



Florence Yee

Sharp Tools for Unripe Fruit

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Florence Yee: Sharp Tools for Unripe Fruit

Since the mid-twentieth century, the social positioning of East Asians in North America has shifted towards the good 'model minority.' Weaponized as a stereotypical success story against themselves, as well as against other minorities, their newfound citizenship was conditional upon assimilationist respectability politics of patriotism, neoliberalism, "hard work," and normative white middle-class femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Hence, queerness and failure (or queerness as failure) for Asian diasporas can be political and subversive to hegemonic power structures.

Cynical of liberal multiculturalism, my work attempts to step around easy signifiers of legibility. It recognizes the danger of nostalgia as a site of utopic contemplation that unjustly flattens marginalized existences. It seeks to deromanticize queer, racialized experiences and destabilize linear narratives of intergenerational knowledge by showcasing failure, futility, repetition, and dead ends.

We demand evidence of our communities, often for good reason: to imagine ourselves in a larger narrative; to understand our lineages and legacies; to affirm our belonging, conditional as it may be. And yet, even as queer and racialized people are gravitating towards archival practices—from which we were once excluded—the form of the archive itself still retains the structure of the problem: their own inherently limiting boundaries of authority, (in)accessibility, ethnographic classification, and penchant towards legible representation. How do we hold space for the unrecorded, the unrecordable, and the yet-to-be-recorded? What if our desire for documentation might be damaging? The challenges of commemoration beckoned me to consider what queer theorist Jack Halberstam refers to as 'new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.' (*The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011:16).

My ongoing series of embroidered watermarks is a first attempt at contending with the incomplete business of documentation by taking cues from traditional printing processes. The term 'proof' is used to mean a preliminary stage of work, a state that requires flexibility, responsiveness, and consent. The watermark is an appropriation of a commercial obstacle, becoming a boundary to its consumer-audience in an attempt to mitigate the colonial impulses to explore, explain, and exploit. The word PROOF stands both as a porous barrier to the subject and a cheeky response to our inclination towards preserving evidence.



Selected Hauntings is a series of twelve textile panels hung as a labyrinthine installation. Each is embroidered with words and sentiments that have haunted me in ambiguous ways related to the failure of racialized and gendered expectations as a queer and trans Cantonese person. The hauntings include both internal and external voices, caught between the hetero-patriarchal ideals of respectability politics and the white hegemony of so-called Canada. The installation's materiality also negotiates between the anxieties of self-orientalism and acceptance. As ink brush scroll paintings and silk brocade are easily fetishized, the traditional format is presented without the typically colourful accents. The grey tones and sheer texture are used as tools to deny the white gaze an essentialized and palatable form of content. These interlayered panels create a narrative which demonstrates the relationships between seemingly isolated feelings. By connecting them to larger social and historical ideas, they allude to the ways in which the violence of unspoken trauma and displacement creep into our lives. The installation reveals insecurities and fears we may only want to discuss within our own communities. I hope this may serve as an opening to bring the vulnerability of these pieces into our day-to-day conversations.

Other text-based pieces borrow the institutional pen of templates, academia, and forms, while displacing their functions through skeptical lived experiences. The works use an ironic and humorous tone to recognize the limits of their own structure, and to sustain a necessary uncertainty. The *Pseudo-Monument* was a vinyl and wooden cube placed at the center of Rochford Park in Charlottetown, PEI, questioning the neutrality of all structures through the phrase A MONUMENT IS AN ALTAR; YOUR GLANCES ARE ALL PRAYERS. It accompanied another work positioned a few blocks away: a van with the logo, 'Monument Movers Inc. Disposal and Repairs' was parked in front of a bronze cast statue of John A. MacDonald. This fake company was a speculative exercise manifesting the demands of many groups to remove the statue—an act finally accomplished in 2021.

I also want to propose other ways of thinking about commemoration. A collaboration with Arezu Salamzadeh, *Please Help Yourself* is a collection of glazed ceramic pieces meant to resemble tangerine peels. The offering of tangerines is reminiscent of the ways that Cantonese people often welcome guests in their home or share with strangers. We propose these inconspicuous leftovers as alternative monuments, emphasizing collectivity and care over the history of glorifying individual and colonial exploits. The project also turned into a collaborative endeavour during the pandemic: friends and family received clay in the mail with instructions allowing them to 'share a tangerine' with us. The sculptures then also become commemorative objects of loss and longing.

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Front Cover: *Selected Hauntings*, hand embroidery on organza, 12 panels each 80"x 26", 2018

Back Cover: *PROOF—Please Help Yourself*, hand embroidered on inkjet cotton voile, 37"x 50", 2021

Below Left: (installation view) *PROOF—Recipe Book*, hand embroidered on inkjet cotton voile, 48"x36", 2021

Below Right: (detail) *PROOF—Recipe Book*, hand embroidered on inkjet cotton voile, 48"x 36", 2021

Left Page: *PROOF—Sharing goji in amiskwaciwaskahikan*, 37"x 50", 2022



Florence Yee is a visual artist and serial collaborator based in Toronto/Toronto and Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montreal. They collect text in underappreciated places and ferment it until it is too suspicious to ignore. Florence's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art (2021), the Art Gallery of Ontario (2020), the Textile Museum of Canada (2020), and the Gardiner Museum (2019), and many others. Along with Arezu Salamzadeh, they co-founded the Chinatown Biennial in 2020. After graduating from Fine Arts at Dawson College, they obtained a BFA from Concordia University and an MFA from OCAD U.

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