

Art | Basel



LA artist Candice Lin replays colonial violence with piss, plants, and razor wire

Catherine Wagley

In her Art Basel Hong Kong presentation, the haunting politics of the so-called Chinese coolie trade take center stage

A milky fluid rose until it drowned the unfired porcelain objects and texts in Candice Lin's *A Hard White Body, a Porous Slip* (2018). Shown at the University of Chicago's Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, this installation – the third and final iteration of Lin's *Hard White Body* project, which began in Paris in 2017 – included all the material from the artist's research into botany and colonization. She had placed it in a pool comprising porcelain slip (a liquid used for casting) and urine that kept deepening, because she had invited visitors to add their own to her supply. Soon, the texts Lin had studied so thoroughly began to gather mold, turning into a mess beyond her control. 'I didn't want it to feel authoritative,' she tells me. 'I wanted it to feel fragile and always changing.'

Lin is sitting in her dining room in Altadena, an unincorporated community northeast of Los Angeles settled at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains. She has several shows coming up, notably her project in Art Basel Hong Kong's **Discoveries sector** in March and the related exhibition at her Los Angeles gallery, **François Ghebaly**, which will open on May 18. Her small studio, through the kitchen and down some stairs, is full: There are drawings on tables, a waist-high ceramic figure, herbs and plants spread about. A block of seductively dark red clay sits on the floor. Lin brought it back from the Altos de Chavon residency in the Dominican Republic, where she researched the connection between the landscape and histories of slavery – including the coolie trade of Chinese laborers brought to the Americas. 'My suitcase was very heavy,' she laughs.



Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body, A Porous Slip*, 2017-2018. Installation views from Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago. Courtesy of the artist, Logan Center for the Arts, and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo by Robert Chase Heishman.

In-progress sculptural sheetrock walls stand outside in the yard, meant for the upcoming Art Basel and François Ghebaly shows. The texts etched into their surfaces have been poorly Google Translated from English to Chinese, making them impossible to read for many Westerners – and likely confusing for Chinese speakers as well. This project, *Meaningless Squiggles* (which will also be the title of the May exhibition), loosely pulls Lin's own history as a first-generation Chinese-American into the network of materials, stories, and images already integral to her work. Back in the studio, she has pages of traditional calligraphy written in Mandarin by her father. She will distort his words, further experimenting with legibility versus illegibility.

'Too many things,' Lin says of her crowded workspaces. But her installations are often equally overflowing. They function as multi-textured tentacles, all reaching toward the same big question: how do we embrace the alternative knowledge and narratives that, in her own words, are 'needed because they are not linked to power in the same way as the histories we know'?



Candice Lin and Patrick Staff, *LESBIAN GULLS, DEAD ZONES, SWEAT AND T.*, 2017. Courtesy of the artists, Human Resources, and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Ian Byers-Gamber.

Lin studied at Brown University and then at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she graduated with her MFA in 2004. She began exhibiting steadily in Los Angeles circa 2006. The first solo show I saw of hers, back when François Ghebaly occupied a plaza storefront in Chinatown (after a couple of relocations, the gallery can now be found in a downtown warehouse), was called *The Sexual Lives of Savages* (2009). It featured drawings of powerful women navigating beautiful but hostile landscapes – in one monochromatic drawing, women with long, thick hair were sitting in a mossy tree, drinking the blood of a bearded man through straws. In her next solo exhibition, *Holograms* (2010), a porcelain sculpture of a woman's delicate, truncated torso sat on a pure white stool near the gallery entrance, a video playing inside the vulva (visitors knelt to watch). The aesthetic precision of these early works would remain present but become subsumed in more infrastructural, sensorial installations.

You are a spacious fluid sac (2015) at François Ghebaly featured a gray, oversized insect surrounded by welded objects, meticulous scientific drawings, and jars filled with fluids and organisms (dead baby mice were suspended in one). *LESBIAN GULLS, DEAD ZONES, SWEAT AND T.* (2017), a collaboration with artist Patrick Staff at the artist-run Los Angeles space Human Resources, included a fog machine that perpetually sent clouds of herbal vapor into the space. Each of Lin's material choices had an origin in her research into colonialism's relationship to slavery, and into the botanical knowledge both lost and saved by oppressed people. 'I think it's material that reveals those kinds of human anxieties or relations that are historical but no longer present,' says Lin. 'It's about stories – how do you make a thing that is already present in this sublimated way live so that the politics of it are haunting and interesting?'



Candice Lin, *La Charada China*, 2018. Installation views from *Made In L.A.*, the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2018. Courtesy of the artist, the Hammer Museum, and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo by Ian Byers Gamber.

In June 2018, in the Los Angeles Hammer Museum's lobby gallery, Lin installed *La Charada China*. A raised earthen platform stood at the center of the room, lit neon pink with grow lights. All the materials in the room, from the red clay to the seeds and guano, probed the histories and geographies traversed by coolie laborers brought to the New World and forced to work. Lin had researched which poisonous plants had been associated with the Opium Wars, and laborers and slaves in the Americas. Plants grew over the course of the exhibition.

The artist's upcoming projects widen her exploration of the coolie laborers to encompass her own relationship to migration. 'We don't have anyone I know of who is tied to that diaspora,

but my dad's family is from the area from where people were exported,' she explains. 'I think a lot of the things I make art about are things I want to understand for myself.' Her relationship to the Chinese language, for one, has always been complicated. She recalls a recent visit to Taipei, during which native Chinese speakers did not quite believe her when she said she barely spoke the language.



Candice Lin, *You are a spacious fluid sac*, 2015, installation views. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo by Robert Wedemeyer.

The text inscribed on the free-standing wall sculptures that she plans to install both in Hong Kong and at François Ghebaly comes from American philosopher John Searle's speculative and somewhat offensive 1980 paper *Minds, Brains, and Programs*. 'He uses the Chinese language as a metonym and metaphor for inscrutability,' explains Lin. Searle writes: "To me, Chinese writing is just so many meaningless squiggles.' The philosopher then goes on to hypothesize that he is in a room, alone with a set of rules telling him how to write in Chinese, with no understanding of the language. He does it so well that, from the outside, he seems fluent. (Searle's Chinese room argument has been used to demonstrate that, although machines can produce something that resembles knowledge, they have no grasp of it.)

Lin imagines her upcoming installation also operating at the edge of what is understood and what is lost. In her work, it's Searle's words that resemble cuneiform. 'At first you can't recognize it.' This odd language serves as a barrier, inscribed into actual barriers – sheetrock walls, perhaps with razor wire woven into them. Objects and drawings pinned to the walls will conjure the coolie laborers' stories. 'I guess it's similar to a spell, where each ingredient you use has a loaded meaning it brings with it through history,' Lin concludes.