YC

Patty, were you at UC San Diego then?

PC

Yes. I was also in undergrad at that time, graduating in 1994. What year did you graduate?

YC

1996.

at Tanam Press. Cha's *Dictee* (1982), is a landmark of experimental Asian American literature; a recent reprint by the University of California Press returned the book to the artist's original format and intentions. See Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays*

on *Dictee* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, photo essay and book design by Yong Soon Min (San Antonio: Third Woman Press, 1994); Constance M. Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–82)*, essays by Lawrence R. Rinder and Trinh T. Minh-ha (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley

Issues in Autobiography, this class I taught just once, was an incredible way to let people open up in class and in general. Students learned to talk about themselves as a means to talk about others as well as larger issues.

— Yong Soon Min

PC

I felt very isolated in my own San Diego bubble. I didn't go up to L.A. very much. One of my strongest memories of going up to see artwork during school was seeing Reza Abdoh's performance in the early 1990s. But I didn't have any connection. I can't pinpoint exactly when it was, Yong Soon, but I didn't know of you and your work until much later. Right after I graduated I moved to New York with a friend of mine, Rajendra Roy, who's now the Chief Curator of Film at MoMA. Back then we were both making performances and I guess I just didn't know at 22 what I was going to do. I had no idea that being artist could be a lifetime thing. It was very amorphous to me.

YC

In school, did you have an Asian American artist/mentor/professor, whether it was in San Diego or New York?

PC

At San Diego, Kip Fulbeck was a teaching assistant and Yau Ching was a visiting professor. Lisa Lowe taught in the

Art Museum, University of California Press, 2001); Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Exilée/Temps Morts*, ed. Lewallen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); and the conversation and work by Na Mira in this volume.

Literature Department. In New York, Julie Tolentino was an informal mentor. She was always such a wise person and I took any opportunity I could to be near her and to hear whatever it was that she had to tell me. It wasn't a formal thing and we are all just living in this world. At the moment, you may not think, "I'm learning." But there are some people that you learn from and you don't think about it.³

Patty and I didn't study together and Patty and Yong Soon didn't study together, but in a way we're colleagues, you know? It's a different type of connection beyond academia and pedagogy. It's more about coexistence.

— Young Chung

In some ways, Yong Soon and Young, I'm a little bit jealous of your relationship because it feels like having another familial relationship of a different sort. As a child I had a pretty strong mother figure. And for me, becoming an adult, it was about *not* having that. In my 22-year-old brain I was like, "I want to get far away from having mentors. I don't want to have anyone who I'm responsible towards, or anyone who can tell me what to do."

3. Artist, dancer-choreographer, curator, and activist Tolentino started the performance and queer-safe-sex space Clit Club in 1990 and was a founding member of ACT UP New York's House of Color Video Collective. She performed with the dance company David Rousseve/REALITY throughout

the 1990s and has since created works for museums and galleries around the world. Tolentino is a cast member and choreographer of Simon Leung's *Scratching at the Moon* video installation *Act 2: An Opera by Luke Stoneham and Simon Leung*.

YC

But did you understand the weight and the power of using yourself in your work at that time, the fact that you're Asian American?

PC

I don't know if I knew the power of it, but I knew that it did something and there was sort of a direct power that I could inhabit and then project out. My earlier performances did often have to do with me being Asian, and an Asian female. It was a way that I could respond to how I felt in the world, creating more space for this. There was also a real, underlying energy or maybe an anger. Now I'm like, "Goddammit, I wish I had somebody to tell me what to do." If I was to do it again, I think I would seek that out.

YC

My time at UCI with Yong Soon was very intimate when I was an undergrad, where there was a handful of grad students per year. I don't know if it was something that I was searching for, but it felt very comforting. I felt like the UCI art department, at that time, allowed me to thrive. It was like fuel, food, you know? I have more lasting relationships with the people that I met at UC Irvine than I do from my grad school at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was in the art department at Irvine for only two years, so it really says a lot about Irvine at that time.

PC

In some ways that's part of your role as gallerist, right? You're sort of like the department chair, holding people together.

YC

I'm trying to resist that chair role as much as possible. I don't want Commonwealth and Council to be a dictatorship, so I often opt out by saying, "I'm not a gallerist, I'm not a dealer, I'm a space operator. I bring artists together." In a way, it kind of echoes Yong Soon. Yes, she was my teacher, but I think we became friends who argued—well, I think we argue more now than we did back then. She's included me in exhibitions, and I've taken a photograph of her for my own work. I knew immediately that Yong Soon would say, "No, I don't want that portrait of myself that you took to be in the show." It wasn't important for me to have a physical something included as well—I don't make art anymore. But when Anna [Sew Hoy]

shared the parameters of *Scratching at the Moon* and mentioned who else would be included, I thought maybe this is an opportunity for me to bring in Yong Soon. It's like one of those missed moments, let's say, between Anna and Yong Soon. They've known about each other, but maybe they just never had that moment. I wanted to bring them together and disappear. But then it turned out this way. It's like a compromise, where Yong Soon will have her likeness included in the exhibition, as well as her poster series. So, it's all going to work out.

Patty and I didn't study together and Patty and Yong Soon didn't study together, but in a way we're colleagues, you know? It's a different type of connection beyond academia and pedagogy. It's more about coexistence—for me to know about what Patty was doing in New York and finding comfort in that. What I'm trying to say is that we don't have to actually pay tuition to directly study under someone. It is more like this moment where, before we became friends, we were doing things—spread out, but here we are.

PC

Yong Soon, I got to know you a lot more after David [Kelley] went to grad school and studied with you.⁴ Even though I wasn't your student and I never learned from you in the formal sense, that's kind of how I knew you—a built-in sort of intimate relation, beyond you as a public figure.

YC

It sounds like an in-law.

PC

Totally, like a daughter-in-law. I just like, *whoosh!*, slipped in somehow. There are ways of learning that are not formalized, that are more like being near and just spending time together. I think that's how people create feeling, by being included in something and observing or taking part. You don't have to have a hierarchy of learning. I feel very warm toward you, Yong Soon, but I think it's all part of your community as well.

There are ways of learning that are not formalized, that are more like being near and just spending time together.

I think that's how people create feeling, by being included in something and observing or taking part.

You don't have to have a hierarchy of learning.

— Patty Chang

4. The collaborative performance, video, and photographic work of Chang and Kelley includes the videos *Flotsam Jetsam* (2007), *Route 3* (2011), and *Spiritual Myopia* (2015). *Stray Dog Hydrophobia* (WIP), their 2023 LACMA Art + Technology Lab grant project, considers the future of

deep-sea mining, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and more-than-human relationships in the ocean between minerals, animals, machines, and visiting humans.

PATTY CHANG
YOUNG CHUNG
VISHAL JUGDEO
SIMON LEUNG
MICHELLE LOPEZ
YONG SOON MIN
NA MIRA
AMANDA ROSS-HO
MILJOHN RUPERTO
DEAN SAMESHIMA
ANNA SEW HOY
AMY YAO
BRUCE YONEMOTO