

# CHINATOWN

# BEYOND THE STREETS

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TOMIE ARAI  
**PORTRAITS OF NEW YORK  
CHINATOWN**

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ANNIE LING  
**A FLOATING POPULATION**

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**DECEMBER 13, 2013 – APRIL 13, 2014**

MUSEUM  
OF  
CHINESE  
IN  
AMERICA

## CHINATOWN: BEYOND THE STREETS

As with any neighborhood designation, the term 'Chinatown' signals a set of associations that can be misleading and one-dimensional. But storefronts cannot tell the full story of a neighborhood, and in fact, they can sometimes betray a hidden truth. For example, Mulberry Street is generally understood to be the center of Little Italy (and the Italian restaurants on the street level would seem to prove that) but Chinese residents occupy many of the tenement apartments above. However, nobody really thinks Mulberry Street between Canal and Broome Street should, for this fact, be called 'Chinatown'.

In civic life, names of streets, neighborhoods and institutions matter because they describe an intangible - the ambition and strength of a community - as much as a physical reality.

MOCA has changed its name several times in its history, from the original Chinatown History Project to the Museum of Chinese in the Americas to our current name, Museum of Chinese in America. The name revisions reflect not only a shift in what we think we do at a certain moment, but also changes happening around the community of the museum. Hopefully these name changes speak to our awareness of the dramatic structural and demographic shifts happening around the museum and how we hope to represent and serve our communities in light of those shifts.

The notion of change is a key concept of the museum's work. In the early 1980s, historian Jack Tchen and community activist Charlie Lai noticed how so many laundry businesses in Manhattan's Chinatown were shutting down due to expiring long-term leases, their histories lost in trash dumps. They also recognized that a generation of Chinese men that immigrated to America without their families in the late 19th and early 20th century would pass away without family members to keep their memories alive. Jack and Charlie founded the Chinatown History Project to preserve material and stories

that were in danger of being forgotten in a rapidly changing neighborhood.

Manhattan's Chinatown has continued to change since the 1980s due in no small part to the rise of Chinese enclaves in Queens and Brooklyn, increased immigration from Fujian province, real estate development within Chinatown and in bordering neighborhoods, and a host of other factors. Today's Chinatown is diverse and dynamic, and MOCA remains committed to telling the untold stories of this community before they are lost and forgotten.

Through projects by artists Annie Ling and Tomie Arai, we attempt to look beyond the streets into the interior life of Chinatown, its domestic spaces and collective memory. Throughout its history, MOCA has consistently engaged contemporary artists to help give voice to the untold stories in our Chinese American communities. Though Annie and Tomie differ in their approaches to image production, art making and materiality, they share a deep concern for social engagement and community cooperation that is also at the heart of MOCA's mission.

I would like to acknowledge my predecessor, Cynthia Lee, and MOCA's founder and past executive director Charlie Lai for having the foresight to commission Tomie Arai's project in 2008. Special thanks to scholar Lena Sze for writing an insightful piece that perfectly captures why Annie and Tomie's exhibitions are so critical now. And of course, thank you to Annie Ling and Tomie Arai whose dedication to their art and humanity towards their subjects is a model for our own work.

### Herb Tam

Curator and Director of Exhibitions



## MAKE IT MEMORY, MAKE IT NOW: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CHANGE

In 2007, artist Tomie Arai and I began work on a project for the Museum of Chinese in America entitled *Archeology of Change: Tales of Gentrification from Manhattan's Chinatown*<sup>1</sup>. Conducting oral histories and workshops with people who lived and labored in greater Chinatown, we sought stories about how the place had changed, memories of the neighborhood's past rhythms and present character, and opinions about its future transformations. In other words, rather than understand "gentrification" as an abstract concept, we wanted a sense of the riotous, polyglot, and complex set of histories that made Manhattan's Chinatown such a storied neighborhood to begin with.

The larger context for our project, of course, was the intensified gentrification of the last two decades across the city<sup>2</sup>. Since 2002, official city planners have completed nearly 125 re-zonings, constituting a massive, albeit piecemeal, transformation of the city. Many long-time New Yorkers have felt a distinct shift of neighborhood culture for better or for worse. Arai's work speaks to these apparently contradictory impulses: on one hand, the well-orchestrated repositioning

By mining neighborhood oral histories, she is interested in complicating familiar gentrification narratives and tropes, and does so by offering Chinatown's "structure of feeling" across several decades<sup>4</sup>. What, then, does it mean both to crystallize the textures of place described by oral history narrators who live or work in that place; and to piece together those fragments to construct something entirely different or new? *Portraits of New York Chinatown* presents a faux



of New York's economy and culture toward global city and financial service functions<sup>3</sup>; and on the other hand, by the dis-junctures, tensions and pleasures, inherent to urban change experienced by people everyday. Arai offers a visual language for this change and, paralleling this contradiction, her pieces simultaneously present a seamless story of a neighborhood experiencing gentrification wholly and a partial or incomplete set of perspectives.

or alternative historical record, based on actual experiences, histories, and events, but reimagined by Arai as a composite set of maps, people (or "characters"), and sites. Immersed in the details of the affordable housing crisis, of luxury redevelopment proceeding at a seemingly unchecked pace, and of stories of evictions and displacements, Arai wades through this sea of experiences and perceptions to assert that memory, or a historical feeling, of place is never

finished or complete, but nonetheless an urgent thing in these fast-moving times.

The material onto which Arai's portraits are printed is wood. As she has noted, it is a medium that inherently suggests motion and transformation because it contains the natural patterns of growth and change. Likewise, Arai's artistic approach both pulls back broadly and draws up close, showing at once the city's overall trajectory toward a more gentrified condition and Chinatown's own particulars: its sub-geographies, a variety of important institutional and personal place markers, and the faces of people who make it a place worth remembering and struggling over.

Combining a rare awareness of self and of MOC's own role in the neighborhood's makeover (part of the original impetus for our project),

Arai condenses the fragments of oral histories into something we might consider, pick up, interact with, retrace. Not, she would remind us, something final or definitive, but open-ended: a work-in-progress, much like the neighborhood itself.

Both Tomie Arai and photographer Annie Ling are concerned with the interplay between public and private, the traffic between the streetscape and the most personal of Chinatown's places (interiors, families, private memories). Ling spends her energy in *A Floating Population*, however, really taking time to linger in apartments, shaftways, hallways, roofs, windows—the interstitial spaces that most one-time visitors to the neighborhood simply do not see.



I first encountered Ling's work a few years ago in *The New York Times* where her project documenting the lives of the residents of 81 Bowery, a single room occupancy (SRO) hotel, was featured<sup>5</sup>. A curious thing about her photographs, though, is that they are not strictly documentary. The photographs focus on the objects and moments, the silence and the noise of daily life in a Chinatown SRO, rather than on its conditions *per se*. In abstracting these lives, she imbues them with new meaning and significance: the stills of the frozen TV screen, the calendars, the slippers, the plants, the blankets, the dressers. In doing so, she takes Chinatown and the people photographed seriously, foregrounding populations normally left to the periphery or cropped out of quick shots of Mott or Pell Streets.

The residents of 81 Bowery are not alone in their struggle to stay in their neighborhood. In Chinatown and all across the city in fact, long-time pressures to shut SROs as neighborhoods have "upscaled" have left many immigrant, migrant, and retired workers on the brink of homelessness even while there's a flurry of hotel development, often branded or boutique, nearby<sup>6</sup>. The particular tenants of 81 Bowery have not been a quiet bunch, however, as they have worked with CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, a local anti-gentrification group, on a campaign to reestablish their tenure.



Because the subtext for the "81 Bowery" series is the loudness: of confrontation, of many people living in cramped quarters, of the traffic below as tenants lie on the fire-escape, it's particularly fascinating to see these photographs alongside those of the "Shut-ins" series. Ling carefully presents in these photographs the rhythms of those aging in place<sup>7</sup>. The growth of aging, senior, and elderly populations of Manhattan's Chinatown is a quiet story unfolding that is not particularly flashy or much discussed, but absolutely critical to the neighborhood's future: Who is to care for them now? What is to happen to that housing stock when they pass away? Who in time will be Chinatown's new residents and workers?

Not long ago while walking through the ruins of homes in central Shanghai designated for demolition and redevelopment by the government, I came upon a pair of shoes covered in dust, a change of clothes folded neatly nearby, and a toothbrush on top, evidence perhaps of

a migrant worker's use of these half-raised buildings. While rooted in a specific place, Ling's photographs of well-worn sneakers covered in white dust, of cups of toothbrushes, and her shots of life lived as people make do in dignified ways with what they have could, then, be set anywhere, in any place—like Chinatown—that is rapidly changing.

The Chinatowns of *A Floating Population and Portraits*. Here is a community in its politics: public, private, and something in-between. Offering momentary access to

other internal worlds, to the lived spaces of Chinatown, and to the memories that drive our actions, Arai and Ling reveal to a larger public what many of us (those from the neighborhood anyway) find both known and new.

## Lena Sze

A cultural worker and poet, Lena Sze is completing a dissertation in American Studies at New York University entitled, "Made in Manhattan: Industrial Retention Advocacy, Neighborhood Change, and New Forms of Creative Production, 1993-2013."

1 From 2007 to 2008, Arai and I conducted approximately thirty oral history interviews, arranged meetings, and conducted workshops with a variety of people from the neighborhood for Archeology of Change. Arai subsequently conducted ten additional or follow-up interviews, with plans to conduct more during the exhibition run for an evolving digital archive.

2 <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/rezonings/index.shtml>

3 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991/2001).

4 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

5 [http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/ousted-by-the-city-tenants-look-for-a-home/?\\_r=0](http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/ousted-by-the-city-tenants-look-for-a-home/?_r=0)

6 CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities/Urban Justice Center, "Converting Chinatown: A Snapshot of a Neighborhood Becoming Unaffordable and Unlivable." (New York: December 2008).

7 Asian American Federation of New York, "Asian American Elders in New York City: A Study of Health, Social Needs, Quality of Life and Quality of Care." (New York: February 2003).





## **PORTRAITS OF CHINATOWN NEW YORK**

### **ABOUT THE ARTIST: TOMIE ARAI**

Tomie Arai is an artist, curator, and community activist who was born and raised in New York City. She has exhibited extensively across the U.S. and abroad, including at the Museum of Modern Art, PS1 Museum/Institute of Contemporary Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, and the de Beyer Museum, the Netherlands. Tomie has been the recipient of numerous public art commissions for sites across the country, including in New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Seattle. Among other awards and grants, Arai received the Anonymous Was A Woman Award in 1997, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant Award in 1994, the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship for Works on Paper in 1993, and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship for Printmaking in 1991.



## **A FLOATING POPULATION**

### **ABOUT THE ARTIST: ANNIE LING**

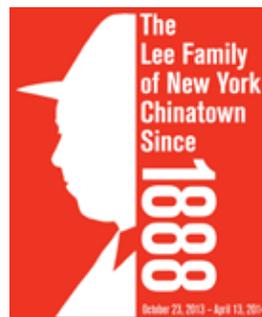
Born in Taipei, Annie Ling is a Canadian artist and documentary photographer based in New York City. Ling is a contract photographer for The New York Times, and her work has appeared in such publications as GEO Magazine, Courier International, FADER Magazine, New York Magazine, PDN Photo Annual, American Photography, Magenta Flash Forward: Emerging Photographers, among others. Her work was recently exhibited in the 2011 Gwangju Biennale: Unnamed Design, curated by Ai Weiwei in Gwangju, South Korea and the Lumix Festival for Young Photojournalism in Hannover, Germany. She recently received a New York foundation for the Arts 2013 Fellowship for Photography.



## **COMING UP IN SPRING 2014**

### **OIL AND WATER: REINTERPRETING INK**

This exciting contemporary exhibition presents the work of three renowned Chinese contemporary artists: Qiu Deshu, Wei Jia, and Zhang Hongtu. Ink is the primary medium of traditional Chinese two-dimensional art; it unites the "three perfections": calligraphy, poetry, and painting. Through a unique employment of the traditional Chinese materials of ink, brush, and rice paper, and by drawing inspiration from the Western art practices of impressionism, abstract expressionism, and post modernism, Qiu Deshu, Wei Jia, and Zhang Hongtu investigate and reinterpret conventional calligraphy and landscape painting with contemporary approaches. This exhibition is organized by MOCA and Carolyn Hsu Balcer; and guest curated by Michelle Y. Loh.



## **CURRENTLY ON VIEW**

Harold L. Lee and Sons, Inc., is a corner stone of Chinatown. In this exhibition, MOCA traces the rise of the Lee family business over 125 years – from a modest grocery store to a national insurance brokerage. This exhibition offers a unique glimpse of Chinatown's cultural and economic landscape over the decades, through the historical lens of a multi-generational family business.

# ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

MOCA's mission is to celebrate the living history of the Chinese experience in America, to inspire our diverse communities to contribute to America's evolving cultural narrative and civil society, and to empower and bridge our communities across generations, ethnicities and geography through our dynamic stories.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These exhibitions are made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts (Museums Program), celebrating 50 years of building strong, creative communities in New York State's 62 counties, and with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. Additional support for Portraits of New York Chinatown is provided by the Asian Women Giving Circle and the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU.



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## LOCATION

215 Centre Street New York, NY 10013

## HOURS

Monday: Closed  
Tuesday – Sunday: 11am – 6pm  
Thursday: 11am – 9pm  
Target Free Thursday

## ADMISSION

General Admission: \$10  
Seniors (65+ with ID) and Students (w/school ID): \$5  
Children under 12 in groups less than 8: Free  
MOCA Members: Free