

ART

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The videos and artifacts of the installation are disturbing both for the stories her relatives relate about working conditions and pay, and because they clearly reveal that this is not a thing of the past but, for many contemporary Chinese immigrants, a clear and present reality.

Trump's demonization of Chinese people and the anti-Asian violence it continues to provoke is but a modern-day echo of the many historical humiliations Yu's relatives faced. There are T-shirts printed with copies of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law to restrict immigration to appease white paranoia about Chinese workers taking their jobs (absurd on its face since only 0.002% of the population in 1882 was Chinese). A wallet bulges with official documents family members had to carry on them to prove their immigration status and allegiance to America. Other ephemera document the establishment of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance to fight discrimination.

Sabrina Gschwandtner contributes a "video quilt" called "Hands at Work." The screen is populated with a grid of triangles onto which are projected 16mm and 35mm archival film clips of women doing a variety of tasks related to textile production and handwork: braiding straw, loom weaving, rolling bolts of fabric, sewing, knitting, trapunto stitching, threading a needle and so on. These appear in triangles that are interspersed among triangles of plain color; the grid configuration regularly changing throughout the loop of the video.

The work is not politically charged in the way Yu's installation is – at least not on the surface. Yet if we consider the unsafe, poorly ventilated factory conditions under which many of these women labored, as well as implications of textile technologies such as repetitive motion disorder, the piece gains a certain portent.

As the credits roll at the end, the colored triangles are filled with the products of handwork, such as actual quilts. It made me wish Gschwandtner had started this at the beginning and continued it throughout the film rather than using plain colors. This element not only adds to the visual richness of the piece, but also imparts deeper resonance by acknowledging the beauty of what women produced throughout time.

Centrally placed in the



Photos by Carolyn Wachnicki

Suspended from the ceiling, "Iran Si Iran" (2019), by Eniola Dawodu, is at the center of the "Punctures" installation at Space Gallery.

gallery and commanding a large sculptural presence is Eniola Dawodu's "Iran Si Iran," which means "generation to generation" in Yoruba, a language of southwestern Nigeria. An artist and costume designer, Dawodu honors African textiles and the women who have created them for centuries. The piece, suspended from the ceiling, is made of synthetic hair fibers woven in collaboration with Wolof coiffure artists of Dakar, Senegal, and Majak weavers in a neighborhood of the city called Fass Canal 4.

Placed underneath it is a simple wooden stool where viewers are encouraged to sit. I highly recommend doing this, as suddenly the sculpture becomes a kind of enormous ceremonial headdress. The sense I had as I sat on the stool, my head grazing the woven fibers, was one of powerful transmission. It was as if I could connect somehow through time to the awe-inspiring spirit of these weavers. I'm not sure what the digital film connection is in this piece, if indeed there is one. But it really didn't matter as I sat there, goosebumps spreading over my skin and chills rising in my spine.

The digital film connection seems obvious in Cecilia Vicuña's "La Noche de las Especies." It is, after all, a video projected onto a wall of a dark space at the back of the gallery. But for those unfamiliar with this artist's work, it's the textile connection that will be unfathomable. Vicuña is a Chilean poet and multidisciplinary artist whose oeuvre, in the words of art

historian Roberto Tejada, "at its very essence is 'a way of remembering.'"

For Vicuña, words are vehicles for giving voice to what has been forgotten or remains unsaid. Further, she sees a connection between word and thread. For years she has made this explicit in her explorations of quipu, an ancient Incan system of recording information by making various types of knots in different colored threads. Words and quipu, then, are both languages that bring into manifestation what is unmanifest. Hence an implied, though not apparent, connection between digital film and fiber handwork.

"Especies" began as graphite drawings composed of words that were then digitized and made into video animations resembling plankton and microscopic marine life. The letters float across the screen slowly, but their varying type sizes and the ways they enter and leave the frame require us to wait patiently to reveal the phrases they spell out: "Hilos vivos" (live threads), "Suelo submarino" (sea floor), "Vivos al viento" (alive in the wind), "Pelo sensor y discos anemonas" (referring to the sensory hairs of sea anemones), "Membranas nictitantes" (nictitating membranes that protect the inner eye, such as those we see in fish or birds). In this way, the video seems to be evoking the creation of life, which evolutionists theorize originated with aquatic micro-organisms that emerged from deep-sea hydrothermal vents. In this light, the experience of the

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Punctures: Textiles in Digital and Material Time"
WHERE: Space, 538 Congress St., Portland
WHEN: Through July 3
HOURS: 2-4 p.m. Thursday and Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Saturday
ADMISSION: Free
INFO: 207-828-5600, space538.org

promulgated through media. A memorable snippet shows a woman impersonating Charlie Chaplin over which we hear a conversation about same-sex attraction from the movie "Victor Victoria."

"Everything I Say is True" exhibits elements of a performance piece by Oglala Lakota artist Suzanne Kite. One wishes the videos here were actually of the performance piece itself, which involved recitation of a poem about various inhumanities perpetrated against Native Americans while the videos here were projected onto Kite as she danced in the dress on display. It is a lot to ask the viewer to put all these elements – dress, poem, videos – together in their minds. As with any conceptual art show, of course, doing it justice requires much longer than the half-hour slots one must reserve for viewing.

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Cecilia Vicuña's "La Noche de las Especies."

60-minute video becomes a moving, meditative origin story.

There are other

works too: A video and "trans-fashion" garment by Charlie Best that challenge the binary view of sexuality

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THEATER

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of those with whom he has come in contact.

It seems the Man was visited by the mysterious Stranger who promised a new way of life, if only he can convince the townsfolk to relinquish their old ways and follow him. It's a tempting plan that begins to work, until the circumstances get a little sticky and the Stranger loses patience.

The play concocts a complex brew of fear, alienation and manipulation for the story of someone pushed to the edge of his community in more ways than one. Through vernacular versifying and soulful singing, Lee excels at bringing this imaginative play home while still leaving big questions for the audience to decide before they vote at the close.

Should an understanding of how people can be driven to extremes lead us to forgiveness? How important is personal responsibility to community cohesiveness? Are we also judging ourselves when we judge others? There are many angles to consider in this thought-provoking play.

The minimal set design by Anita Stewart and lighting design by Jamie Grant bring an atmosphere to the



Photo by Mical Hutson

Tracy Conyer Lee plays the Man in "Where We Stand" at Portland Stage.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Where We Stand," written by Donnetta Lavinia Grays, directed by Kevin R. Free, starring Tracey Conyer Lee
WHERE: Portland Stage, 25A Forest Ave., Portland
REVIEWED: May 23; continues live through June 6, digital on demand June 2-20
TICKETS: \$35-\$63 (discounts available) for live performance; digital starting at \$25
CONTACT: 207-774-0465, portlandstage.org

story that is both deep-rooted and magical. Colorful light sculptures by Pandora LaCasse, familiar to those

who visit the nighttime streets of Portland, adorn the stage and the ceiling above the audience, coming on and off at appropriate intervals.

A certain immediacy to the experience of the play was sacrificed to the requirements of social distancing and mask wearing in place on opening night (pre-pandemic productions elsewhere had the Man coming into the aisles of the theater and addressing people up close, one on one). But, with enchanting lyricism and a bit of visual dazzle, this production renews an appreciation for theater that can be both entertaining and ask tough questions.

Steve Feeny is a freelance writer who lives in Portland.

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