

Sowing Discourse

By Kavior Mooni, January 31, 2022



Candice Lin: View of *La Charada China*, 2018, the Taipei Biennial, Taipei.

[...]
Unlike Okoyomon, who has made it a point to work with invasive plant species, Candice Lin focuses on plantation crops cultivated in colonies, highlighting the brutal systems of extraction and exploitation on which global markets often depended. *System for a Stain*—the centerpiece of “A Body Reduced to Brilliant Colour,” her 2016 exhibition at Gasworks in London—was an elaborate apparatus formed from glass jars, plastic tubes, a copper still, ceramic vessels, and other objects to distill fermented tea, sugar, and cochineal into a dark red liquid collected

in a large rectangular basin. The fluid was then pumped through a plastic tube that snaked into an adjacent room, where the ruddy brew dripped out and slowly accumulated on the floor, covering the faux white marble laminate over the course of the exhibition. The installation referred primarily to the way cochineal insects in Mexico and Central America were collected and crushed to make carmine dye, a high-value colonial product. But the growing bloodlike pool at the end also viscerally evoked the regime of bodily violence that tea and sugar plantation owners inflicted on workers in other colonized lands.

In subsequent works, Lin has continued to explore how shifting desires for certain plant-based flavors and drugs have shaped colonialism and geopolitics. For her 2018 installation *La Charada China* (2018), created for that year's Made in LA biennial, Lin constructed a memorial to the coolie laborers brought from China to the New World in the nineteenth century. As slavery was being abolished in some colonial empires, indentured workers were transported from China and India to fill labor shortages. More than 200,000 Chinese people were brought to the Caribbean between 1847 and 1874 alone. The center of the installation was a raised earthen platform with a depression in the form of a human body in which seeds of opium poppies, sugarcane, and poisonous plants native to the Caribbean were planted; a watering system was set up to coax their germination. The plant species Lin chose reflect the overlapping histories of the Opium Wars in China and labor rebellions on sugar plantations in the Caribbean. During the latter, workers at times resorted to toxic plants as a last-ditch means of resistance, deploying them to sicken

or kill animals, themselves, or other people. The magenta glow of grow lights against the room's silvery mylar-covered walls imparted an eerie ambiance. On one wall a faintly projected video conveyed accounts of unburied laborers' corpses deliberately desecrated and even burned along with the carcasses of livestock to make bone charcoal, which was used to refine and whiten the plantations' sugar.

[...]

<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/sowing-discourse-1234617345/>