

Opacity and Exposure in *Far Away, From Home*

Thea Quiray Tagle

When is a public artwork actually a queer Trojan horse? Ask Zhidong Zhang, who has managed to smuggle into the heart of Boston's Chinatown an innocuous-appearing cabinet— a larger version of what one might find in a middle-class Chinese American home— that holds (but never fully contains) symbols of queer Asian diasporic joy, presence, and resilience that persists despite historical and contemporary erasure.

To welcome in the Year of the Dragon, Zhang breathes fire into *Far Away, From Home*, a new public artwork sited in Chin Park and commissioned by The Greenway. Affixed to each lightbox is a photograph printed on vinyl of manipulated latex balloons, each imprinted with fragments of temporary tattoos of stereotypically “Asian”-style motifs such as dragons, peonies, and skulls. At first appearing to be balloon animals made by clowns and other entertainers, Zhang's latex creations are far more ambiguous. While some have been contorted into shapes legible as gendered markers of childhood— a pink balloon shaped like a Hello Kitty ribbon, a colorful bouquet of flowers— most uncannily flag as queer sex acts, genitalia, or even the tip of a condom. These lightboxes thus slyly call in and call out to LGBTQ Asian Americans and Asian diasporic folks traversing the park, who might find pleasure (as I do) in seeing these atypically erotic objects exposed in such a public space.

By appropriating visual elements of Chinoiserie, Japonisme, and other exoticized Asian aesthetics for this piece, Zhang seduces viewers to look closer in order to surprise them. Depending on a viewer's vantage point, they would either see an image of the “real” balloon figure or its paper doppelganger: for on the backside of each lightbox isn't the balloon's mirrored image, but rather a paper cut-out of a photographed balloon, assembled and reconfigured with tape. Doubling down on the images' artifice through this maneuver, the artist shrewdly reveals the flatness of all constructions of Asian-ness, and in doing so, draws out the historical construction and contemporary re-constructions of Asian diasporic identity as queer and Chinatown itself as a queer space.

As Asian American Studies scholars like David Eng, Nayan Shah, and I have written about elsewhere, Chinese immigrants to US cities in the late 19th century were legally restricted to live and establish businesses in zones that became the nation's first Chinatowns; these districts were produced through city maps, popular journalism, and political rhetoric as vice districts, or sites where sex, disease, drugs, and crime were rampant and endemic to its residents.¹ Chinese men, who were largely bachelors and “paper sons,” and Chinese women— who were in reality or in imagination seen as sex workers— were thus produced as *queer*, or non-heteronormative, alien presences that

¹ David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Thea Quiray Tagle, “Feeling the Manilatown and Fillmore Blues: Al Robles's Politics and Poetics of Place” (*Critical Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 3, No 2., Fall 2017, pp. 99-125).

threatened to contaminate a white, heteropatriarchal, Christian populace. While most US Chinatowns have by now been gentrified into tourist zones and seen as innocent spaces for (white) families and people of all ages to voraciously and safely consume Asian food and culture, *Far Away, From Home* re-inserts Asian queerness of all kinds back into this place: queerness as resilient; queerness as transgressive; queerness as both pleasurable and dangerous. It's thrilling to imagine who will find out this artwork's secret.

Thea Quiray Tagle, PhD (she/her) is a transdisciplinary scholar of ethnic studies, queer studies, and visual studies; a writer; and Associate Curator of the Bell Gallery at Brown University.