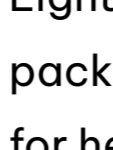


REMEMBER CHRISTINA YUNA LEE WITH ART ABOUT ABSENCE

Holding space for a flame that once burned, a special exhibit at the Eli Klein gallery in New York City examines death, loss, and memory

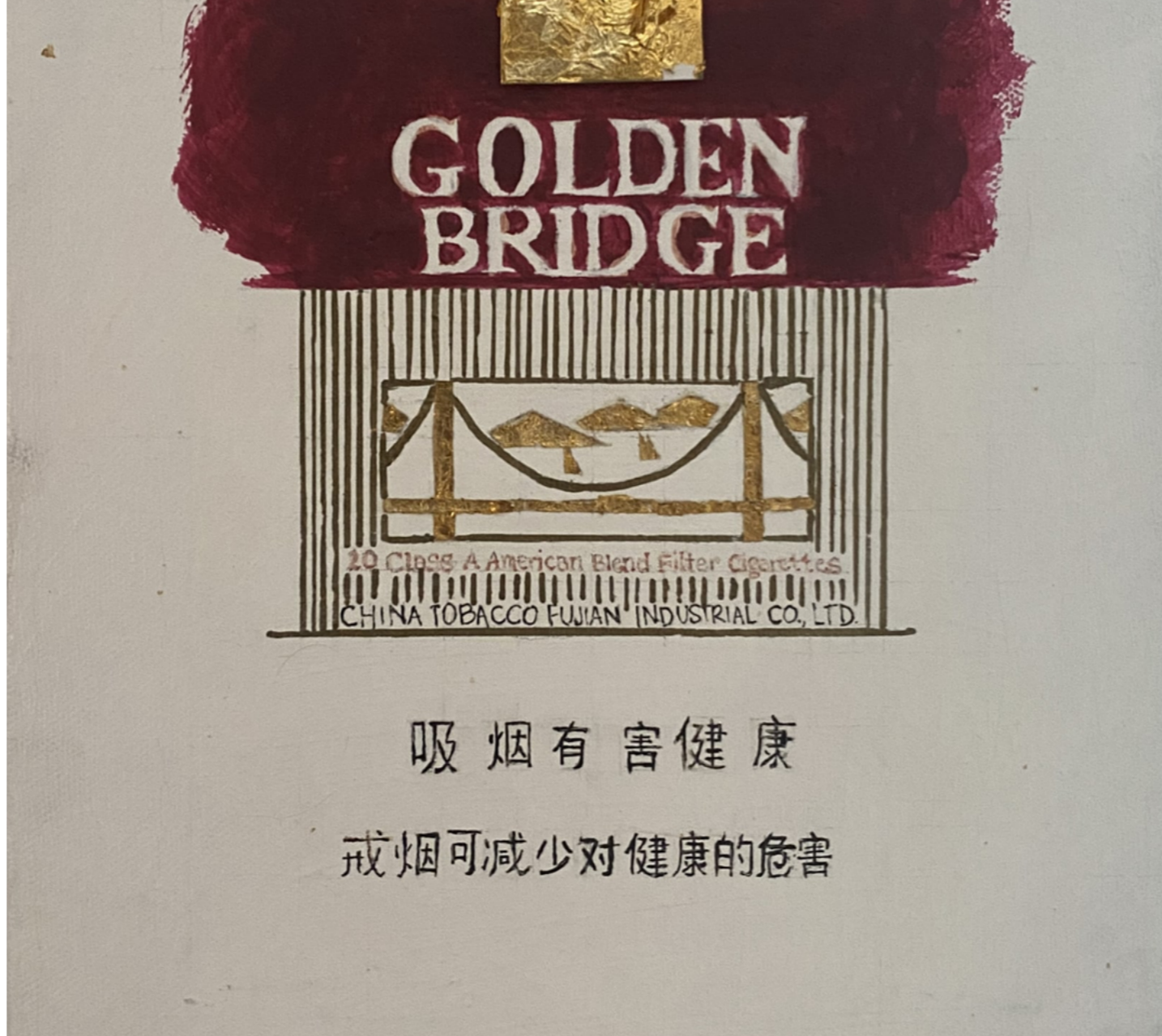
collage by Frankie Huang

Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Maia Ruth Lee



WORDS BY **HUA XI**

Eight years ago, Christina Yuna Lee painted an image based on the packaging for Golden Bridge, a Chinese brand of cigarettes, as a gift for her friend and gallery owner Eli Klein. The painting was a token of friendship and a show of support for Klein, who used to frequently bring cigarettes back from China before managing to quit smoking. “Golden Bridge” now hangs above an altar dedicated to Lee, who was killed in February after being stabbed 40 times by a man who followed her home. The altar holds objects placed there by Asian American artists: a seashell, a pinecone, a bracelet, a branch of cherry blossoms.



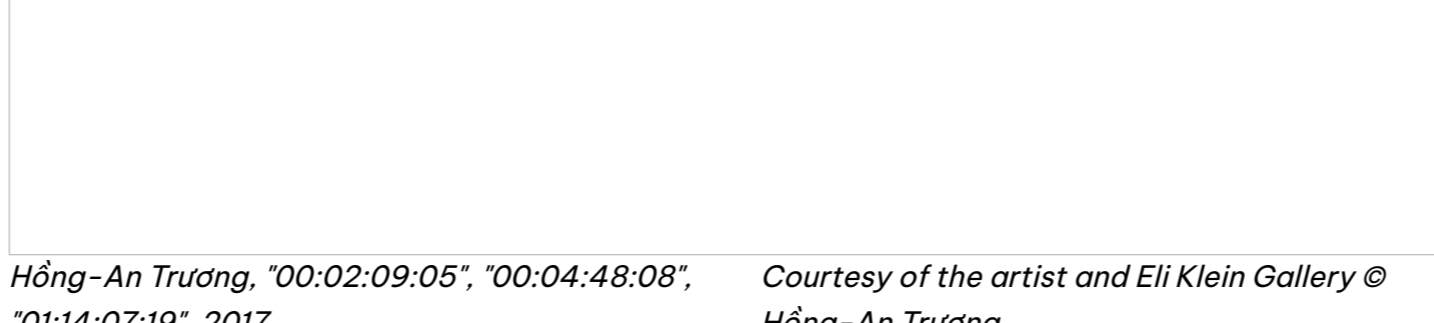
Christina Yuna Lee, Golden Bridge for Eli Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Christina Yuna Lee

The altar is part of a group exhibition running through June 5 featuring works by nine Asian American femme artists at the Eli Klein gallery in NYC’s West Village in remembrance of Lee, an art lover who worked as associate director of the gallery for four years. The exhibit is a space of presence within a space of absence, with pieces referencing the many forms of grief experienced in Asian communities. Using photographs, sculptures, videos and paintings, artists have gathered their own stories to surround Lee’s story, as if to create togetherness out of emptiness .

A statement from the gallery accompanying the exhibit reads, “Residing in loss or sustained mourning may be viewed as the ultimate position of defeat in the West—but where is the continued engagement with ongoing forms of loss?” This exhibit suggests that perhaps death is something to hold onto a little longer, that loss need not be shamed or buried, but can form a place of exchange and support. In curator stephanie mei huang’s words, which hung on the wall, “We have been robbed as members of the diaspora in the West, from our grieving processes. Our grieving spaces, also stolen.” In response, the works in this exhibit seem to purposefully pause in a space of grief rather than a push to move on, heal, and forget.

Multiple works dwell on moments just prior to death or just following it, which are often overshadowed by the moment of death itself. A framed text by multi-disciplinary artist Patty Chang titled “List of Invocations,” written during her father’s illness and before he passed away, includes “INVOCATION OF MEDICAL DIRECTIVE”, “INVOCATION OF DEMENTIA”, “INVOCATION OF SILENCE” and other references to end-of-life experiences. The work is a reminder that the loss of a loved one to illness is an extended process, which can begin long before someone is gone.

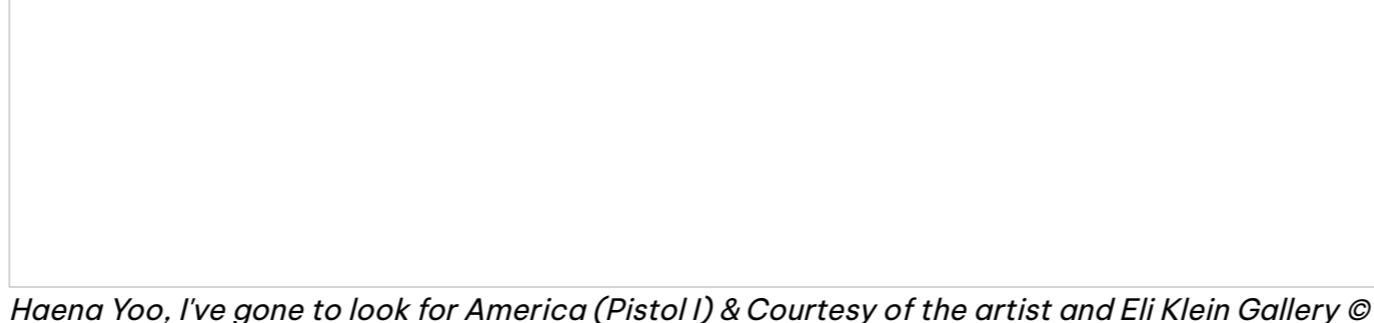
Directly adjacent to “List of Invocations”, is a photographic series by Hông-Ân Trương made up of film stills taken from footage originally shot by American and Australian soldiers in Vietnam in 60s and 70s. Trương, who works across photography, video, sound and performance, has selected moments where the soldiers have zoomed in and lingered their gaze momentarily through the camera on the Vietnamese women. The effect of freezing this Western gaze on Vietnamese women, unaware passersby on the street, is haunting and melancholic. The timestamp at the bottom of every frame is ominously reminiscent of the security camera footage that circulated online showing Lee entering her apartment building, followed by the man who would murder her.



Hông-Ân Trương, “00:02:09:05”, “00:04:48:08”, “01:14:07:19”, 2017 Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Hông-Ân Trương

Trương created this piece following the death of her mother, using footage from when her mother would have been a young woman, walking the streets of Vietnam. Each one of the women in the footage reminded her of her mother, Trương said, and these stills seem to waver between moments both following and preceding loss; following the death of Trương’s mother, following the death of Lee, but just before these women walk away, just before they disappear out of frame.

Another piece in the exhibit is a striking pair of paper guns by Haena Yoo, a South Korean artist who lives between Seoul and Los Angeles, constructed using newspapers printed with coverage of anti-Asian violence. A headline that read “The Cost of Being an ‘Interchangeable Asian’ is rolled into a gun barrel. Other snippets with the words “Spa Shootings” or “Chinese American, Authorities Say” can be read along the guns’ grip and frame. By design, the folding of the paper nearly obscures the specificity of each act of anti-Asian violence, making it so that it’s not always possible to tell from just text snippets which incident any article refers to. The loss of space is keenly felt here, to see so little room being made to adequately mourn each event before moving on to the next news item.



Haena Yoo, I’ve gone to look for America (Pistol) & Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © (Revolver) Haena Yoo

The newspapers have additionally been treated with soy sauce, producing a yellowed, aged appearance despite their depiction of fresh wounds. This might be read as a commentary on how these incidents seem to become distant history before their time, too quickly pushed into the past and on their way to being forgotten when it would be more meaningful to hold these deaths a little longer.

“August 4-6”, originally created by Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Akashi to mark the tragedy of the 2020 Beirut explosion, appears at first glance to be a hollow, partly burnt candle. The sculpture in fact depicts lines of melted wax that once flowed down the sides of a candle, a hollow where the candle once was. Like Akashi’s non-candle, the artists in this exhibit gather around Lee’s absence not just with their works but their own personal narratives of loss. They bring up the deaths of fathers, mothers, grandparents, and serve as reminders that each Asian artist, or even each Asian person, holds their own personal griefs when confronted with public incidents like Lee’s death.



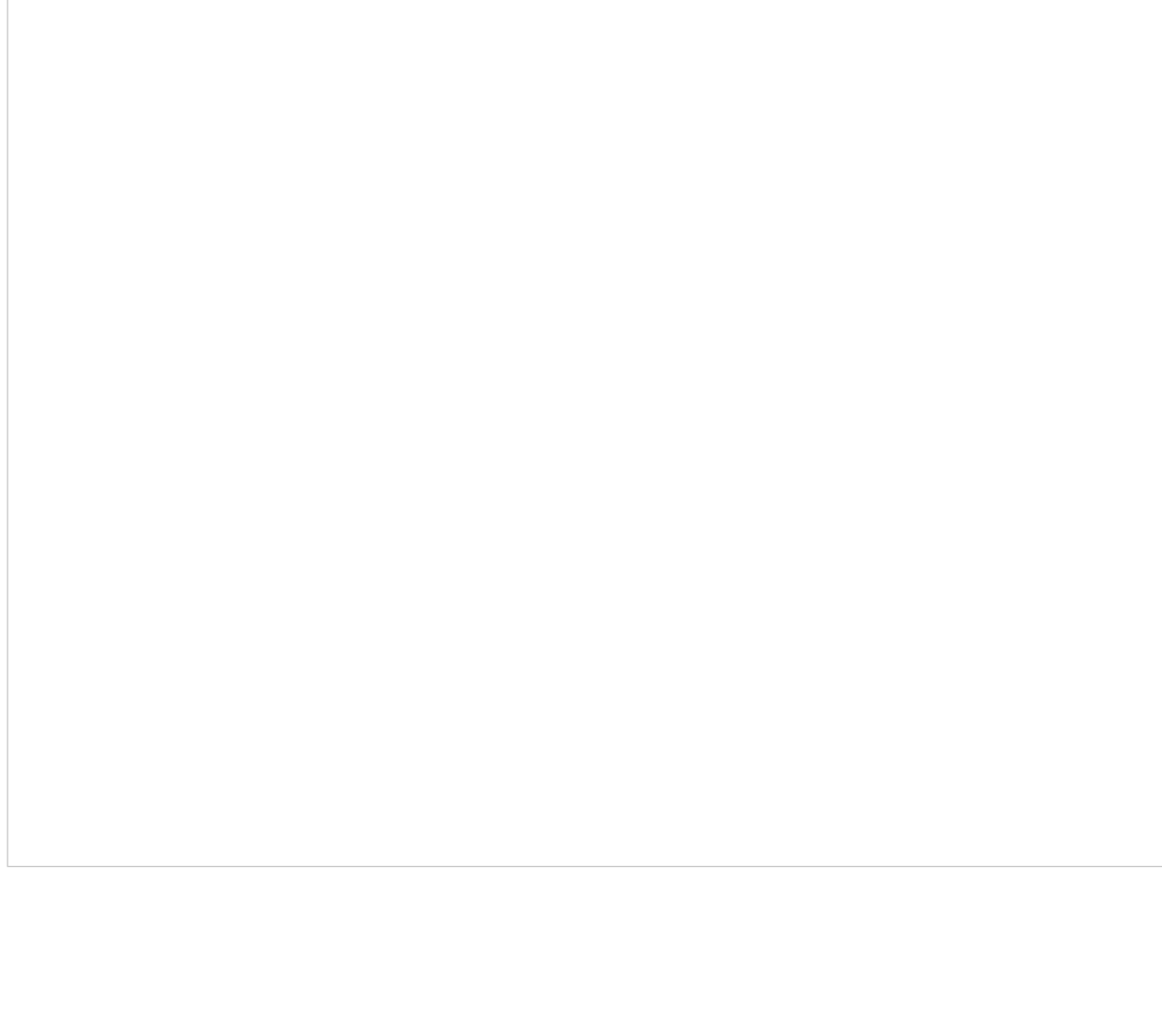
Kelly Akashi, August 4-6, 2020, Bronze Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Kelly Akashi

It can seem bleak to surround one absence with other forms of absence, but like the melted lines of wax solidified around an empty space, it is a reminder of the flame, of the light that once was. The “Golden Bridge” painting by Christina Yuna Lee herself is placed at the center of the exhibit, and I could not help but picture in my mind the lit end of a cigarette, which becomes the flame on this missing candle.

The exhibit takes its title, “with her voice, penetrate the earth’s floor”, from a poem by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the Korean American poet and artist who wrote the seminal *Dictee*. In 1982, Cha was raped and murdered by a man she did not know. A week after her book’s publication. Elsewhere in Cha’s writing, she describes a “hollow bowl... resistant to memory”, a quote cited as the exhibit’s invocation. The exhibit and Cha’s metaphor evoke the idea of an empty space into which memory cannot flow, an empty space which memory can only flow around.

Viewers, before leaving the exhibit, are invited to take a sheet of red and gold joss paper, custom-made by huang and embossed with the design of a Chinese cigarette brand. Joss paper, the exhibit’s text explains, is traditionally burned as offerings at Chinese burial sites and temples. The joss paper itself is again an object of transience. There is a place between presence and absence in which the joss paper exists temporarily, like the space between the living and the dead that art so often hopes to reach.

As huang explains in text hung on the wall, the etymology of the word “joss” can be traced back through multiple languages, including Chinese Pidgin English, Japanese and Portuguese, and all the way to the Proto-Indo-European root “-dyeu” meaning “to shine”. As I leave the gallery, I think of how far the meaning of light has traveled, through geographies, through lexicons, through time, to arrive here in this form today, and of how much a flame can preserve even as it disappears.



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