



Opinion

Danielle Wu

Why is being an Asian-American woman in the US still a danger? Art exhibition in tribute to Christina Yuna Lee seeks answers

- Murdered in February, Christina Yuna Lee was a former employee of New York's Eli Klein Gallery, which is holding the exhibition that opened on April 13
- The exhibiting artists are unified by a shared understanding of 'what Christina's experience was in New York,' says curator Stephanie Mei Huang

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Published: 7:15pm, 18 Apr, 2022

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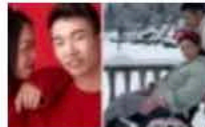
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Stephanie Mei Huang (left), artist and curator of the "With Her Voice, Penetrate Earth's Floor" exhibition at New York's Eli Klein Gallery in memory of Christina Yuna Lee, ignites risograph joss paper to activate the opening of the exhibition. Photo: Judy Chiu

What permissions does the occasion of grieving unlock?

This unspoken question lingered in the air along with the faint fragrance of incense at the opening reception for “With Her Voice, Penetrate Earth’s Floor” at New York’s Eli Klein Gallery on April 13.

The group exhibition is a tribute to Christina Yuna Lee, a former employee of the gallery who was tragically murdered in her home in Manhattan’s Chinatown in early February.

Lee, who was Korean-American, left her position as an associate director at the gallery about eight years ago but remained on good terms with the artists and clients, according to gallery founder Eli Klein. “I wasn’t always the easiest person to work for, and she was always kind of the buffer between me and everyone else,” Klein says.



A person holds a photo of Christina Yuna Lee as people gather for a rally protesting violence against Asian-Americans at Sara D. Roosevelt Park in New York on February 14, 2022. Photo: AFP


Golden Bridge for Eli Klein (2014) – a painting by Lee that she gave Klein when she left the gallery – hangs above a table in the gallery that serves as an altar.

At the opening reception on Wednesday, the offerings included branches of cherry blossoms, Chinese joss paper and a jade bracelet that once belonged to artist Patty Chang's grandmother.



吸烟有害健康

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Christina Yuna Lee's painting of Golden Bridge cigarettes, a Chinese brand, hung above an altar of offerings at the Eli Klein Gallery where she used to work.

Friends and supporters greeted the exhibition's curator, artist Stephanie Mei Huang, as collectors inquired about the prices and availability of works. The coldness of commerce in the wake of death would have felt obscene if not cushioned by the promise that half the sales would go to a charity in Lee's honour.

The event was an odd mix between an intimate funeral service (though Lee's family did not attend the opening) and a business-as-usual exhibition opening (though none of the artists except for Huang was there to enjoy the limelight).

The exhibition is titled after a poem by Korean-American artist Theresa Thak-hyung Cha, who was murdered under eerily similar circumstances in Manhattan 30 years ago. All exhibiting artists identify as women belonging to the Asian-

American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community.



The opening reception for the exhibition. Photo: Eli Klein Gallery

Ultimately, the exhibition searches for the reasons why Lee's identity – an Asian-American woman – is one that continues to endanger those who live with it.

It is not a yearning for representation, but rather the heavy burden that some bodies carry to represent nations oceans away, that the exhibition aims to confront.

What unifies the artists is a shared understanding of “what the experience is in the US right now, what Christina’s experience was in New York”, Huang says. The degree to which race and gender factored into Lee’s death remains unclear, although reported hate crimes against Asian-Americans have been rising since their false association with the coronavirus pandemic.



Exhibition curator and artist Stephanie Mei Huang. Photo: Gabriel Bruce

Haena Yoo printed a number of recent newspaper articles reporting anti-Asian violence on rice paper and folded the printouts into gun-shaped sculptures; Astria Suparak's *For Ornamental Purposes* (2022), a three-channel video, used scenes from films that cast Asian women only to be desired and conquered, pointing to the harm made possible by fantasy.

A series of photographs by Hong-An Truong are taken from films shot by Western soldiers during the Vietnam war,

capturing unsuspecting Vietnamese women strolling by in traditional *ao dai* dresses. The casual voyeurism feels as intrusive as the American occupation in Vietnam, a gaze that trespasses while masquerading as a valiant saviour of democracy.

However, the suspect apprehended for Lee's murder was not the kind of white male soldier behind the lens of a wartime camera, nor a film director with all the privileged resources of Hollywood. He was 25-year-old Assamad Nash, who lived in a homeless shelter on Bowery Street in Lower Manhattan and has maintained his innocence.



"I've Gone to Look for America (Pistol I)" (2021) by Haena Yoo features reports of anti-Asian violence on folded rice paper. Photo: Eli Klein Gallery

He is currently being held under deplorable conditions at the notorious Rikers Island prison until his next court date in July 2022. If convicted on all counts of murder and burglary, Nash faces a minimum of 25 years and a maximum of life without parole, with no plan of action to address the conditions of desperation that might have driven him to commit crime.

Lee's murder added impetus to New York mayor Eric Adams'

already tough crackdown on crime and homeless encampments. In a statement on Nash's indictment, Adams applauded the New York City police for delivering justice. The April 12 attack on commuters on a Brooklyn subway train has also prompted strong words from state governor Kathy Hochul promising to end street violence.

But critics, such as Hochul's rival in the upcoming gubernatorial election, Jumaane Williams, are calling for plans to address social factors that are driving people to crime and to expand the social safety net, including mental health and housing programmes.

What does a “white cube” gallery exhibition in memory of Lee provide that the scheming world of politics cannot? For the curator at least, it creates a rare space for AAPI women to mourn personal and cultural losses, and it grants permission to mourn for permanent losses that cannot be resolved by policy and legislation.

As Huang writes about childhood memories of attending funerals in China: “We have been robbed, as members of the diaspora in the West, from our grieving processes. Our grieving spaces, also, stolen.”

Such a loss has inspired new languages for this group of artists. On a pair of canvases, Maia Ruth Lee paints the silhouettes of disassembled garment patterns, a memorial to what life lived inside those clothes.

While the emphasis on Asian hate risks abstracting the unique details of the murder case, “With Her Voice, Penetrate Earth’s Floor” carves quiet moments like these to express how it feels to be broken.

“With Her Voice, Penetrate Earth’s Floor”, Eli Klein Gallery, 398 West Street, New York City. Until June 5.