

Art

Commemorating the Life of Christina Yuna Lee

with her name, penetrate earth's floor remembers the Korean-American creative producer who was murdered in Lower Manhattan at age 35.



by Isabel Ling
22 hours ago



Christina Yuna Lee, "Golden Bridge for Eli Klein" (2014), acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 10 x 8 inches (courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Christina Yuna Lee)

In a grainy video, a hand curls around a crisp white-green leaf from a head of napa cabbage, moving as if to peel and discard the vegetable's outermost layers. Instead, however, the viewer is witness to an uncanny creation story, with each motion bringing new leaves until the napa cabbage is fully materialized. "white vegetable i" (2021), a video work by stephanie mei huang, is an examination of grief's transformative powers, a proposal that by attending to one's fixation on melancholy, one might be able to reassemble that which is lost into a whole.



On view at Eli Klein Gallery through June 5, the work is a part of ***with her voice, penetrate earth's floor***, a group exhibition held in honor of Christina Yuna Lee. On February 13, Lee was followed into her Chinatown apartment and murdered. While her murder has yet to be ruled a hate crime by authorities, her death follows a sharp rise in anti-Asian violence that has spiked since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.



stephanie Mei huang, "white vegetable I" (2021), digitized 16mm film single channel color video, 2:59 minutes, edition of 7 (courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © stephanie Mei huang)

Following Lee's passing, Eli Klein reached out to huang to curate an exhibition in memory of Lee, who worked at the gallery between 2010 and 2014. "[Christina's death] has been almost impossible to process," Klein told me. "I felt an obligation and a desire to honor Christina's life and remember her for who she was beyond this incident. She was so incredible and talented, I hate her name being almost synonymous with this act [of violence]."

In the wake of Lee's death, the act of mourning itself has become barbed with instances of violence. The memorial outside of her apartment has been vandalized multiple times and Asian femmes have reported experiences of being stalked upon visiting the site. For huang, a guiding motivation for curating the show was a desire to establish a safe space for grieving. "It was important to me that we didn't grieve

in isolation,” they said in a recent phone conversation. During this conversation, huang points out that within the Asian diaspora it is common to hold grief privately, an isolating experience that is caused by the geographic separation of individuals from their homelands and community-based rites and rituals. “I was interested in depathologizing mourning and normalizing extended mourning. Within extended mourning I think there’s extended celebration of someone’s life too, a way to extend remembrance.”



Christina Yuna Lee (courtesy Eli Klein Gallery)

with her voice, penetrate earth’s floor brings together the works of nine Asian American femme artists — stephanie mei huang, Kelly Akashi, Patty Chang, Maia Ruth Lee, Candice Lin, Astria Suparak, Hồng-Ân Trương, Haena Yoo, and Christina Yuna Lee herself — in order to commemorate and highlight Lee’s life and work within the art world.

Despite Klein’s initial intentions to disentangle Lee’s legacy from the conditions of her death, the exhibition, which draws its name from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s poetry volume *Dictée* (1982), does begin by mapping the through line of gendered and racialized violence within the Asian femme experience. A photo series from 2017 by Hồng-Ân Trương draws from stills of archival video footage shot by American and Australian soldiers in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early ’70s. A pointed



portrayal of the racialized gaze, each photograph suspends a moment in which the soldier wielding the camera has zoomed in on a woman wearing an áo dài, a traditional Vietnamese garment. In documenting these acts of voyeurism, Truong excavates the power dynamics in seeing and being seen, demonstrating how the pervasive surveillance of Asian corporeality can distort simple everyday actions like crossing the street or walking home. Haena Yoo's "I've gone to look for America" (2021) tries to ground a long history of racial violence against Asians in the United States in the present by memorializing the victims of 2021's Atlanta spa shooting. The work features two origami guns crafted from rice paper that has been imprinted with newspaper headlines on the shooting. By staining the rice paper brown with soy sauce, Yoo seeks to evoke the staining tears of the East, a representation of the reaction East Asian communities across the world have had in response to the onslaught of anti-Asian violence in recent years.



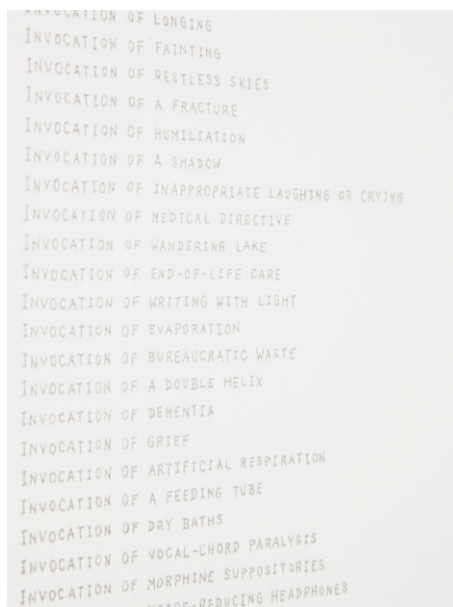
Installation view of *with her voice, penetrate earth's floor* at Eli Klein Gallery. Altar for Christina Yuna Lee (courtesy Eli Klein Gallery)

Anchoring the exhibition is an altar where the majority of the show's artists contributed personal objects in honor of Christina's life and legacy. Offerings like a pinecone collected by Truong's seven-year-old daughter, a jade bracelet that is the last of Patty Chang's grandmother's jewelry, and gold-leaf embossed joss paper huang modeled after her grandfather's favorite cigarette brand are a reminder that grief is an ongoing and intergenerational inheritance.



At the center of the altar is Christina's own painting, made as a gift to Klein at the end of her tenure as the gallery's assistant director. Rendered in acrylic and gold leaf, the painting depicts a box of Golden Bridge cigarettes, an inside joke that originated with Lee finding boxes of the cigarettes, Klein's favorite brand, hidden in between art books.

In truth, grieving is a messy and often contradictory grasp in the dark. Christina Yuna Lee was a 35-year-old Korean-American creative producer whose warmth, curiosity, and sense of humor made her irreplaceable to her loved ones and those privileged enough to encounter her in life and in work. Her murderer, an unhoused and mentally ill young Black man, complicates the race-based narrative that has risen around her death by positing that perhaps her murder was not just an act of racial violence but a systemic failure of the state. Within this context, *with her name, penetrate earth's floor* is at its most profound in artworks that are not centered around diaspora, like Maia Ruth Lee's *Language of Grief* (2021) series. In these works, the artist deconstructs vintage sewing patterns, dipping skirt panels and pant legs in India ink and rearranging them in striking text-reminiscent patterns as an offering for new interpretation. Here, Lee augments grief by acknowledging that that which is incomprehensible sometimes requires new vocabularies and relationships of understanding.



Patty Chang, "List of Invocations" (2017), letterpress, 17 1/2 x 12 inches, edition of 50 (courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Patty Chang)





Hồng-Ân Trương, "00:04:48:08" (2017), archival pigment print, 7 1/2 x 10 inches, edition of 5 (courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Hồng-Ân Trương)



Candice Lin, "Untitled" (2021), raku fired ceramics, 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 3 inches (courtesy the artist, François Ghebaly and Eli Klein Gallery © Candice Lin)





Installation view of *with her voice, penetrate earth's floor* at Eli Klein Gallery. Pictured: Haena Yoo, "I've gone to look for America (Revolver)" (2021), rice paper dyed in soy sauce, 13 x 7 x 1 1/4 inches (courtesy the artist, Murmurs Gallery and Eli Klein Gallery © Haena Yoo, photo courtesy Eli Klein Gallery)



Installation view of *with her voice, penetrate earth's floor* at Eli Klein Gallery. Left to right: Maia Ruth Lee, "Language of Grief 04" (2021), India ink on raw canvas, 65 x 45 inches; Maia Ruth Lee, "Language of Grief 06" (2021), India ink on raw canvas, 65 x 45 inches (courtesy the artist and Eli Klein Gallery © Maia Ruth Lee, photo courtesy Eli Klein Gallery)



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Kelly Akashi, "August 4-6" (2020), bronze, 4 1/2 x 13 x 8 1/2 inches (courtesy the artist, François Ghebaly and Eli Klein Gallery © Kelly Akashi)

with her voice, penetrate earth's floor continues at *Eli Klein Gallery* (398 West Street, West Village, Manhattan) through June 5. The exhibition was curated by *stephanie mei huang*.

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