Conversations on community: where we live

All over the world, people are chasing houses. Aurelia Guo and Amy Ching-Yan Lam discuss how property and the pursuit of it shapes all of our lives.

Amy Ching-Yan Lam's *Property Journal* (2024) is a diary of a year in which Lam recorded every time that real estate, property and housing came up in conversation. People's names are replaced with those of household objects – Blender, Slippers – which has the affect of making the whole action of the book cramped and domestic, similar to the affective experience of negotiating precarious housing. Aurelia Guo's *World of Interiors* (2022) is a book of essays and poems about housing, hoarding, migration, and the experience of being perceived by other people. For TANK, Lam and Guo discussed the personal and political dimensions of housing, and how property shapes our lives and dreams – which take place within and outside the permanent state of urgency, scarcity, disenfranchisement and desire called the "global housing crisis".

Amy Ching-Yan Lam The first essay in your book is called "London (Poverty)", in which you talk about *The World of Interiors*, the glossy magazine about interiors and furniture.† Condé Nast imagined it as a – wait, sorry, was the guy's name actually Condé Nast?

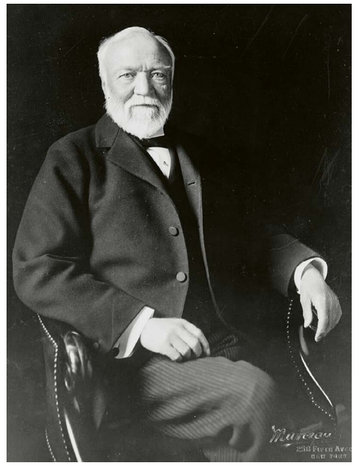
Aurelia Guo The media empire's originator was literally called Condé Nast. *World of Interiors* was begun as an independent publication by Min Hogg [in 1981], then [the company] Condé Nast bought it. Hogg remained the editor, but Condé Nast became the publisher.

AC-YL You write that Nast saw how success lay in conspiring not only to attract readers from a particular class but to "rigorously exclude all others". I was wondering about this idea of exclusion – the magazine is designed to exclude you, but at the same time anyone can read it, and in some ways, it's also meant to attract the people that it excludes. I was wondering about that in relation to property itself – this feeling of constantly being excluded from what we need, while the very fact of scarcity makes us want it more. Someone told me that there's a feeling of longing throughout *Property Journal*. I love walking around in the evening, looking through people's windows and imagining their lives.

AG Last year, I was commissioned to write a text on public libraries in Glasgow, and I wound up writing about the origins of philanthropy in the sense that we know it today – support of the arts and culture through institutions, libraries or museums – as a product of 19th-century industrial capitalism and the struggle between capital and labour, between the new urban rich and the new urban poor. Writing that text made me reconsider the transition I mention in *World of Interiors*, from periodicals connected to guilds

† **"Preferring genteel aesthetics over commercial and professional ones, Hogg favoured a decorating style that was 'cluttered, ancestral, simple, eccentric': *The World of Interiors* coined the term 'shabby chic'."**
— *World of Interiors*, Aurelia Guo

Anxiety about the economic migrant takes us back to the particular and often unfortunate place that the Chinese migrant has had in the settlement and urbanisation of colonies like Australia and Canada



‡ **"Philanthropy in the modern sense of funding for arts, education and cultural institutions emerged in the period between 1885 and 1915 through the ideology and actions of philanthropists such as [Andrew] Carnegie, who explicitly framed philanthropy as an alternative to the redistribution of wealth in a period of class consciousness and struggle that had recently encompassed the 1848 publication of Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, the 1871 Paris Commune experiment with socialist government, and the 1886 founding of the American Federation of Labor."**
— "The Gospel of Wealth", Aurelia Guo (2023)

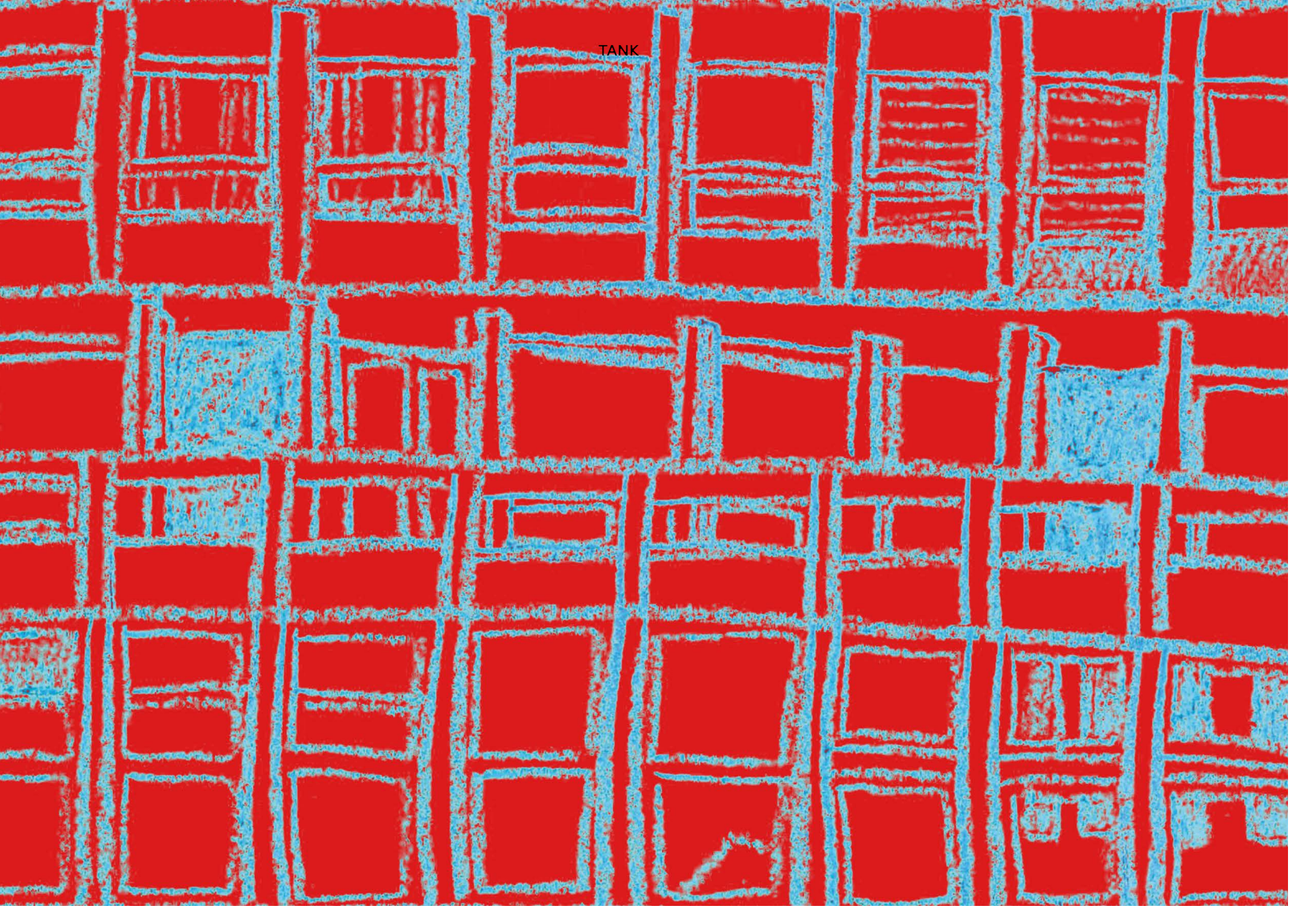
or professions – directed at, for example, the Association of Metal Workers – to what Nast called class publications, for people who want to dress in a certain way, decorate their house in a certain way, entertain their peers in a certain way.‡ The 19th-century emergence of global capitalism made goods available on the market that had never been available before. Today, commodities have cheapened, so that even someone who's not wealthy can afford an iPhone or a lipstick or a handbag, but property has not. Not everyone can afford somewhere central, attractive and desirable to live – so property remains an object of envy and spectacle. It's interesting to hear a description of *Property Journal* as full of longing, as I also think of it as full of anxiety. I was struck by the scene where you visit your sister's newly renovated home for the first time. Your description of the pale oak hardwood floors and the soft wool carpet is suffused with anxiety and tension and the feeling that all of this could be taken away.

AC-YL Absolutely. In the midst of celebrating all these very nicely appointed details, I also remember thinking, "Oh my God, how will this oak floor stay clean?" There's a joke in the journal about how to survive academia: if anyone brings up their home renovation once, never talk to them again. But I knew how taxing and stressful it was for my sister and her partner, how hard they had worked to afford it and the financial pressure they felt, and the oak floors embodied all of those pressures and strains. Maybe this is completely ridiculous, but I'm relieved even now when I go over to their house and the floors still look really good. I guess that's the nature of having something expensive. My partner said that the book is also a journal of class contact within families, a map of difference between my financial position, and my sister's and my parents'. I found that helpful to think about. It's not uniform. That can strain relationships. The sense of anxiety in the book is also about the future, because so many things about money are unstable.

AG The way you use dollar amounts in the book is really effective. It drives home how much the property market is an exercise in financial property speculation while at the same time capturing the prosaic and everyday nature of property relations. When I was writing my book, I was thinking about how the British context is so different from the Australian context where I grew up and I imagine the Canadian context you grew up in. Class is something that people are painfully conscious of in Britain and the hiding and disavowing of it is such a big part of life. We both come from settler colonies, New World places that are premised on the dubious ideas of discovery, and on new societies supposedly different from the British class system. I'm not sure how different Australia or Canada are from Britain in terms of their class systems. But there are things in London that are just so galling and do feel uniquely British. There isn't really an equivalent of Oxbridge elsewhere or a similar discourse around accent. Those things were completely foreign to me when I moved to London, when I realised that they are massively important to British people.

AC-YL A British person once told me they thought Canada was frozen in a specific idea of what it thinks Britishness is. There is a strong current of Anglophilia in Canada, of aspiring to be the progenitors, the settlers. But she said that Canadians copy what they think Britain is and then make it even more stuffy and inert. I think that's so funny, because as a Canadian, I do feel the culture is uptight. And the book is very much about Canada as a settler colony, a place that's founded on genocide and extraction of profit from land. The project of settler colonialism isn't about bringing so-called enlightened values to the New World, but about taking the land and speculating on its value. This is what created the housing situation in Canada, where rent and house prices are so high. It's not Hong Kong, where I was born, which is a small island – Canada

"Sunday 18 December. The house reminds me of going to a really fancy downtown food court with Blender a few years ago, while she was on a lunch break, and getting these super dense, deep-green, velvety smoothies together. It was so delicious and so unaffordable, and in that moment I felt a strange urge to protect her from the super luxurious smoothie!"
— *Property Journal,* Amy Ching-Yan Lam



has a small population and vast land mass, but for some reason, the housing market is completely bonkers. It doesn't make sense, and I think that's why it feels so disturbing. Something I was thinking about in reading *World of Interiors* and reflecting on this topic was this feeling of loneliness. In Canada and Australia, and here in the US, where I am now, there's so much loneliness in the way these societies are structured. People aspire to live alone in a family-sized home. Was loneliness something you were thinking about as you were writing? In your book there are essays, but there are also poems created through collage that bring in language from other sources. Does this collage technique have something to do with loneliness?

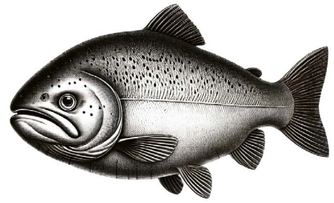
AG When I was rereading *World of Interiors*, I thought about the loneliness that can happen inside homes. I watched a lot of television as a child and read a lot of books from the library. I lived in quite a fictive world. This has extended into my adult life and art practice through the use of collage, perhaps as a way of incorporating other voices. When I was writing the book, I was thinking about transformation and how an individual's life can transform again and again, in acts of creation and "de-creation", of homes and families and lives. Relationships between people can transform through their relationships to power. You write about a radio interview of a couple who were evicted from their house on Vancouver Island with

What we've been writing and talking about is how we inherit what there is – we're not born into utopia, and we don't make our lives there

their baby. They decide to move to Nova Scotia, where they could afford land and a house. When they finally buy a house, other people are living in it, so they have them evicted. As you write, "the evicted become evictors." When asked by an interviewer, "What do you think about people in Nova Scotia being worried about people coming in from other parts of the country, buying up their houses and land?", the couple said, "I hope they can think of all of us as Canadians in it together." Elsewhere you write about how someone you know worked on a book about the Community Land Trusts that were started in the 1970s, 1980s and even 1990s, and now have large land holdings because of how cheap land was at that time. A major challenge for people involved in these land trusts is that they began as activists and tenant organisers, and now they find themselves property developers and property managers.

AC-YL I think capitalism promotes this idea that every circumstance can be changed for the better. As you write in your opening essay about Anna Nicole Smith, people talk about poverty as if it's a place from which you can escape, but poverty is a legacy. This idea of legacy and inheritance is present in both of our books. I do believe in transformative potential but we live in societal structures with legacies that can feel impossible to change.

AG I wrote *World of Interiors* to try and work out something about national and racial identity in relation to social and geographical mobility. That was part of my interest in people like Anna Nicole Smith, who was white but a figure of transgressive social mobility. I was also trying to think about the tangled ways in which the state draws a distinction between political refugees and economic migrants – not that the state is really in the business of creating safe and legal channels for the political refugees that it supposedly cares about. Now that there's even less of a notional idea of adhering to international law, even that seems to be fading away. In any case, this anxiety about the economic migrant takes us back to the particular and often unfortunate place that the Chinese migrant has had in the settlement and urbanisation of colonies like Australia and Canada, and the economies that have emerged there. I wrote the book partly as a way of dealing with what I felt I experienced as people's classed and racialised projections of who I am – their often shifting and contradictory fantasies about what kind of class or family origin I have. How would you describe the role of race in your book?



"Friday 20 May. At the sushi burrito place at Yonge and Dundas, Rice Cooker and I saw a sushi burrito being made with an enormous amount of salmon, like two whole fistfuls. We were saying to each other, *How is that even going to fit into the burrito?!* when a white woman in front of us with the same thought, wearing a cardigan and flowered pants, asked the man who'd ordered it, *Wow, so much salmon, what did you order?* The man, also white, wearing a Prada jacket with pointy shoes and a briefcase, replied authoritatively, *Get extra protein and make it extra spicy*. The woman asked him where in the city he lived. He told her he lived in Midtown and then, without any other preamble, they started discussing what property they owned and what they might buy next! … It was if she'd spotted him, another wealthy white person eating near Yonge and Dundas Square, getting his money's worth, and they just went straight into the heart of the matter."
— Property Journal

"Wednesday 20 July. Learning about land assemblies in Chinatown from the land trust research, which is when people or companies buy up adjoining properties with the hope of selling them off together for big future developments. One of the biggest current land assemblies is owned by a huge real estate investment company. Their mealy-mouthed slogan: *Delivering sustainable value through creative real estate investment solutions*."
— Property Journal

AC-YL It's a good question. In the years leading up to keeping the journal I was involved with organising around gentrification and displacement in [Toronto's] Chinatown. My experience of being involved in the Toronto Chinatown Community Land Trust taught me about the history of Chinatowns in North America as neighbourhoods created by exclusionary laws on immigration. Chinatowns formed around the reality that only men could immigrate, and they had to be workers, and they couldn't bring their families. Now there's the shared identity of being Chinese as an ethnic and racial category, but there's also the same kinds of difference that you get within any group, where there are people with different political beliefs. The dominant group in Toronto's Chinatown is the Business Improvement Area Association, which gets money from the city to operate. It's very conservative, very pro-police, anti-unhoused people, and pro-development. It's very contradictory in relation to the history of Chinatowns. And now there's a rise in the scapegoating of immigrants and racialised people in Canada, blaming them for the housing crisis, and especially of international students. Before Justin Trudeau stepped down, he put policies in place to deny international students work permits. People are fighting back, but there may be a mass deportation of international students from Canada in the coming years.

Maerl
Sarah Bernstein

After her presentation, my colleague, making reference to my two years at art school prior to the degree in environmental science, asked if I would build a human-scale model of a maerl bed for educational purposes. She imagined at one end a living landscape, that deep pinky-red, replete with sea creatures, a colour and life which, dwindling in the middle, would end in a ghostly, white emptiness. Six feet by eight feet, she said, very clearly, turning me around so that she could use my back to scrawl something on a piece of paper. On the paper she handed to me was a sketch of the maerl bed with rough dimensions and the words *the barren sea*.

I undertook this endeavour without much comment, using papier-mâché and chicken wire, education was, after all, one of our charitable objectives, and as to the question of whether the children, who were between the ages of six and eight, might be frightened by the exhibition, which was accessed through a curtain into a dark room, with only the maerl bed illuminated, accompanied by a soundscape emulating the undersea noises of the fish farm, the generators running day and night, the incinerators, the feed-delivery systems, the motor boats, the constant repairs, as to this question, my colleague would not have her efforts derailed by the molly-coddling instincts of the bureaucratic class, she would not be deterred. I left the organisation before she executed the final stages of these plans, so I never did find out how it went.

FLASH FICTION

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Before this, they'd been used by universities as an enormous source of tuition income. So there's this scapegoating of racialised people, but it's also perpetuated by conservative forces within these same racialised communities. Some of the main property developments in Chinatown are geared towards students. They're completely unaffordable, terrible buildings.

AG Things are similar in Sydney and Melbourne. The business models in higher education have relied on massive extraction from international students who, at the same time, are deprived of work, housing and welfare rights. This becomes fodder for a nativist, populist kind of right, and it's also a challenge for the left. You would hope that trade unions or student unions could organise around these unmet needs. Now, additionally, there's an unease that surrounds Chinese people for geopolitical reasons and the spectre of a possible trade war with China.

AC-YL And all the Chinese spy weather balloons.

AG Exactly. I wrote the book following the wave of consciousness during the Covid-19 pandemic but I feel quite pessimistic about how things have gone since. World events, like the LA fires, don't always, or only, indicate something positive as far as our ability to cohere around shared experiences and unmet needs, whether they're material, social or emotional.

AC-YL There's a line from one of your poems in the book about the "limitless human capacity for tedium and abuse". It's one of the last lines of the book, in fact. While it's so true in this extremely negative way, it also speaks to human endurance. This idea of survival comes up a lot in your writing. Do you remember where that line came from?

AG It's so difficult to look at the world sometimes. I guess what we've been writing and talking about is how we inherit what there is – we're not born into utopia, and we don't make our lives there. The line comes from a piece on workplace novels by Kaitlin Phillips. I think of it as connected to the line before, which references a "theatre of profound loneliness that has constituted their lives for centuries" written by Marguerite Duras, the author and filmmaker, whose films sometimes push the limits of boredom. I appreciate how *Property Journal* documents that many human efforts are futile, at least in the sense they don't work out as hoped at the time. We should never forget that boredom is a big part of the human experience, and a big part of what we share; acknowledging it makes it a lot easier to bear one another. There is something affirmative about remembering that we're vulnerable, that we have these needs we can't escape, that we have physical and emotional limits. It all becomes a moving document of the idea that nonetheless, we'll live with one another, that that's all there is. ⊕

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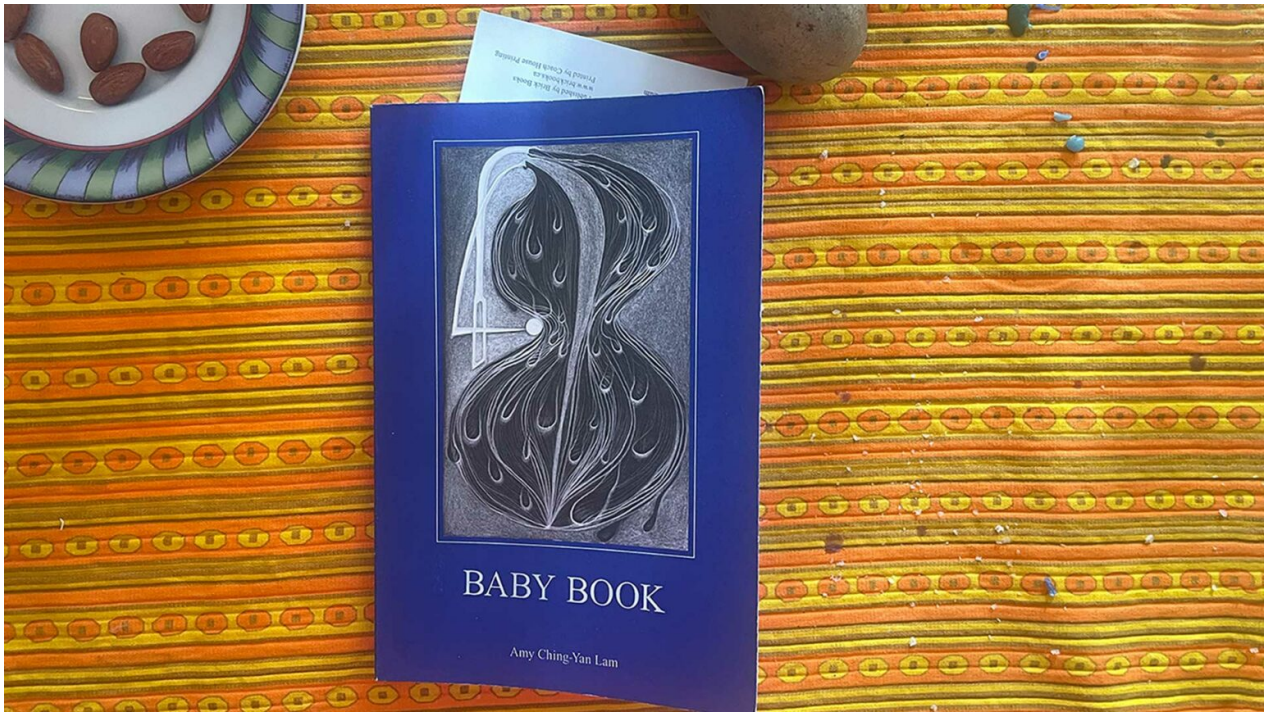
Fear Soups the Soul // Baby Book by Amy Ching-Yan Lam



Amy Ching-Yan Lam, *Baby Book* (Brick Books, 2023)

Five beautiful books on a shelf that remain closed.
Each for a different period of life.
One has bright blue inflatable pages that can float in water.
The second comes with a lock and key.
The third has long horizontal pages that take two people to flip.

The fourth is bound in tinfoil, cardboard, and tape.
The fifth has a cover of mirror-finish gemstone green.

— Amy Ching-Yan Lam, "Natural Fact"

In her debut full-length poetry collection, *Baby Book* (Brick Books, 2023), artist and writer Amy Ching-Yan Lam's autobiographical yet fable-like poems are conceptually framed to evoke the personalized record-keeping genre that is the baby book. Questions such as "What does it feel like to be a baby in the world's most expensive city?"[1] provokes the reader to reflect on one's own sense of place and the conditions for those who have made sacrifices to raise them. On the page, the poems sit in the prescribed spaces of the baby book, minus the curlicue frames made for ephemera, photographs, or vital information.

Reminiscent of a colleague who once told me that her therapist suggested the root of her problems perhaps stemmed from birth trauma, Lam's poetry reads as being grounded in an attempt to reconnect with her memories as a baby in Hong Kong, or maybe even further back, to fetal memory.[2] Taste and smell are aids for grounding and giving narrative to an otherwise forgotten past, in an exercise to contract the gaps between past and present. *Baby Book* takes on this feat with both humor and mischief, to understand the present through an experimental contingent on remembering the earliest stages of life — the cosmic soup of all matter(s). Historically, the word 'soup' was a verb, meaning the act of soaking or pouring the brothy substance from a bowl, an etymological tracing exercised by Lam throughout. In "Natural Fact" Lam writes:

So I eat to try to remember my life as a baby.

If I eat what I ate when I was one year old:

– Carrot
– White rice
– Oatmeal

Maybe then I can remember my memories.[3]

In “The Long-Lost Ritual of Baby Books,” Erin Blakeford writes that the genre is believed to have been popularized in England around 100 years ago as a document of an infant’s life, to track a child’s history of immunization, disease, locks of hair, weight, names, and so on. Efforts to classify and gather data through seemingly innocuous means was likely encouraged by the British Empire’s imperialism and colonial expansion projects, as a means to control populations and territory. In our digital age today, this historical practice has now merged “with the public health command to record growth, development and medical care as online ‘sharenting’ — with baby bumps and sonograms announcing an infant’s timeline before they have left the womb.”[4] Lam doesn’t reveal any empirical information about herself contained in the “five beautiful books on a shelf that remain closed,”[5] choosing instead to emphasize physicality, tactility and ornamentation as a method to show how surface and adornment contributes to the practice of fabulating and invention. The descriptions of the books from a distance emphasizes the way that ornamentation carries the imagination to make up, aspire to, care for, and re-examine the elasticity of so-called facts.

Writing under the influence of porridge and temperature, notions of what constitutes the narrative upbringing in *Baby Book* often occur during acts of reading, eating, or watching TV. Involuntary memory emerges “out of the soup”[6] (where soup is a metonym for memory), recalls a fear, a story, and then disappears again. According to time line therapy, “a person’s timeline represents their mental photo album and their own ability to distinguish between images of the past and perceptions of the future.”[7] Using a hypnosis theory methodology whereby a person is made to surrender to unconscious emotions from the past with the aim of reprogramming and releasing the effects of negative experiences, time line therapy acknowledges that unlike information in a ledger, memory is nonlinear. Is it a corruption of time? Time dust?

In “Life’s Not Fair,” Lam writes, “The action of believing is related to the action of eating and the action of fucking / These actions require using the whole body / The actions require the entire body.”[8] Such acts of urgent embodiment link perhaps to the popularity of personal development books, as Lam humorously cites: “‘MASTURBATE YOUR WAY TO MILLIONS’ ranked “#29,332 in Self-Help Books.”[9] During emotional blocks, fear may act like stale bread (if you have any) for binge-souping the soul. Mental health flare ups or chronic depression may be soothed with the pleasure of cooking, stuffing yourself, or fasting, to ease the unspeakable.[10]

Lam sifts between fact and fiction. Through colonial histories and diasporic migration, community and memory is violently unsettled through extraction of ancestral food sources and traditions — with its revival being essential for restoring fragmented timelines and reconnecting with ancestral knowledge and notions of 'home' as embodied through digestion. Taste and smell have the ability to cross time and space in families separated by geopolitical conflict, space, time and illness. Traditions of keeping in touch with familial ghosts, deity worship, mourning, to observance of family festivals and holidays, carried forth in ceremonial rituals pertain to "the sacrifice and devotion of offering food to the no-longer-living."[11]

Amy Ching-Yan Lam and HaeAhn Woo Kwon, *Oopsie Compound, You Don't Have to Die*, 2023, various materials

Baby Book lives within the hyphenated genre of biotext, a Canadian genre combining elements of autobiographical, historical, and fictional writing that navigate a poetics of displacement and disorientation, such as Fred Wah's *Red Diamond Grill* (NeWest Press, 1996), bp nichol's *Selected Organs: Parts of an Autobiography* (Black Moss Press, 1987), Mei Mei Berssenbrugge's *4-year-old-girl* (Kelsey Street Press, 1998), and Ada Smailbegović's *The Cloud Notebook* (Litmus Press, 2023) — where Smailbegovic translates recipes from the book, *How to Survive on Humanitarian Aid* (1994). Recipes such as "War Icing," or "Stojanka Hodžić's No-Bake Chocolate War Cake," list ingredients distributed by humanitarian aid during Bosnia's 20 months of siege.[12] Similarly, Lam caught my attention when she writes to the psychological functions of glucose: "That the fact of uprightness comes from sweetness. / I learnt that

in First Aid."[13] The brain, just like capitalism, depends on sugar. In this instance, I read the line where glucose helps take "some of the weight off the neck,"[14] not only as vital for thinking, satisfying hunger, but necessary for suspending a moment into delight. Recall how in the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel," two famished children abandoned in the woods eventually encounter a house made of candy, that they both devour and are nearly devoured by. Lam's poems hint at the ways immigrants may feel exasperated when explaining themselves by emphasizing how indigestible stories (the nonverbal) become trapped in the body to eventually be released by a burp, acts of care, a long sigh, or a momentarily unfurling of the spine. Lam's writerly experiments in digestion as a tool for remembering bring to mind ca Conrad's somatic exercises in radical presence, when reflecting on poetry as a record of tuning into inventive mindfulness practices — perhaps even in dissociative states — that support the brain's doughy ability to reorganize itself to form new neural connections and pathways throughout a life.

Recently I had a drink with a poet who told me she doesn't do therapy because she does poetry and "that's enough."[15] I too had followed this assertion for a long time, but during my reading of *Baby Book,* I was in the process of making the effort to take care of myself via a smorgasbord of therapeutic approaches. After two years of seeing a counselor, recent 'homework' includes daily body scans and checking in with my inner child. This comes after a decade of hearing and not understanding when friends made the suggestion to "forgive your inner child." I would hesitate — child? What child? As of late, I have made contact with two younger selves — a 4-year-old and a 12-year-old — with whom to reorient 'original' feelings. When I feel overwhelmed, my counselor tells me to "let go of narrative and just feel the feelings," suggesting that perhaps it's not personal, that I am tuning into the collective grief during the ongoing state of ecological and geopolitical crises. During a consultation with a psychic, I am offered the image that my body has been sitting on a chair with a missing leg; the metaphor of the broken chair is a way to make sense of the discomfort held in my body. Despite these and other efforts, occasionally I still indulge in self-soothing habits like gorging myself with minestrone, returning to practices that allows for nonverbal soothing (like painting), and taking on too much work — in other words, I perpetuate the juggling acts accumulated during states of dissociative self-effacement.

Consider Lam's close reading of the children's story *Franklin in the Dark,* a tragicomedy by Paulette Bourgeouis *(*Kids Can Press, 1986). Franklin the turtle fears

his own shell, "his own essence,"[16] that even in the effort to separate from that part of himself — by dragging the shell around with him — it is still and always there. If a baby book serves not just as a means to document the life for a baby you care for presently, but to tend to one's inner child, then reimagining the baby book can serve to re-coordinate physiological memories stuck in the body. Unlike the way time lines up with facts in record keeping books, Lam's poems unstick narratives by thinking through fears, which if left unchecked, eat the soul. Perhaps the antidote lies in surrendering to a process of *becoming*-baby — returning to decolonial "ways of sense-making"[17] that allow for new pathways to sprout from the mushy, underground recesses of the mind.

Notes:

1. Amy Ching-Yan Lam, *Baby Book* (Kingston: Brick Press, 2023), 19.
2. Epigenetics is an area of scientific research that shows how environmental influences affect the expression of genes. Epigenetic changes in DNA register both positive and negative experiences and influence how the body reads genes in a DNA sequence. Through this process, inherited memory, such as intergenerational trauma, is imprinted in genes and may remain latent or be turned on.
3. Lam, *Baby Book*, 16.
4. Erin Blakemore, "The Long-Lost Ritual of Baby Books," *JSTOR Daily*, November 1, 2020, https://daily.jstor.org/the-long-lost-ritual-of-baby-books/.
5. Lam, *Baby Book*, 24.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. "Time Line Therapy," *Good Therapy*, July 2, 2015, accessed October 10, 2023, https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/timeline-therapy/.
8. Lam, Baby Book, 71.
9. Ibid., 73.
10. Coinciding the word 'trigger' in warfare, photography, and therapy, I recall John Berger's essay "Photographs of Agony" where he writes, "The camera which isolates a moment of agony isolates no more violently than the experience that moment isolates itself." See: John Berger, 'Photographs of Agony,' in *John Berger: Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York; Pantheon, 2001), 279-281.
11. Lam, *Baby Book*, 24.
12. Ada Smailbegović, *The Cloud Notebook* (Brooklyn: Litmus Press, 2023), 72.

13. Lam, *Baby Book*, 30.
14. Ibid.
15. I am reminded of an interview with the artist-poet Precious Okoyomon who said, "I can't afford therapy, so I write poems." See: Precious Okoyomon, "Conversation: On why creative blocks aren't always a bad thing," by Willis Plummer, *The Creative Independent*, August 2, 2017, accessed November 24, 2023, https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/precious-okoyomon-on-finding-poetry-in-everything/.
16. Lam, *Baby Book*, 21.
17. Stefanie Lyn Kaufman-Mthimkhulu, "Healing Outside the Medical Industrial Complex," Stefanie Lyn Kaufman-Mthimkhulu, accessed December 3, 2023, https://www.stefaniekaufman.com/healing-outside-the-mic/.

Images

1. Amy Ching-Yan Lam, *Baby Book* (Brick Books, 2023). Courtesy of Tiziana La Melia.
2. Amy Ching-Yan Lam and HaeAhn Woo Kwon, *Oopsie Compound, You Don't Have to Die*, 2023, various materials. Detail view at *a small but comfy house and maybe a dog*, Richmond Art Gallery. Photo: NK Photography. Courtesy of the Richmond Art Gallery.

Tiziana La Melia is an artist and the author of *The Eyelash and the Monochrome* (Talon Books, 2018), the poetry album *Kletic Kink* (Tenderly, 2023). Recent exhibitions include *confessions on sparkling hill* at Damien and the Love Guru (Zurich, 2023).

"How can I make a movie of your life if there's no information about it?": An Interview with Amy Ching-Yan Lam

Kirby Chen Mages

I first met Amy through our mutual friend HaeAhn Woo Kwon. I don't know how HaeAhn met Amy, but I'm sure it was also through one of their mutual friends. What beautiful things can emerge through friendship. It is this moving through that gets us somewhere closer. In this conversation, in which Amy and I met on Zoom, through the screen, I had the sensation that we were sitting on clouds, drifting.

Our conversation moved through the realms of memory, associative thought, family, and collectivity, all while being anchored by Amy's beautiful Baby Book. *I've found that I cannot speak of* Baby Book *without calling it "beautiful* Baby Book." *There is something beautiful about a baby. There is something beautiful about a book. There is something doubly beautiful about Amy's* Baby Book.

–Kirby Chen Mages

KIRBY CHEN MAGES: I read that the first inspiration for *Baby Book* came from you writing a piece for an

art exhibition catalog. Did you always know that you wanted to have a physical book of poetry?

AMY CHING-YAN LAM: Not at all. It was a surprise for me when I got the invitation to write something, that it came out in this way. And it was so fun. I think that's what I really loved about discovering writing again. I found so much pleasure and joy in doing it. Through the pandemic and the beginning of 2020, when I was at a residency in London with my former collaborator, John, I was writing a lot. It was a real process of discovery. I had no idea what it was going to be. I was very uncertain that it was poetry, even, but I didn't want to write essays, and I didn't want to write stories, either. And so, through the many years of working on the book, I discovered things about form that I didn't know starting out.

I really didn't think that it was going to be poetry, but it made sense in terms of the content of the book, which is, in some ways, about my grandmother's life, and my life, and lots of other people's lives, where there's this unknown portion of it, or my grandmother telling me about her life, but not being able to articulate or explain these massive things. In the book, she tells me, "I had 20 brothers and sisters and they all died," and then there was nothing more she could say about that. That kind of void. She can't express it, but obviously that's shaped her life so much, and my life, and my mom's life. I think that's why it made sense for the book to be poetry, because there are lots of things that can't be said, or that exist in absence, or through the connections.

KCM: In terms of form, did you have certain constraints that you were working through or was it more intuitive?

ACL: I had no guidelines. I think that's why when I first started out, there were so many versions of some of the poems, like "Sunflower Seed," "Autoicon," or "Remembrance Day," but especially "Sunflower Seed." If I looked at my computer, there would probably be 200 versions of it, because I didn't know what felt right. Through the process of writing the book, I've been able to figure that out more, and so now when I sit down to write, I'm not writing 300 versions of the same thing. But in the beginning, making the book was definitely many different attempts to figure out

what felt good.

KCM: I was definitely thinking about family while reading your book the first time around, and coincidentally, I was reading Sophie Lewis's *Abolish the Family* upon my second read. I've been thinking a lot lately about how the family can be this kind of horror story premise in some ways.

ACL: *[Laughs]* I agree. The family's totally a horror story type of situation, right? It's like something that you can't escape. Or, you can, but oftentimes, it's a question of wanting to escape, but then not totally getting liftoff.

I've been working on this other book that's called *Property Journal*. It's a journal that I kept in 2022 of all the times people talked about real estate, but a family story is very present in it, because it's also the story of my parents retiring and figuring out where they're going to live, and my sister helping them with that. When I was writing *Baby Book*, it was a time in my life where I was reckoning with my own relationship with my family—and *really* facing it, having spent a lot of my life not facing it, trying to escape it, or trying to just ignore it in some ways. That's what I feel the book is also really composed of, is this part about aging—being in middle life and thinking back on how I've ended up where I am, and how formative the family is, for better or worse.

KCM: What does the idea of being baby mean to you? Or what's the significance of that word?

ACL: For the baby part, it's definitely a conception of baby as a baby, you know, like a person or being that's just been born. But why the book is called *Baby Book* beyond the element of family, is this idea I have of babies coming to know the world through their senses in this very physical way, through putting things in their mouths. That sensorial experience that we'll never be able to access again. That's something I really wanted to think about: How do you come to know the world? And it's really strange, because our experience of the world is like, okay, I'm in this room, I can see it, but the world obviously also consists of so many other things, or so many other histories. That was a big part of the thinking that I was doing

when I was writing the book. How do you access knowledge? And how do you access knowledge of things that have happened before you were alive, but that are so important to your being, or that constitute your being? Like, my grandma's experience, or any part of the history of the land that I'm on. History is a funny word. Because it's not even history. It's the context, you know? And how do we come to know that context?

KCM: Can you talk about how food shows up in your poems?

ACL: I think with the food there's a part of it that relates to the baby and senses, and learning things through your mouth, or feeling in that way. Or, coming to know the world in that way. And then there's another part of it that's about resources and the fact that you need food to stay alive, and that you have to pay for it. That's the way our world is set up. And how does that make any sense? The fact that the natural world is so bountiful, has so much abundance, but there's so much scarcity that's enforced. The poem "Land Made of Food" is about that. There's a previous version of it in my chapbook, *The Four Onions*, where it's maybe a bit more explicit, and it talks about the idea of the rich going to live on Mars, where there is no food, and they would bring their own food. It's based on this medieval idea of the land of Cockaigne, which is a world where everything is food, and if you're a peasant you dream of this land and it's this beautiful fantasy. But it's also portrayed as a place poor people are fantasizing about because they're so lazy, like, they just want to live in a world where they can pluck hamburgers from the trees, or whatever. It's more associative for me, but to me it relates to the fact of how we relate to nature. We think it's something to be extracted from.

I guess there's also a part that I'm trying to avoid, which is the classic Asian American or Asian Canadian "I connect to my culture through food," which *is* a big part of it, and maybe a place that I did start from at the beginning. It's really important for my family. It's how we spend time together. It's one of the only shared interests that we have.

KCM: There are lots of references to different types of classes and therapies in your book. Were you

actively doing all of that while you were writing?

ACL: One of the experiences that's in "Sunflower Seed," the experience with EMDR [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing], was a very important experience. And really, it's one of the seeds of the book in some ways. I had this experience doing EMDR for the first time, which is a type of therapy. The way that I did it was with binaural sound. The therapist leads you through accessing a traumatic experience, and that really feels like time travel. It was so intense. I never had that experience before where I was like, wow, I really feel like I visited—because that's what she did, she led me on this experience of visiting a past self. And I had never had that kind of emotional reaction before, or even that feeling. That was really important in terms of what the book is about—reckoning with the family, and coming to face it, and coming to understand it and also have compassion for those experiences. I didn't really have a project of trying to access memories, but I think that in a way, the writing led me down so many paths that I never would have been able to follow without it.

KCM: There's a moment where you write about the logical brain and how if you overdevelop it, then you can't access your memory. I feel like that's connected to how we access our imaginations too, especially as poets. How do we reach those moments where we're able to let go of the logic and get into the ripeness of the imagination?

ACL: I thought it was so funny. The fact that you can overdevelop your logical brain. And I feel like it really applies to me, because, yeah, it's too logical, and I have no memory of things. I feel like a lot of the stories in the book come from things that I overheard or things that I read about. Like, the poem that's about a woman who sets up a toll, "Iron Pole." I read that in a book. They were driving in China, and they saw this. This is a small detail in the book, but it really stuck with me. Thinking back on it now, it's trying to recuperate or collect these details. And that's mostly my writing process: collecting things and writing them in my notes and then stringing them together. But I like that process of taking a small detail that comes to me through whatever means and

then making it into something that's more mysterious or that reads on an allegorical level instead, and I don't know exactly what the moral is or anything.

KCM: Your poems sometimes have an indexical quality to them that makes me think of list keeping.

ACL: It goes back to how I write the poems in the first place, which is keeping these notes and then there's a feeling that I think is associated between them, and then dumping them into a document, and then trying to organize them in some way. And by "organize," I mean creating some kind of flow between them. So it's not a list that's organized by type of thing, necessarily, but it's like, how do you make leaps between these things that might not be similar, in order to create some kind of feeling, or to convey that feeling of how they're connected, even if they're not connected. Or not obviously connected. That's the main thing for how I write and so maybe that's also part of the logical brain, because in my daily life, I keep all kinds of lists that are things I must do. And then writing poetry is a different type of list keeping.

KCM: In terms of form within the book, there wasn't a pattern, necessarily, and there are no consistent formal restraints, but it has a certain flow.

ACL: For me, it's like, how do I convey these connections? Counterintuitively through the spacing. That's how it makes sense to me. There are things that don't belong together. But what happens if I put them closer together? And then there are things that belong together, so what happens if I split them apart more? And just trying to find the rhythm in that.

When I wrote "Movie of My Life," my grandma passed away very close to the actual date of it, and I knew at the time that I was writing it that it was the end of the book. In a way, it's obvious. The book begins with my grandma telling me that story about her siblings and saying, "Oh, I know why you're doing this. You're gonna make a movie of my life." And I was like, "How can I make a movie of your life if there's no information about it?" Like, what? *[Laughs.]* How am I supposed to do that? So yeah, that's why it's the end of the book. And because it's the end of the book, it

made sense for me to use spacing in a slightly different way.

KCM: I recently attended a Don Mee Choi reading where she talked about finishing her trilogy and having to accept that she wanted her books to read like films—that they each had a beginning and end, to a point where, with her third book, she decided to eliminate titles altogether.

ACL: Yeah, that's really interesting, because I feel like that's the direction that I've been thinking in, too. I've been thinking about this book I read by Lewis Freedman that's called *I Want Something Other Than Time*. It's published by UDP, and it's a small book, but every poem has the same title, which is "I Want Something Other Than Time." I just really love when the book itself makes sense as a book. As a coherent entity. I really wanted to do that with this book, and I continue to think about how to do that. I'm resistant to the idea of poetry as these short fragments or short, pithy things that you can have on Instagram or whatever.

KCM: Along the lines of resisting certain trends in poetry, which rules are your favorite to break?

ACL: I think it goes back to the question you asked earlier of how I got to writing in the first place. Ever since I was a kid, I really did think, I'm gonna be a writer. I'm so into books. I love books. It's just the number one thing. My favorite objects, you know, so much affection for them. And then going to grad school and doing an MA in writing and being like, what is this? I totally don't want to have any part of it. Like, feeling so disillusioned by it, and then ending up somehow having a career in the visual arts, instead. And then coming back to writing and being very grateful for that circuitous path.

In the 10 years after grad school, I did write, but I wrote for performance and it was always collaborative. I really didn't have a solo writing practice at all. I felt so resistant to it. It was so important to have that break, and to rediscover writing in my own terms and come to it in a totally different way. I didn't study poetry in my program. I never really felt like it was something that I would do. And so, it's so cool to really have that experience of

doing something new as someone who's an adult, or of a certain age. It's something that I always want to convey to people, especially to students who feel like they need to be on the "right path." It's not like that, you know? If you have a long, windy path, it's gonna be more fruitful for you in terms of what your actual creative practices are and why you feel committed to it.

KCM: I was so inspired by your self-organized book tour. It seemed so centered around friendships that you had in all of these different locations. There's always the life of the book as the object and then what it becomes when you bring it into a collective space. Do all of the people who you read with on tour also have a visual art practice?

ACL: I would say most of them are not only writers. I think that's generally the type of person that I gravitate towards. For most of the readings I did in the fall, it was people that I invited. It was people that I felt an affinity with. And so, those rooms did feel very warm and connected.

In December, I was invited to do a reading in Toronto, but it was in a very different context. I read the poem "Remembrance Day," and I introduced it by talking about the assault on Gaza. But the rest of the night was this totally random mix of rock music and other readers, and I felt so discombobulated by it, because there were like eight performers and only two of us brought that context into the room, and everyone else basically ignored it. And that happens in lots of different kinds of public spaces right now. Where it's like, some people talk about it, some people don't, and that night, especially because I was performing, I felt so disturbed afterwards. I was just like, "What happened?" It took me a while to get over it—the energy of going up on stage, a huge room, and then saying these things, but then not feeling like they were heard, or not hearing them come back in any way.

KCM: At the reading I did with you in Los Angeles, I was so affected by you being on stage and asking everyone present to say "Free Palestine" altogether. And then asking everyone to say it one more time. I have to say, I haven't had an experience quite like

that since, unless it's an event explicitly organized around Palestinian liberation and ending the genocide, so I think about that night a lot, in contrast to when I've experienced the ignoring of what's happening, especially within the arts. It's made me want to attend less and less institutional events.

ACL: In November, before I went on the tour to the UK and Europe, I was really stressed, because I had organized everything myself. You know, doing all that work of emailing people and then I didn't end up getting a travel grant, but someone I know, who's a patron, gave me some money so I could cover the flight. It was this feeling of, oh my god, why am I even doing this? Are people gonna come? Like, all the questions that you have when you organize events. So that was the feeling I had going in. I also tried to keep in mind that it's this immense privilege for me to be able to share my work and the fact that I do have enough resources to squeak by.

I would say that my experience of doing the events with people that I had invited, and whose work I really love, and being able to have conversations with them and relate our different practices together was so powerful. I feel like it was a lesson for me that it's

tough, it's challenging to do things on your own, and to be a poet and to be poor, and not have access to institutions, or whatever. But there's also this great benefit in it, which is that, because I organized it, I created the scene, or I was able to, with other people, make the scene for their work and for my work. I feel like the events were very successful in that way. They were very nourishing. That's the flip side of doing things independently. And I think about that now too, to connect to what we're saying about the genocide. It's like, okay, all these institutions are fuckin' like, masks off. There's this feeling of, why are we even working for these larger institutions that are so hypocritical? There's value in doing things on our own, you know?

Did You Get What You Wanted from This Life?

Amy Ching-Yan Lam's first solo show playfully questions the stuff of our earliest fantasies.

Dorothy Woodend / 5 May 2023 TheTyee.ca
Dorothy Woodend is the culture editor for The Tyee.

A Small but Comfy House and Maybe a Dog is a curious fantasia of the deeply familiar and the distinctly odd. Amy Ching-Yan Lam and Emerson Maxwell, *Looty Goes to Heaven*, 2022. Photo by Michael Love.

When artist Amy Ching-Yan Lam's parents were packing up the family home in Calgary, Lam's mother came upon a time capsule that her daughter had made when she was in elementary school.

A Small but Comfy House and Maybe a Dog takes its title from what 11-year-old Lam thought her adult life might offer. But the stuff of what used to constitute the badges of adulthood — a home, a pet, a settled and comfortable life — isn't what it used to be. The time capsule and all that it carried became the catalyst for Lam's first-ever solo exhibition at the Richmond Art Gallery.

There is a lot packed into the show — feng shui, couches, actually a lot of couches, real estate, both real and unreal, sundials, slightly unnerving animation and Pekingese dogs.

If the mutable and changing pace of memory and home is the subtext of the exhibition, it extends far beyond the objects and installations. The barest glance out the window of the Richmond Art Gallery provides an indication that development on an almost metastatic level has changed not

only the physical landscape but also the economic one. Houses are increasingly investments, temporary repositories for money. And dogs? Well, they're still dogs.

Guest curator Su-Ying Lee explains in the material introducing the show that by age 25, Lam assumed that all the markers of adult life would have duly arrived: "Starting from these childhood fantasies of domestic love and financial stability, Lam presents artworks that explore how these dreams have been indirectly influenced by the wider trajectory of colonial history.

"With humour and acuity, she examines the complicated relationships between institutional collections and power, property and theft, and history and family."

By incorporating the scale of development into the exhibition itself, Amy Ching-Yan Lam renders the dynamic between art and the outside world as one of constant renegotiation and reassessment. *Future-Friendly*, 2023. Photo by Michael Love.

The shifting relationship between art and the outside world

Born in Hong Kong, Lam mostly grew up in Calgary. Although she is currently based in Toronto, Lam made multiple trips to Richmond, B.C., watching the scale of development spring up alongside its art gallery.

In one image in the show, marketing material for new condominiums completely erased the Richmond Cultural Centre, the physical site of the Richmond Art Gallery, in its entirety.

By incorporating the scale of development into the exhibition itself, Lam has done something interesting. She renders the dynamic between art and the outside world as one of constant renegotiation and reassessment. Arguably every time one sees the show, it will be slightly different as the buildings climb ever higher.

Lam's artwork is joined by HaeAhn Woo Kwon (https://www.haeahnkwon.com/) , who contributed sculptural objects. Some of these defy easy description, such as a giant flip-flop sandal resting atop a pile of sand, studded round with shards of broken glass. It's simultaneously funny, disturbing and more than a little absurdist, a trifecta that runs through much of the show.

Humour is not often something you see in contemporary art, and there is a joyous abundance of it here. It's visible in the daily calendars that Lam kept making note of whenever anyone mentioned anything to do with housing or real estate (suffice to say: it's a lot). And very much in the presence of Looty (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Looty_(dog)) . A Pekingese dog purloined by British forces at the end of the Second Opium War, Looty was gifted to Queen Victoria. She promptly renamed the dog after how it was procured. Maybe a name like "I stole this dog" was too clunky?

The Looty material in the show is complicated. It isn't as straightforward as a full-blown takedown of colonialist thievery, although that is certainly there. What's more interesting is the other potential reality that Looty presents in the exhibition. This alternative version of history is suggested by the book that accompanies the show, as well as in an animated film loop of Looty, lolling about, tongue out, looking fashionably deshabille.

The animated film and book, created with Emerson Maxwell, share the same title: *Looty Goes to Heaven, 2022*. The book-length form, offered in both English and traditional Chinese, imagines another story for Looty. In this other world, she is given voice and agency, finally freed from her English captors, and spirals up to heaven.

The one photograph of the real-life Looty, slumped in a chair looking as forlorn as possible, provides an entrée not only into the history of British imperialism and its rampaging ways, but the ongoing repercussions of the take-anything-that-isn't-nailed-down modus operandi of colonialist rule.

In the process of putting the show together, Lam wrote to the Royal Collection Trust, requesting permission to include a painting of Looty (https://www.rct.uk/collection/406974/looty) in the show. A copy of the rejection letter that she received from the Royal Collection denying the request is blown up to poster size and is featured in the show.

As the piece entitled *Rejection Letter, 2022* makes clear, it's very hard to get stuff out the hands of the royal family. Not much has changed in terms of the how things are taken and never returned.

As if in a riposte to this institutional greediness, Lam shoplifted a USB key in the shape of the Rosetta Stone from the souvenir store at the British Museum. As Lam explains, the best way to shoplift is to also buy something at the same time. She bought one USB key and stole the other. This is more than fitting, given what the Rosetta Stone actually represents.

As the attendant material explains: "The Rosetta Stone is one of the most famous objects in the British Museum's collection, and is well-known for providing a key to Egyptian hieroglyphics, with text in both Greek and Egyptian. However, the original use of the stone was to announce a mass amnesty, for both debtors and prisoners, in 196 BCE. This means that both financial debts and criminal sentences were forgiven; everybody had access to a fresh start."

Dreams with a dark edge

The good-natured and very funny aspects of the exhibition run riot throughout. Especially in the surreal sculptures, co-created by Lam and Kwon that incorporate old toys, teapots, fountains, gourds, all seemingly put through a funhouse mirror, so that they pop out on the other side, becoming a curious fantasia of the deeply familiar and the distinctly odd.

But here is where things also begin to deepen and darken.

Amy Ching-Yan Lam and HaeAhn Woo Kwon's sculptures incorporate all manner ephemera that creates a sharply funny collection of work. Amy Ching-Yan Lam and HaeAhn Woo Kwon, *Oopsie Compound*, 2023, *You don't have to die Library*. Photo by Michael Love.

Every child, at one point or another, has drawn a version of their fantasy house from the future, complete with a bowling alley, a movie theatre, a swimming pool, maybe a couple of different pools. There are echoes of this particular convention in the show, coupled with the emotional qualities that nostalgia stirs up at a certain point in life, when old things transform from cute to mournful. It is within this interstitial territory, an emotional no-man's-land that floats between crepuscular sadness to more silly stuff, that the meat of the show takes place.

This quality is especially evident in another missive from the past. A student newspaper, created when Lam was in grade school, predicts the future from a different perspective. The young artist wrote a column that declared that women will have completely taken over and rule the European continent. The boys in Lam's class were more concerned with who would take over from David Letterman on late-night television. So, maybe some things haven't changed at all.

In addition to objects, couches, toys and sundry objects from the artist's childhood home, melded into new creations, the show features different artworks from the Richmond Art Gallery's permanent collection as well as objects from and the Richmond Public Library. And that is only the barest dip of the toe into the show.

Feng shui expert Sherman Tai contributed his skills to the exhibition, suggesting that a fountain just inside the entrance would attract people into the space. Given that there is pillar directly in front of the front doors of the gallery, this can only help. But the fountain itself isn't exactly straightforward. Turn on the water and it jets out into a wastebasket placed directly in front. It's this mixture of familiar and weird, discombobulating, so that nothing feels certain or reliable any longer.

And that's largely what adult life feels like now. All the usual guideposts and signs aren't what they used to be. In this new territory, the hopes and dreams of the past linger like sad and broken toys.

'A Small but Comfy House and Maybe a Dog' is on view at the Richmond Art Gallery to June 11.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ART BOOKS | FEBRUARY 2023

Amy Ching-Yan Lam's *Looty Goes to Heaven*

Histories of dog breeding, racist genetic theory, and British colonial extraction form the backdrop to this work of speculative fiction.

By Daniella Sanader

The dog whistle was invented in 1876 by Francis Galton, a Victorian-era statistician and sociologist who was studying the hearing ranges of humans and

various animal species. A tool to compel obedience and promote "correct" behavior, these whistles emit a high-frequency noise, known to be inaudible to humans yet significantly noisy to our animal counterparts, particularly dogs and domesticated cats. In 1883, however, Galton invented something else; as an early advocate for a movement that promoted selective breeding in humans to weed out so-called "undesirable" qualities, he was also the first person to use the term *eugenics*.

Courtesy Eastside Projects. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

Amy Ching-Yan Lam
Looty Goes to Heaven
(Eastside Projects, 2022)

The entwined histories of dog breeding, racist genetic theory, and British colonial extraction form the backdrop to artist Amy Ching-Yan Lam's work of speculative fiction, *Looty Goes to Heaven*. The titular character is a small Pekingese dog, gifted by British troops to Queen Victoria in 1860 after she was taken from the Summer Palace in Beijing during the end of the second Opium War. Renamed Looty by the British, in honor of her provenance, she appears in an 1865 photograph included by Lam in the appendix of her book—soft ears framing her square face, a sleepy puddle of fur on an imposing ornamental chair. In the narrative developed by the Toronto-based artist, provided in English and Traditional Chinese, Looty has died and stands on the threshold to heaven, having been asked to account for the story of her life. "It seemed very unfair that she had to determine at this moment what her account would be when so many other things had been determined for her," Lam writes. For one, she could not say with any confidence what her true name was: it certainly wasn't Looty, nor was it Flower Bud, the name she had carried during her previous life at the palace, where "all the dogs were to be named after beautiful, precious things."

Courtesy Eastside Projects. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

Within the small publication—written and distributed in conjunction with Lam's 2022 exhibition of the same name at Eastside Projects in Birmingham, UK—Looty's narrative unfolds in two ways: through both Lam's approach to speculative fiction, and the artist's accompanying timeline, which charts Birmingham's deep connections to the histories of British tea manufacturing, professional dog breeding (as the home of the annual Crufts Dog Show), as well as the city's legacy as Galton's birthplace. The wide, interconnected scope of Lam's research anchors the specificity of Looty's voice, as the toy dog navigates those very same historical forces: the heavy burdens of her different lives under imperial rule. Both surreal and frank, Lam's style of narration illuminates the particular in-between quality of Looty's position on the edge of the afterlife, where she waits, debating whether to move forward into heaven or return to Earth for a small form of revenge. The precision of Lam's humor also creates opportunities for Looty's resistance against her captors, whether through the oozing "slurry of sugar, liver, and tea" the Pekingese caused by disrupting a genteel luncheon between the queen, princess, and their royal consorts, or through the author's description of Looty's nicknames for her owners, such as Stinky Wind (the Emperor), named as such for his particularly odorous farts. Throughout *Looty Goes to Heaven*, Lam's shared backgrounds in poetry and comedic performance and film work (through, notably, her former collective Life of a Craphead) makes her narrative style a unique one: the story of Looty's life is equal parts silly, mournful, loving, and deeply anticolonial.

As Lam's research in the publication explains, Francis Galton also briefly owned a Pekingese. Named Wee Ling, the puppy was gifted to him by his protégé, who was using eugenicist principles in an attempt to produce an albino breed of the toy dog. Wee Ling, however, was infertile and by Galton's account, bad-tempered—he did not remain long in the household. (Had Looty known Wee Ling, she may have also encouraged him to find a new name for himself, to reject the orientalizing nonsense with which he had been titled.) In spending time with the many threads (and names) of Looty's life, I also find myself thinking back to Galton's other invention. These days, a phrase like "dog whistle" often also connotes a certain form of political rhetoric, where seemingly innocuous language signals to more extreme ideologies without arousing suspicion (think of a phrase like "family values.") At the gates of heaven, Looty also chafes against the names she has been given, the larger values—of imperial conquest, of exoticism—her small body has been called to represent, regardless of her choice. As Lam aptly describes: "Looty wondered if being renamed had changed something inside her, because she felt different, like something had been lodged inside her, some kind of pointy irritant that shifted uncomfortably with movement." Standing on the threshold of what comes after, I can only hope she found what she needed—that Looty's true name was waiting for her on the other side.

Daniella Sanader is a writer and reader who lives in Toronto.

PREVIOUS
Art Books
Dick Higgins's *A Something Else Reader*

NEXT
Art Books
Phil Jung's *Windscreen*

Histories and Setups: Interview with Life of a Craphead

by Robin Simpson

I met up with Amy Lam and Jon McCurley for a *casse-croûte* breakfast at Canada Hot Dog in Montreal's Rosemont neighbourhood following the opening of their exhibition *Entertaining Every Second* at Centre Clark and a few weeks before the unveiling of their two-part billboard project *$100 Bill With South Asian Scientist Added Back In* (2019) with Dazibao. Having rarely shown or performed in Montreal, Lam and McCurley arrived with an exhibition tuned to a fine pitch, following presentations in Calgary at Truck Gallery and in Saskatoon at AKA artist-run. Addressing Western imperialism in Asia—Vietnam in particular—and systemic anti-Asian racism within the Canadian art milieu, the exhibition at Centre Clark marks a turning point in their more-than-a-decade-long practice, notably occupied by the long production period for their feature film, *Bugs* (2015), made in parallel with their performance art show and online broadcast *Doored* (2012–2017). Understandably, after touring the exhibition this past year, Lam and McCurley shared questions of their own on the methods behind their practice.

Compared to research-based or documentary practices in art-making that look for oblique angles into the archive or suggest neat speculative histories, Life of a Craphead's work is rigorous memory work. This is memorial work, the painful and vulnerable work of research set on personal and collective trauma with a close watch on the violence behind it. It's accompanied by straightforward titles: *Find the US Soldier Who Killed Your Grandma* (2018), *Making Something Positive out of Chris Cran's Painting 'Self-Portrait with Combat Nymphos*

Life of a Craphead, *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don*, 2017, performance
PHOTO: YUULA BENIVOLSKI; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

of Saigon' (1985) (ongoing), *Angry Edit* (2018) *or The Quiet American but Only the Parts Where the White Man Main Character Tells the Asian Woman to Do Stuff for Him* (2018). Each title plays the setup to—but not, to my mind—an assurance of a laugh to follow. Instead, they are setups that leave you time to trade your anticipation for attention and understand in this suspension that you're now to follow up on the details.
— Robin Simpson

Robin Simpson: Let's start with the place of monuments in your work over the past decade.

Jon McCurley: We've done three projects explicitly about monuments: *Double Double Land Land* (2009), *Bugs* (2015) and *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don* (2017). We have been asked do monument stuff since our successful monument thing in the Don and it seemed like, "well, what can we actually say about monuments?" But then, looking back, we've been thinking about monuments for many projects.

Amy Lam: *Double Double Land Land* was this play about this town that nobody wanted to go to. One of the plot points was that they built this public sculpture to attract people, a giant spring that, when you go to look at the spring, it bounces you out of town. In *Bugs*, there's this Douglas Coupland *Monument to the War of 1812* (2008) statue at King and Bathurst in Toronto that's a part of the story. We renamed the statue for our purposes and put tape on it and stuff…

JM: …and a plot in *Bugs* is that the characters are trying to install a new public monument, too.

RS: I wanted to ask about *Double Double Land Land* and *Bugs* and the place of civic life in your work.

AL: Both of us don't come from art. Jon went to art school for one year, but I definitely did not understand what visual art was until my twenties. I had never been to a gallery and I just didn't know. Public statues are what you see, in terms of art, if you don't go to museums and galleries. We don't necessarily think about Toronto, it's just important to use whatever is close to us. The statue at King and Bathurst... literally, for our movie, we asked: "Where can we shoot?" We can shoot in parking lots, because it's free if you don't get stopped. We can use this street corner and we can use the bathroom at Jon's house.

JM: I really enjoy and wish I could work more in community-building. I value that a lot—building something with the people around you. That must be the way to succeed, because it just seems to be so much more honest. But as far as *critiquing* city planning and stuff in our projects [deep sigh], it's just bad writing.

AL: We have had a few city-planning-style projects, like *Model for Waterfront Development* (2016).

JM: Oh yeah, that piece is bad.

RS: I was going to ask about that work.

JM: That's a deep dive.

AL: Maybe we should take all the bad projects off the website.

RS: What stands out with that project is your play with a certain style of institutional language on the panels. This can also be seen in the didactic text panels in *Entertaining Every Second*. Maybe this could lead to thinking about editing, but let's start with the adoption of that particular tone.

JM: The way that all of that past work ties into what we're doing right now is totally the text panels. That's the comedy part: you have to get the one-liner out of the text. It's like setup and punchline. You have to tell them straight out or you're wasting their time. It's true with *Model for Waterfront Development* that the text is the best part because it has this subtlety and satire.

AL: For *Fifty-Year Retrospective, 2006–2056* (2013) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the text panels were written like museum texts. It comes out of being asked to do things in these spaces. How does a museum work? There's a painting and then there's a text beside it. That's what people see. They don't just see the painting, so it doesn't make sense to only make the painting. Why wouldn't the artist also control all the other elements? Maybe it's us wanting to direct the audience response in a very specific way, but then also point out all the other parts of how art is shown.

JM: About editing, maybe it's because there are two of us. If an artist is one person, they don't have to do the added step, which is convince someone who probably doesn't want to do it. That is probably why language and editing are such a big part of our work. I think we're trying to get away from it because, after about 40 projects, they all kind of have this one-liner feel. What do you do when you can see that about your own work?

RS: Even if this current project is a turning point for you, the process of taking into account the audience's reaction as well as your own is something that you've carried over from work you've done over the past decade. Could you talk a bit more about this question of address?

JM: We built *Entertaining Every Second* thinking about the audience and our relationship to the audience. Maybe that is something we've taken from thinking about how comedy works.

AL: What's annoying about comedy—but also what is so great about it—is that it is so clear. You want these people to laugh. That's relaxing for people: "Okay, I only have to do one thing and that's laugh." It's annoying because, when I go to comedy shows, people are laughing at so many things. "Why are you guys laughing so much? Do you actually think this is funny, or just because you know you have to do that?"

Maybe when we started out, we were looking at art from this outsider perspective, asking: "What is this? What are these people doing? Why don't they try harder to make their audience understand something?" Very bluntly: "Well, we should do something very clear."

JM: Maybe we started as some idea of anti-art. There is something that is art and we are not part of it. Maybe that still exists in some things: we have this really strange, destructive name, and the fact that it's not just one person, because you can't do all this stuff that an artist would usually get to do, which is be a stoic supergenius, idol character that everybody worships.

AL: We don't get to do that?

JM: No, we don't get to do that. So, instead, it's just work. I mean, when one of us has an epiphany—"Okay, I'm baby genius idol"—the other is, like, "Stop," or just "No."

AL: A lot of it is us trying to make the other person laugh, then talking about it and thinking about all the angles of why it's funny, and trying to see if those reasons are solid.

JM: A conversation that happens is: "I don't relate to this at all." We're different people with different identities. You can say, "Wow! This really expresses my soul," and the other person can reply, "I don't relate..."

AL: Your soul expression is not interesting to me.

JM: Maybe this is a stretch, but in order to really convince someone of your soul expression, you have to be really aware of them as an audience. You gotta sell it to them. You gotta make them get that your "whatever" is worth anything.

RS: What's interesting with *Entertaining Every Second* is how many different tones there are. Obviously, both your voices are in there—there isn't one uniform voice for Life of a Craphead. Then there is taking on the institution's tone in the panels and a conveyance and an amplification

Life of a Craphead, *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don*, 2017, performance
PHOTO: YUULA BENIVOLSKI; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

of comments made on your practice, as well as the voices behind historical narratives and cultural objects. I'm curious about this exhibition series being itself, so to speak, in response to encounters with these tones. You spoke about audience reaction. Further to that, what do you think of this exhibition being seen as consequential?

AL: Maybe that's the part that I have the most questions about, because so much of the work in the show is: "Here's this novel and here's me writing about the novel. Here's this painting and now we've made a tote bag out of it. Here's this curator telling us that our work isn't funny enough, so here's us telling him off…"

JM: …"I'm a victim" art.

AL: I think the work is not just reactive: it comes from so much other stuff, obviously—everything that we have experienced. But I do wonder about it and I think I'm not really interested in making work like that anymore.

JM: Maybe being an artist is that you figure stuff out in front of everyone, everyone gets to see you make mistakes, you just figure it out. So, in this period, when we're being critical of ourselves, we say that we've made a lot of "poor me" art, which is just a way of making fun of ourselves and pointing at the "reactive" element that's in all that work. But maybe in a positive way we're building a narrative around it that is really easy to understand and it tells our story.

RS: What are some of the underlying processes of the exhibition that are not public but buttress your practice?

JM: If there is any theme of victimhood, I think it is paired with this idea of: "This makes me really mad, I've got to do something about this." I find it very empowering to share with people that making *Find the US Soldier Who Killed Your Grandma* (2018) was motivated by hating the 2016 Ken Burns and Lynn Novick Vietnam War documentary—which is a monument in a way—because it is what most people will watch to learn the history of the American war in Vietnam.

It's this 10-part documentary, praised for being unbiased and fair. When I watched it, it made me so mad. They are all pro-America and pro-soldier stories. Seeing that, and having access to what is missing and not feeling represented, seeing these white people praised for telling their understanding of Vietnamese stories is infuriating. Even in our art circles in Canada, people don't know this stuff. We'll make this work, show it to them and they still won't really get it. Seeing that barrier and thinking about all those things feels very motivating.

RS: Amy, in an earlier conversation about *Entertaining Every Second,* you spoke about uncertainty and how people dodge uncertainty by declaring some easy summary of the project. Could you expand on that?

AL: That thought was coming out of people who see the show and have this pat response: "I know what this is about, I understand the content." And I'm talking about white audiences. This is Jon's family story, not mine. I've learned a lot about the situation and the context [of the war] but I still don't know. I am very aware that I don't have any experience of it, or an embodied experience. When people see the work, or when curators talk about the work in a certain way—"Oh, this is about trauma. Oh, this is about race and identity."—to just put it into these categories feels deflating.

I guess the uncertainty part is that there is this enormous pain and poison in the *Find the US Soldier who Killed Your Grandma* project—at least in us experiencing it. We're looking at the Facebook page of this guy [the soldier] and it is just horrifying. We're reading all these trial documents, containing all this detailed information that is not in the project and that should not be shared at all. By putting some of this information into our work and making it public, in some way, we don't know what that means and we don't know what could happen with that. In terms of a white audience, or presenters who don't have an experience of racialized trauma, saying, "This work is so great. It's about these themes. It's so important..." I mean, yeah, I guess so, but also there's this question of, "Who knows? Is it actually good? Is this actually too much?"

JM: I ask it all the time. Maybe it's exciting because we don't even know. It's new to us and then we put it in an art gallery, and maybe it's new to the audience. "What is an art gallery being used for? What is happening? What is this information exchange?"

AL: I mean, the pain is the piece of art, but there's also the pain that has been there the whole time. It's the pain of that history. Thinking about monuments... this is why people don't make monuments like this, because it's too vulnerable. That's why you show the sealed-off version, so that's safe for people in a way.

Life of a Craphead, installation view from *Entertaining Every Second*, 2019, Centre Clark, Montreal

PHOTO: PAUL LITHERLAND; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND CENTRE CLARK

RS: Briefly back to comedy and audiences; earlier you mentioned watching the film *Get Out* in theatres and noticing white audiences laugh at different parts of the film than black audiences or people of colour. Have you applied this to *Entertaining Every Second*?

AL: I think the clowns that are part of the *Ceilings with Clowns* (2018) sculpture are interesting because that's this audience response thing. We wanted to add clowns to insult [the festival's curator and board], and to remember the experience of proposing a sculpture specifically about racism for a public art festival and then being fired because they didn't like it... What we proposed—the original version of the *Ceilings* sculpture—is a structure that's the "glass ceiling" and the "bamboo ceiling" combined in a checkerboard. And our line was that "you can stand underneath it and feel what it's like to be an Asian woman." The festival said, as part of their reasoning for firing us, "it's not that funny"—so [in subsequent iterations of the sculpture, as shown at Centre Clark] we added clowns. Being fired speaks specifically to what the sculpture is about: that people don't entirely perceive this kind of racism against Asian people.

JM: They enacted the bamboo ceiling.

AL: Because of all these things about anti-Asian racism—like the idea of the model minority—they don't perceive it as an issue. It's not important enough to make a sculpture about, it's not entertaining. When we decided to make the clowns, we weren't thinking that we needed a colourful part to this show that's all about pain and death. We made them as a very sarcastic response to "it's not that funny." And in making them, they became this thing that does something we didn't anticipate. They are not just clowns, they're things that people really like to look at and take pictures of. Specifically, audiences who don't have a personal connection to the work. Why do they feel that they can take pictures of the clowns and put them

Life of a Craphead, *The Quiet American but Only the Parts Where the White Man Main Character Tells the Asian Woman to Do Stuff for Him*, 2018, print on Sintra, 121.9 cm x 243.8 cm

PHOTO: PAUL LITHERLAND; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND CENTRE CLARK

Life of a Craphead, installation view from *Entertaining Every Second*, 2019, Centre Clark, Montreal

PHOTO: PAUL LITHERLAND; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND CENTRE CLARK

online? This response to the aesthetic of the clowns is something that we didn't necessarily prepare for—or anticipate or plan—and it's been a part of the show that makes it this other thing that people can access. In previous iterations of the show—without the clowns—in smaller towns where we didn't know as many people, some people would have a really hard time talking to us. People just didn't know what to say at all.

JM: It's a lesson that we have learned. They look nice. Everyone loves a clown. That's a really fun thing to brag about! We've never made statues before. We've never made those clowns. How did those clowns not turn out bad? Can you imagine never having made three five-foot clowns before and then having to make ones that people like enough that they're not depressed by the story or the context? But just they look at it and they like it? That's hard! That's a really tall order!

RS: You're going into the shiny genius baby form, Jon.

JM: Damn. Wow.

AL: He got you! He got you!

JM: That's the kind of cold, cynical, no-mincing-of-words that I usually get from Amy.

AL: Journalism! Journalism!

Life of a Craphead is the collaboration of **Amy Lam** and **Jon McCurley**. Their work spans performance art, film and curation. The name "Life of a Craphead" comes from the opening joke of the very first live comedy routine they performed together in Toronto in 2006.

Robin Simpson is Public Programs and Education Coordinator at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal, unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory.

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Life of a Craphead at Centre Clark, Montreal

I heard raves about **Life of a Craphead**'s exhibition at **Centre Clark** before seeing it: "raw and funny", "best art show in ages", and, my favourite, "can't stop crying and thinking everyone else can just stop making art now." I'll join the gush-chorus here. *Entertaining Every Second* offers brilliant, searing, and healing responses to anti-Asian racism in French colonial history, US military history, 20th Century British literature, and, uncomfortably close to home, Canadian art and its institutions.

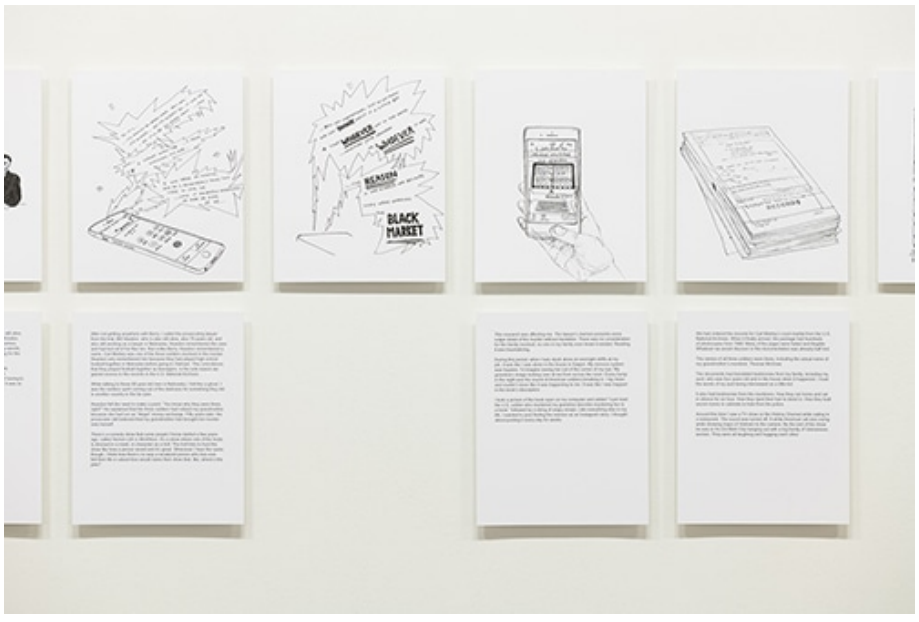
Life of a Craphead (aka **Amy Lam** and **Jon McCurley**) position their work cautiously in relation to comedy. With backgrounds in performance, theatre, and writing, they pull off sharply critical work with sensitivity, wisdom, and the lightest of comedic touches. Punchlines for them are titles, prompts, or starting points for artistic research. The comedian's imperative to reach audiences is first announced in the exhibition's winking title taken from Korean-American artist Nam June Paik's lament: "I am a poor man from a poor country so I have to be entertaining every second." Aside from this sympathetic dialogue with Paik, most of the show's interlocutors are targets of criticism.

The installation *Ceilings with Clowns* illustrates an expression for obstacles to Asian women's advancement in the workplace. Three contorted clown sculptures are squeezed in between the gallery's ceiling and a glass and bamboo one. The work responds to comments made by curators at an art fair in a small town in Ontario who felt that the pair's proposal to make a "bamboo and glass ceiling" was "not that funny." Lam and McCurley added clowns to satisfy the demand, and a cheeky didactic panel instructing us to stand under the work to "feel what it's like to be an Asian woman." A little like Carolee Schneeman's decision to literally internalize a dismissive review of one of her films in *Interior Scroll*, the work incorporates the jury's remarks while setting up a powerful metaphor for the struggles of intersectional feminists.

Life of a Craphead, *Making Something Positive out of Chris Cran's Painting "Self-Portrait with Combat Nymphos of Saigon"* (1985), ongoing project, *Beautiful Tote Bag* (2018), *Beautiful Casual Shoes* (2019) (photo: Paul Litherland)

Lam and McCurley carry on their irreverent conversation with art-world authority in *Making Something Positive out of Chris Cran's Painting 'Self-Portrait with Combat Nymphos of Saigon'* (1985). Once again, their play with signs is pointed. A vinyl print of the Canadian painter with a wooden gun and fedora amid half-naked Vietnamese women in a swampy war zone is cut into bits to make the shoes and tote bag on a nearby plinth. It's hard to not read a connotation of race in the white spaces left by the cut-outs, and in the squeaky clean prêt-à-porter by-products of what McCurley describes as a hurtful painting that is likely the best-known one in Canada of Vietnamese women.

Whereas the above pieces show an impressive fluency with visual signs and a gift for troubling them, the writing in the exhibition ranges from hilarious and well-researched polemics to affecting personal testimony. A copy of British author Graham Greene's novel about love and war in Vietnam, *The Quiet American*, languishes in the middle of the gallery with well-worn Post-It notes marking passages where the story's female character Phuong carries out tasks for American and British men. Large text panels mock the book from across the room. Between little chili pepper icons of the kind seen in restaurant menus, summaries of Greene's misogyny are interspersed with gorgeous, indignant, and probing writing meant to restore the depth of experience denied to Phuong in the book. Lam here writes as a "sister" to Greene's silenced character, but also to countless literary and artistic stereotypes of "Oriental" women from Cran's "combat nymphos" to Flaubert's "Kuchuk Hanem."



Life of a Craphead, *Find the U.S. Soldier Who Killed Your Grandma* (detail) (photo: Paul Litherland)

The exhibition's masterpiece is surely *Find the U.S. Soldier Who Killed Your Grandma*, a memoir hung in mostly paired panels of drawings and text across three walls. It follows the pair's intrepid search in Canada, the US, and Vietnam with clues gathered online, from family, by phone, and in national archives for the soldier who murdered McCurley's grandmother and served only a few years for the crime. Conceived as an app for the Kitchener-Waterloo arts festival, the initial plan was to find the house of the soldier and take a photo in front of it. But as the search "went sideways," the duo documented all its twists and turns, its chilling encounters with lawyers, heart-warming episodes involving family, and serendipitous discoveries in the press and in books. The traumatic impact of the story is mediated for readers by illustrations of the many documents, webpages, and social media profiles viewed on screens along the way. In a painstakingly copied page from the US Army daily Stars and Stripes about a "Private Sentenced to 5 Yrs. for Unplanned Murder of Girl," the very ritual of recording research tools and materials in drawings comes across as therapeutic – a way of pausing mournfully on forgotten injustices of the war in Vietnam.

I'll leave the conclusion of the story out of this review so as not to spoil it, and end instead with requests for the artists to turn this piece into a book (because I badly want a copy), and for anyone who can make it to Centre Clark to go see this treasure of a show.

Life of a Craphead: Entertaining Every Second continues until April 6.
Centre Clark: http://centreclark.com/en
The gallery is accessible.

Tammer El-Sheikh is a writer and teacher based in Montreal. His art criticism has appeared in Parachute, Canadian Art, ETC and C Magazine.

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Toronto

Dumping statue in the Don River a statement about colonialism, performance artists say

Equestrian statue of Edward VII has been standing in Queen's Park since 1969

Makda Ghebreslassie · CBC News · Posted: Oct 29, 2017 6:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: October 29, 2017

A replica equestrian statue of King Edward VII floats down the Don River during a weekly performance by art duo Life Of A Craphead in Toronto, Ontario, Canada October 29, 2017. (Chris Helgren/Reuters)

As the debate continues over whether statues of colonial leaders should have a place in today's world, a new Toronto performance art project is diving into the conversation by dumping the equestrian statue of King Edward VII into the Don River ... well, a replica, anyway.

"It's designed to float like the statue has been toppled. It's a bit submerged," said Amy Lam of the performance art group Life of a Craphead.

Lam and her partner Jon McCurley will send a life-size version of the bronze statue, made of styrofoam and wood, down the Don River on Sunday afternoon.

The performance is titled *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don River.* It follows controversies in the United States about **Confederate monuments**, and in Halifax about the statue of Edward Cornwallis, the governor of Nova Scotia who issued the so-called scalping proclamation, offering a cash bounty to anyone who killed a Mi'kmaq person.

- **'Offensive and disgraceful': Protesters cheer as City of Halifax shrouds Cornwallis statue**

Statue came to Toronto from India in 1969

Lam said they were inspired by the discovery of some historical facts about British royalty, including how the real equestrian statue of King Edward VII found a home at Queen's Park.

It came to Toronto back in 1969 after India, eager to shed signs of British rule, got rid of it.

Performance artist group Life of a Craphead poses in front of the King Edward VII equestrian statue at Queens Park. The duo will be sending a replica of the statue down the Don River. (Yuula Benivolski)

Then there was the story involving Princess Margaret's visit to Toronto in 1958, and the desire not to offend her with the nasty odour emanating from the Don River.

"The river smelled so bad because it was so polluted that city officials decided to mask the smell by putting perfume into the river," Lam said.

By dumping the statue's replica into the river, Lam hopes to spark conversations.

"What are the forces of settler colonialism that have changed Toronto and that have changed this river?" she asked.

"Those same forces are kind of embodied in this King Edward statue."

'Toronto as a colonial city'

This project is the latest offering from the Don River Valley Park Art Program, presented by Evergreen, the city of Toronto and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

A statue of Edward Cornwallis stands facing England - with his back to Halifax - in Cornwallis Park. (Canadian Press)

Curator Kari Cwynar says the dumping of the replica statue in the river sheds light on "the way that the Don River has been changed and polluted through industry and the building of Toronto as a colonial city."

She said the statue will float down the river from Riverdale Park and south over the course of three hours.

You can catch the performance on Sunday afternoons between 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on the following days:

- Oct. 29
- Nov. 5
- Nov. 12
- Nov. 19

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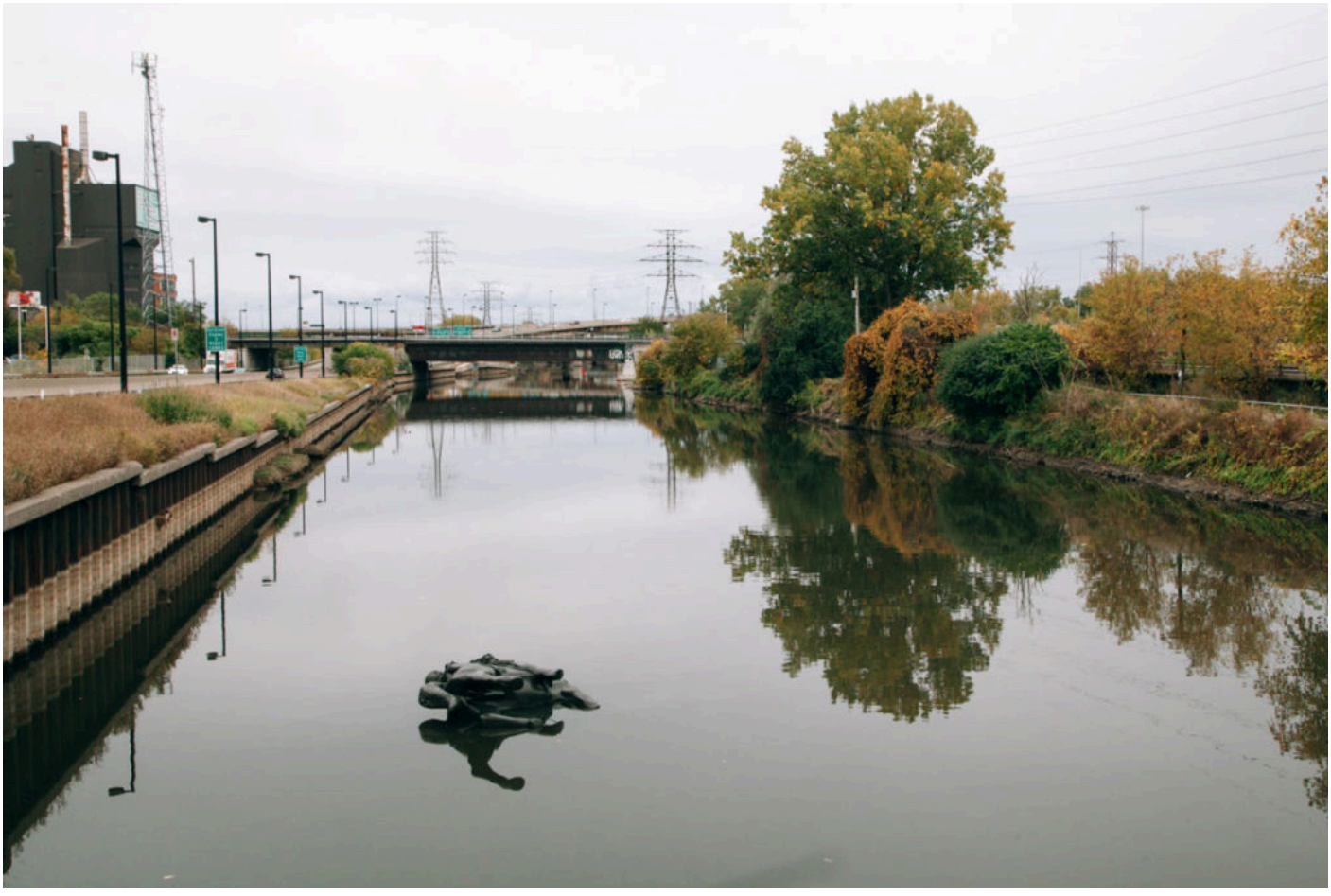
NEWS / NOVEMBER 15, 2017

White Supremacists Target Anti-Monument Performance

White supremacists recently made an appearance at Life of a Craphead's Toronto performance



by Merray Gerges

For four Sundays this fall, Toronto performance duo Life of a Craphead—consisting of Amy Lam and Jon McCurley—have been dumping a life-size replica of a 15-foot bronze statue of King Edward VII on horseback into the Don River, and letting it float down the river. The performance reckons with the ongoing glorification of colonial genocide in public monuments, and it does so at a moment when such monuments' relevance is being called into question. (This particular monument was erected in colonial India in 1922, was moved to Toronto's Queen's Park in 1969, and still bears a plaque stating "The Emperor of India.")

Accordingly, Lam and McCurley's performance has received wide attention, most recently in the *Toronto Star* and *CBC*.

This past Sunday, however, the performance also attracted attention from three white supremacists, who showed up at 1 p.m., as the November 12 performance was starting. They filmed the project. They also approached artist Amy Lam, among others, to ask questions about "European-Canadian identity."

Lam refused to engage them, as did several other artists in the audience.

"It's so ridiculous...that they talk to people about European civilization as if it's not a genocidal motive that they have," Lam says in an interview. "It's already a struggle to be an artist of colour and make this kind of public art. There's the work itself, and then now here's this additional burden."

"I think that it was very effective to ignore them and walk away from them—they weren't aggressive," Lam says. "But they also shouldn't be given a pass as 'debaters about European civilization' because that is their front; that is not what they're actually talking about."

The three men were later identified as possibly being members of a group called "Students for Western Civilization." On its website, the group closely identifies its cause of white nationalism with the glorification of local monuments; their latest poster campaign shows white men standing next to three Toronto monuments juxtaposed with the slogans "Europa Forever" and "Europa Eternal," among others. (Such art-historical imagery is now fairly common among white nationalist groups.) The group has also been posting news items about Lam and McCurley's project on its Facebook page.

"They filmed the main guy walking up to the [Don River] bridge and looking at the statue floating down [the river] sorrowfully," said artist Yuula Benivolski. "It was kind of pathetic."

After the incident, Benivolski posted photographs of the white supremacists on her personal Facebook page to make others aware of the intimidation attempt.

But both Lam and Benivolski hope recent events won't keep audiences away from the performance's next, and final, iteration on Sunday, November 19.

"It was upsetting what happened ... but it is also upsetting if the story that circulates is that these people are going to return and fuck with you," says Lam.

Fear, after all, is what many white supremacists have been hoping to sow in Toronto and elsewhere. And Lam wants to make sure that is tempered; otherwise, "I feel like it could actually have a detrimental effect on our performance and the work itself."

"The media narrative of white supremacists—these scary men with fascist haircuts—it's what they want, right?" Lam added. "They want to portray this image of being totally fearsome, like they're like the most evil people on the planet."

Lam is hoping, and hopeful, that audiences will still turn out this coming Sunday.

Such support is essential in an era when many Canadians still remain unaware of the increased activities of white supremacist groups across the country. Of late, there has been a spate of white nationalist postering at campuses, for instance, with vicious online backlash when these posters are taken down.

"When I told someone that it happened, they were like, 'Oh, I didn't know that they existed here,'" says Lam. "And I was like, 'What? No! Of course they do."

So while the artist doesn't want to sensationalize the white nationalists' action, she does want to acknowledge it.

"It is worthy to talk about in the sense that they are being more active," says Lam. "And who is going to stand up to them?"

Curator Kari Cwynar, who has curated the King Edward VII project and other public art programs for Evergreen, said in a statement that "our primary concern is ensuring that artists and audience members are safe, and feel safe attending the performance."

As a result, on November 19, Evergreen will "have increased staff presence at the performance to ensure [safety], and a security plan."

"The performance has so far been poetic and challenging and funny," Cwynar adds, "and well-loved by audience members; these individuals' presence won't overshadow its success."

Merray Gerges
Merray Gerges writes around art rather than about it. She studied art history at NSCAD and journalism at King's in Halifax, where she co-founded and co-edited *CRIT*, a free biannual criticism publication. Her reporting and criticism have appeared in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *MOMUS, Hyperallergic* and more, addressing issues ranging from the radical potential (and shortcomings) of intersectional feminist memes and art selfies, to art-world race politics. At *Canadian Art*, she was editorial resident in 2016, and assistant editor from 2017 to 2019. She's currently the editorial fellow at *C Magazine*.

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REVIEWS / APRIL 19, 2013

Life of a Craphead Has Fun with Fiction at the AGO

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto March 27 to May 5, 2013

Life of a Craphead *Producing Commercials at a Media Arts Residency* 2012 (Appended text: "We used a government-funded artist residency at a Media Arts facility to make commercial web content for Skittles. We produced a series of interactive videos for the Skittles "Experience the Rainbow" social media campaign under the direction of the advertising agency BBDO Toronto.") Courtesy the artists

by Sam Cotter

One Saturday afternoon in early March, I boarded a school bus parked outside the Art Gallery of Ontario at the behest of Toronto performance duo Life of a Craphead. The bus was full, though no one was quite sure what our participation in this project entailed; we only knew we were headed to a private golf course in Mississauga and should dress warmly and expect a relatively fun time. As the bus departed, Jon McCurley and Amy Lam—the artists that comprise Life of a Craphead—began to explain their intentions. We were told we were travelling to the year 2020 to play "yelf," a sport they are to invent that year.

McCurley stressed the need for secrecy in getting to the location while distributing hand-drawn maps of the convoluted route. We were told to walk in pairs, keeping talk to a minimum, as we slipped past a nunnery, through a wooded area, across a hydro field and finally down a steep embankment to the golf course. "Don't even look at the nunnery," McCurley warned, "what we're doing is *extra*-legal; if anyone asks you what you're doing, just tell them it's a project for the AGO." Taking liberties with their temporary institutional association (they were artists-in-residence at the AGO at the time) we set out.

When the 40-or-so participants assembled on the fairway, we were told to play a modified version of tag that focused on "deviousness" and yelling the word "yelf" as we raced over snow-covered sand traps. Within a few minutes of arriving, we were producing enough noise that any previous measures to hide our presence were rendered null. Further, this fairly elaborate excursion, requiring considerable coordination and planning, was done to produce a single 4-by-6-inch photograph which was attached to a caption in the artists' current exhibition at the AGO. Let this possibly futile and strange excursion be a preface into the often backward, offhand, absurd-yet-somehow-poignant logic at the heart of Life of a Craphead.

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Lam and McCurley have been presenting work as Life of a Craphead since 2006. They began working in what seemed like comedy's equivalent of Arte Povera, a dematerialized and potentially dangerous assemblage of ideas and gestures that challenge the very genetics of humour. Since then, their practice has expanded through performance, film, installation, theatre, sculpture, social sculpture and intervention, producing irreverent, deceptively naïve and always entertaining works.

There is a strange degree of translation in bringing these DIY, no-permit-no-problem antics out of independent art spaces (such as Kensington Market's Double Double Land, where they host their monthly comedy/performance night) and into the city's largest art institution. In declaring their current exhibition—located in the basement hallway that is the AGO's Weston Family Learning Centre Community Gallery—to be a 50-year (2006 to 2056) "retrospective," Lam and McCurley fully embrace this new context, repeatedly overemphasizing its grandeur through an elongated joke-cum-critique.

The exhibition is made up of captioned photographs that document projects executed throughout their "50-year" career.

Among the "early work" in the exhibition is *Free Lunch* (2007), a project in which they used money from a small grant to purchase of one of each item on the menu of a local Chinese restaurant and provided free lunch for anyone who saw their classified listing or visited by chance. Also from 2007 is *Musical Road*, a project that entailed Lam and McCurley dressing as construction workers and using an industrial concrete saw to cut a series of lines into the surface of Yonge Street. They claim that the vibration produced by cars driving over this obstruction creates music, and that thereby the work is a public service.

In these and other projects executed before 2013, the photographs function in a familiar way: they stand in for the dematerialized happenings and actions, acting as a record rather than an objet d'art.

When we look to works allegedly produced between 2013 and 2056, the relationship between the photographs and the actions becomes less clear, at times seeming like an inversion. There is an implication that—for the purpose of this exhibition—actions depicted in the future are staged to produce the photographs, thereby substituting constructions for documents. As we enter the sliding temporal scale Life of a Craphead lays out for us, we see its already present interest in art-and-commerce relations grow and, around the year 2025, shift towards an examination of object-oriented practice.

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The first of the projects in the retrospective that fully embraces this new ideology is *There's a Better One in the Shed* (2025), a project for which the duo will ostensibly produce (or, in this time-warping show, has ostensibly produced) two large sculptures. There is, of course, a catch—only the poorer of the two sculptures is allowed to be exhibited, standing bumpy and bulbous in the gallery and staring at visitors with its crudely rendered face. Meanwhile, the second sculpture—a smooth and polished-looking work—must be housed in a nearby shed. Visitors to this work will be unable to find satisfaction in the gallery knowing that there is a better sculpture in the shed.

By 2032, Life of a Craphead proposes a move to a more radical foil for art-commerce systems. With *Drugs in Our Stuff*, they alienate almost all potential markets for its works by adding illegal substances to all costumes and props from past performances. Anyone wishing to buy these artifacts will have to sign a legally binding document that simultaneously acknowledges they are purchasing drugs and so guarantees they will be punished by law (provided that Canada's drug laws don't get considerably more lax in the next 19 years, of course).

In 2056, Lam and McCurley will supposedly emancipate themselves from Life of a Craphead forever through *The Good Towel*. In this work, they replace themselves with an object, declaring that they are no longer physical representations of Life of a Craphead and completing a cycle from total dematerialization to pure plasticity. The object, *The Good Towel,* is an apparently ordinary towel, though it is housed in a protective humidifying cabinet and wheeled to speaking engagements by handlers.

Strangely, these "future" works seem both refreshing and familiar—particularly in the context of the AGO, where in their own early works and performances General Idea also played with the boundaries between DIY and high-art, past and present, fame and failure to the effect of both elaborating and confounding an antagonistic relationship with the museum. GI's construction of elaborate fictions in works such as the *Miss General Idea Pageant*—and the tensions between those and more present realities—also came to mind.

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Overall, Life of a Craphead's self-appointed retrospective offers a somewhat dizzying and chaotic deadpan series of critiques; Lam and McCurley dissect and baffle small parcels of art-world logic through a series of roundabout excursions, experiments and gags. The form of the exhibition—a constant negotiation of image and caption through past, present, and future—leaves intentional blanks that keep viewers at arm's length, uncertain whether they are included or excluded from the joke.

The exhibition's wall texts seem to engage most directly with its anomalous presence in the AGO's basement. The introductory panel begins: "Yo, before you is a lifetime of work from the exciting performance art group Life of a Craphead" and goes on to say "for half a century they have been trying to get people into their sense of humour. If you've never heard of Life of a Craphead, you're in the right hallway."

The artists' informal tone—they also provide their phone numbers and ask visitors to text them feedback directly, sidestepping the museum—and put-on juvenility in these exhibition writings seem as out of place as their art does in the pristine institution. They acknowledge the fiction of their retrospective by openly admitting the exhibition is in an out-of-the way hallway—yet there are also incongruous signifiers of grandeur and importance, like the large, honorific portraits of Lam and McCurley that flank a giant all-caps wall text that reads "Life of a Craphead."

These signifiers of authenticity lead to moments of suspended disbelief for viewers as the duo's fiction becomes, indeed, a reality.

Sam Cotter