

# ARTFORUM



**Candice Lin, *La Charada China (Tobacco Version)*, 2019**, cement with casein paint, welded steel table frame, tobacco, ceramics, distillation system, poppy-pod putty, sugarcane, white sugar, cacao, sage, ackee, oak gall, *Adenanthera*, dong quai, California clay, Dominican Republic clay, metal parts, bucket, pumps, tubing, dried indigo, glass slides, bottles, drawings, tile, rubber, wood, dimensions variable. Photo: Kell Yang-Sammataro.

## Candice Lin

FRANÇOIS GHEBALY

The first room of Candice Lin’s solo exhibition at François Ghebaly was organized around *La Charada China (Tobacco Version)*, 2019, an altar-like assemblage featuring the prone silhouette of a humanoid figure made from dried, pressed tobacco leaves. As in previous installations, for this work Lin cleverly deployed a host of “natural” materials (the scare quotes are necessary, given Lin’s penchant for reframing the ideological categories that have historically structured our experience of the world) to signify global histories of exploitation and colonial violence. Clay from California and the Dominican Republic was shaped into meat tenderizers and offering vessels; a tincture of poppy, tea, sugar, tobacco, and piss was gunkily distilling in a centrally placed flask. These elements, when taken together, outlined a history of Chinese immigration to Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century: Over the course of a few decades, more than one hundred thousand Chinese workers (mostly male) were imported to work the sugarcane fields alongside enslaved Africans. Lin’s tactile outline of this story of exploitation was filled in by a diminutive book, located near a crumbling cake of dried tea, that detailed the necropolitical horrors of life in the Caribbean for these laborers. The suicide rate for Chinese people in Cuba was one hundred times that of white residents and fourteen times that of enslaved Africans. Equally horrific were the plantation authorities’ dissuasion tactics: The bodies of those who committed suicide were

desecrated and dumped in flagrant disregard for burial customs. With *La Charada China*, Lin pieces together an archaeological précis of power fit for Michel Foucault's oeuvre, had the French philosopher been more attuned to the histories of Asia and the Caribbean.

Describing *La Charada China* in this way might make it seem purely exegetical; it was not. In this and other works, the artist's critiques of capitalism were also evocative and sometimes atmospheric, as in her sculptural-audio installation *Exposed Foundation*, 2019, which included such diverse materials as a recording of Renee Gladman reading a poem, faux rocks, and a moldy copy of a collection of essays by James Baldwin, all carefully ensconced at the end of a hallway lit magenta with LED panels. What all these components meant together was not clear, but one could intuit a statement on power in the titling and some of the references. This piece was characteristic of the exhibition as a whole: Each work demanded close and careful viewing, but even then the plenitude of referents made an assessment of their total effect nearly impossible. On the walls surrounding *La Charada China* were a woven textile depicting a person ravaged by snarling beasts (*Papaver Somniferum [Tapestry]*, 2019), an appliquéd blanket of arcane symbols heraldically surrounding a single, open eye (*Flag of Traded Colors*, 2019), and as drawings on blotter paper and on amate, a kind of bark paper used in ancient Mexican codices. One of these, *Datura metel*, 2018, featured an inky human figure striding atop a three-headed dog (was this Cerberus?) and holding a gnarly root like a protective amulet. Plant lore, dream, history, legend, and myth—each is carefully conjured and set into a broader constellation of concerns. Taken together, these works established a network of connections between historical and contemporary Asian and African diasporas in the Americas, as well as their attendant generational traumas and historical (mis)translations.

Connected by the brightly lit, magenta-painted hallway that housed *Exposed Foundation* (and the exquisite drawing *Fragment from a Hard White Body*, 2017–18), the second space of Lin's show was anchored by a large Sheetrock-and-iron barrier topped with razor wire (*A Robot Spoke What My Father Wrote*, 2019). Two large open eyes anchored the central iron panel, and two ceramic masks—referencing in form and title the medieval torture devices known as scold's bridles—were judiciously hung on the cutout Sheetrock. The shapes of these cutouts were derived from magnifications of Lin's father's Chinese calligraphy for a Google translation of part of John Searle's 1980 collection of essays, *Minds, Brains, and Programs*. In the text, Searle compares Chinese writing—he doesn't get more specific than that—to “meaningless squiggles.” That phrase also titled this show. As if to emphasize the outmodedness of Searle's techno-Orientalism, mold and cobwebs filled the nooks and crannies of this hole-ridden wall, as though it had been there for decades—forgotten yet obdurately present. Standing nearby were two long-haired figures wrapped in indigo-dyed cotton cloth. With their intricate, sculptural masks, they resembled otherworldly guardians—angels, or maybe demons, of history.