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JOYCE CHAN'S "WALLS" VISUALIZES THE OWNERSHIP OF IDENTITY

Posted by Katie Cusack | Jul 3, 2019 | Makers, Visual
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Above: Joyce Chan, "Wall 4," handcut gift wrapping paper, contact paper, 40"x 71," 2014.

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Troy-based visual artist Joyce Chan's new solo exhibit of sculpture, drawing and paper cutting is an exploration of her own Chinese-American identity, bringing to life memories, emotions and experiences from her childhood that have been molded and morphed over time.

"Walls," on display at PH GALLERY + STUDIO in Troy through July 26, is partially sourced from the bamboo-themed wallpaper of her parents' Chinese restaurant in Scotia. It was the first of its kind in Chan's hometown when it opened. Scotia's population back then, she says, consisted of very little, if any, immigrant families. She and her brother were teased on the bus often and spent much of their time in neighborhood, Americanized Chinese dining rooms as her parents met and socialized with other restauranteurs.

Soon she realized the wallpaper she associated so closely with her family, childhood and identity wasn't just hers, but common to Chinese restaurants, and other childhood memories, around the country.

"I never realized that my artwork would connect with other second-generation Americans from all different backgrounds, people with mixed parents, foreigners living in the US...Mexican-American students from lectures & workshops, Chinese-Jamaican artists I've worked with, gallery visitors. Everyone is finding their way," Chan says.

In her study of the imagery that permeated her childhood, Chan found that the gaudy, "elevating" decor of velvet walls, the use of luxurious red and gold, traditional paintings and paper lanterns were used by restauranteurs as a way to excuse their "otherness."



Installation view at PH GALLERY + STUDIO. Joyce Chan, "Wall Diptych" foil-lined matboard, 40"x 64," 2011.

"After the lifting of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the early 1990s, Chinese restaurants started populating mainstream America," she says in her artist statement. "Restaurant owners created overly elegant spaces where it was 'safe to eat at' and the 'food was clean.' Diners could experience ethnic food within the comfort of their neighborhood and their palates."

"I think the main core of my artwork is how I identify as a Chinese-American female and the different routes of ideas I can express through materials or imagery or actions," Chan tells The Collaborative. "I was a painter for 10 years, working with abstract watercolor. When I went into grad school I started experimenting with paper itself, taking a more multidisciplinary approach and just thinking a lot about how life and art intersect. You can make a new history with the materials you are working on today, with what you see growing up."

"Walls" consists of a combination of Chan's older pieces in paper-cutting and sculpture, taking form as the continuation of a series on identity, as well as some newer pieces with which she experiments with new material like gold leaf.

"I have five new pieces that are smaller versions, I wanted to find a way to make it more portable. The big ones I see as more installations," she says. "The idea is 'in-betweenness.' The art can be both two-dimensional and three-dimensional at the same time. Stiff paper can act like fabric. Detailed paper cutting, symbols and design elements can turn into abstraction."

Installation view at PH GALLERY + STUDIO of Joyce Chan's "Bricklayer4," flora foam, dimensions variable, 2019.

The main sculpture featured in "Walls" has been shown by Chan before, this is the fourth or fifth time she says she has built the piece. It will be split into two at PH GALLERY + STUDIO.

"Bricklayer4" is based on a childhood bullying experience. In 5th grade, a boy on Chan's school bus asked her if she put bricks on her nose to make it flat. The taunting stuck with her and years later she turned it into an art piece featuring an stacked arrangement of flora foam "bricks" imprinted with the mold of her own nose.

"I didn't think of including it until I saw the space and all the exposed brick there, it seemed like a nice play on the brick idea," she says. "It's nice that I can change the sculpture to fit its immediate environment. I like that it

stays current and can change, like how your memories change, your life changes."

Chan is also selling the bricks individually.

The smaller pieces are much more cooperative to the space, which primarily shows contemporary photo or 2D artwork. But Pilar Arthur-Snead, owner and gallery director of PH GALLERY + STUDIO, has been looking to expand of late.

Chan, who is also the communications administrator at the Troy Business Improvement District, says Arthur-Snead has been incorporating more diverse media such as her own as well as offering new programming in poetry, theatre and music.

"I'm excited about the opportunity to bring these forms of paper and works there. [Arthur-Snead] saw the 'Wall Diptych' piece on my website in February and the conversation about exhibiting started from there," Chan says. "The gallery is in a beautiful space, I think there's a lot going on in Troy. People are willing to challenge themselves and approach new directions, thinking about history and quality."

Joyce Chan's "Walls" is on display through July 26, 11 AM-3 PM at PH GALLERY + STUDIO, Troy. A special culinary promo for "Walls," incorporating edible gold leaf with Nighthawks, is in the works for Saturday, July 20.

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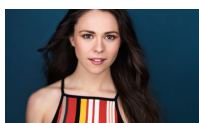
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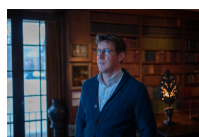
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