

Alan Chin *On the Shoulders Of*

March 16 - April 7, 2024

Not There is pleased to present *On the Shoulders Of*, an exhibition of context-specific sculpture by Los Angeles-based artist Alan Chin. While researching the history of Chinatown, alongside his family's deep ties to the development of the American West, Chin discovered that the gallery's location at 437 Gin Ling Way was once the location of the *Chinaware and Gift Shop* (immortalized in our still extant neon sign) which was serendipitously owned by his Uncle Steve's Aunt and Uncle, Peter and Lillie Soohoo. This coincidence ignited a new body of work for Chin, which explores his Chinese American lineage while confronting contemporary issues of identity, immigration, and social unrest. As a result, it seemed fitting that the text for *On the Shoulders Of* should be enlisted as a work of its own in the exhibition.

What follows is an essay by Alan Chin.

My ancestors immigrated from Taishan, China (located in the Guangdong Province in southern China) to America as scholars and merchants during the Gold Rush in the 1850s and contributed to the west-to-east construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. While delving into my heritage, I uncovered a multifaceted narrative about being American, which encompasses early colonization within China involving indigenous peoples and tribes. The relationship between Europe and America reveals a dark, blood-stained history, marked by the inextricable link between xenophobia and anti-blackness. This connection dates to the early colonial occupation of sacred indigenous lands, genocide of indigenous people, the transatlantic slave trade of African people, and an addiction to free and cheap labor. The impact of England's mass introduction of opium from China in the 18th century, and the subsequent outlawed opium trade reverberated in my family's history, with my grandfather being sold as a slave at the age of 12.

The complexities of intercontinental growth politics, and the history of early Asian American immigration have been largely omitted from the American educational system's historical narrative. The coverage often only extends to brief mentions of events like the arrival of Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush in the 1850s, and their instrumental role in building the Transcontinental Railroad. Regrettably, these omissions contribute to many hate crimes targeting Asian Americans, both historically and currently, and go largely unreported and overlooked.

The question of how one gains recognition as American arises as I recount stories of my grandparents. My grandfather John, or Yeh-Yeh on my father's side, was born in Taishan, China. He was sold as a slave to his uncle in San Francisco, in order to feed his warlord fathers opium addiction. His journey to freedom led him to join the U.S. Army as a private. Drafted to fight in WWII, he encountered extreme anti-Asian hate, primarily targeted at Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Barely proficient in English, he learned the language in the army. Initially assigned as a cook, he later became four-star General Walton Harris Walker's personal bodyguard in General Patton's Army, serving on four frontlines, and liberating concentration camps, in the XX Corps 3rd Armored Division, including D-Day in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and earning a bronze star for saving his entire battalion and the general's life on numerous occasions. Ironically, this act would have warranted a gold or silver star if he were a white "war hero." It wasn't till Dec. 9, 2020, that he was honored with a congressional gold medal of honor for his role in WWII, years after his death. Despite risking his life for his country and fighting for freedom, upon his return to the States, he was perceived as an outsider, un-American, and someone who didn't belong, facing deep prejudice despite feeling American.

My grandmother Daisy, respectfully known as Paw Paw on my mother's side, embarked on a journey to America from Hong Kong aboard the SS President Cleveland. Her initial impressions of the country were shaped by witnessing a child enjoying a turkey drumstick, a sight that left her marveling at what appeared to be the largest chicken drumstick she had ever seen, seeding early perceptions of American abundance. Upon her arrival in the United States, she faced detention at the Angel Island Immigration Station until she was deemed fit to enter San Francisco. Subsequently, she confronted the challenges of living within the unseen confines of Chinatown during the Depression era, discreetly working in a sweatshop to save pennies for her family. Over time, she transcended these humble beginnings, started a family, evolved into a business and property owner, and became a couture fashion and jewelry designer, playing a pivotal role in founding the iconic Empress of China Restaurant. This establishment emerged as a cultural hub, hosting notable figures such as international heads of states, U.S. Presidents, and cultural icons like Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Shirley Temple, Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis Jr., Maya Angelou, and many others during its heyday. Despite her ascent to affluence and significant contributions to San Francisco's cultural landscape, my grandmother encountered persistent prejudice. When attempting to purchase a house within her means, a realtor callously informed her that she couldn't acquire anything "on this side of the tracks," alluding to the racially divided landscape. The once proud feat of the railroad became a divisive symbol, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals who, despite their successes, grapple with the enduring racial disparities ingrained in society.

This exhibition was sparked, in part, by a disheartening experience with an American art center that rescinded an invitation for an exhibition, citing that they had already shown the work of another "Asian couple." The cancellation raised questions about why I was originally asked to show in the first place. Was I their "token" Asian artist? It inspired me to dive deeper into the climate of tolerance and the ongoing work needed to address deep-rooted prejudices toward Asians and Asian Americans locally, nationally, and internationally. The exhibition of my work in Chinatown resonates with echoes of exclusion and tokenism, as Chinatowns emerged across American cities through "Redlining," segregating communities of color into designated areas where they could mainly reside as guests and tourist attractions.

On the Shoulders Of delves into historical events and my personal practice, focusing on the history of ceramics, sculpture, the relationships we form with objects, and the broader complexities of Asian American identity in understanding the American ethos. Through my research, it became evident that anti-Asian hate and exclusionary sentiments did not originate solely with the Covid-19 pandemic, although the surge in hate crimes and over 10,000 reported incidents were seemingly fueled by former President Trump's divisive rhetoric, labeling Covid-19 as the "Chinese Virus" and "Kung Flu." This exhibition confronts and contextualizes these realities while asserting the resilience and contributions of Asian Americans to the fabric of society.

The works in *On The Shoulders Of* explore significant moments in both my family's narrative and the broader history of Asian-American experience.

A Brief History of State Sanctioned Violence Towards Asian-Americans

October 18, 1587. The first recorded arrival of Asian peoples to America on a Spanish galleon bearing Filipino slaves.

Early 17th century. The first anti-miscegenation laws were passed as early as the 17th century, barring interracial marriages between white Americans and non-whites, particularly Black or mulatto slaves, Native Americans, Filipinos, East & South Asians.

1790. The Naturalization Bill of 1790 established federal procedures for

foreign-born individuals to become U.S. citizens. This act limited U.S. citizenship to white immigrants, primarily from Western Europe, with at least two years' residence in the U.S. and their children under 21 years of age. Over the intervening centuries, Congress readdressed naturalization through various acts that increasingly included people of diverse races and origins.

February 19, 1862. In the 1850s and 1860s, after the Opium War, Britain signed the Treaty of Nanjing, gaining Chinese treaty ports. In doing so, Britain implemented the coolie trade in hopes to replace the African slave trade. Coolies, Chinese laborers, were sent to Peru, Cuba, and the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i).

In 1849, the discovery of gold in California triggered a significant influx of people from around the world, drawing them to the goldfields. For early Chinese immigrants, America became known as "Gum San" or Gold Mountain. On February 19, 1862, the Anti-Coolie Act was passed in California and prohibited the trade of "coolies" (Chinese laborers) in response to salary competition with white laborers during the height of the gold rush.

October 24, 1871. A mob of more than 500 people descended on Chinatown in Los Angeles, and in a span of two hours, killed 19 people, about 10 percent of the city's Chinese population at the time. The so-called Chinese Massacre marked the first time Los Angeles made national headlines – a stain on the city's public image that boosters would strive to erase. The 1871 Los Angeles Chinatown Massacre was one of the bloodiest massacres against Asians in the USA on record. It was the first in a series of riots and killings that were documented in places like Rock Springs, Wyoming, San Francisco, and other towns along the Pacific Coast. To make up for the loss of cheap labor, U.S. plantations began importing Japanese men who tried to avoid the fate of Chinese men by assimilating white values and conduct. In response, white lawmakers suspected "the assumed virtue of the Japanese – i.e. their partial adoption of American customs – makes them more dangerous as competitors." The law excluded Chinese people from citizenship by naturalization and halted Chinese immigration for 60 years.

1873. Amidst the economic turmoil of the Depression of 1873 in the United States, characterized by widespread unemployment and labor unrest, Chinese immigrants become scapegoats for the challenges faced by white working men. This barred Chinese workers from entering the country and denying citizenship to those already present. Within this historical context, the narrative of Wong Kim Ark unfolds. Born in 1873 in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, Wong faced entry challenges upon returning from a temporary visit to China in 1895. Despite having documentation affirming his US birth, he was detained by customs collector John Wise. Wong's case reached the Supreme Court in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, where the landmark decision by Justice Horace Gray established that Wong was a natural-born citizen by virtue of being born on US soil, irrespective of his parents' origins. This ruling solidified the interpretation of the 14th Amendment's birthright provision, securing citizenship for all persons born on US soil. Despite its significance in shaping US citizenship jurisprudence, Wong Kim Ark's story often goes overlooked in the broader historical narrative.

March 3, 1875. The Page Act was passed and bars Asian "forced laborers" and prostitutes from entering the U.S., but was used in practice to exclude and deport all Chinese women creating the early Asian American "Bachelor Society."

1882. Initially driven out by white Americans threatening violence, Chinese immigrants later played a crucial role in gold production and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. After completing the railroad, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed, marking the first and only time an ethnicity was explicitly excluded from American law after contributing to a monumental project. In the 1850s, Chinese workers migrated to the United States, first to work in the gold mines, but also to take agricultural jobs and factory work, especially in the garment industry. Chinese immigrants were particularly instrumental in building railroads in the American West, and as Chinese laborers grew successful in the United States, a number of them became entrepreneurs in their own right. As the numbers of Chinese laborers increased, so did the strength of anti-Chinese sentiment among other workers in the American economy. This finally resulted in legislation that aimed to limit future immigration of Chinese workers to the

United States and threatened to sour diplomatic relations between the United States and China. The Act also required every Chinese person traveling in or out of the country to carry a certificate identifying his or her status as a laborer, scholar, diplomat, or merchant.

May 27, 1887. The massacre occurred on May 25th, 1887, at the Snake River in Hells Canyon, Wallowa County, Oregon. The mass slaughter of 34 Chinese gold miners by a gang of white horse thieves was one of many hate crimes perpetrated against Asian immigrants in the American West during this period. Two groups of Chinese workers were employed by the Sam Yup Company of San Francisco to search for gold in the Snake River in May of 1887. As they made their camps along the Snake River around Hells Canyon, a gang of seven white men, known as horse thieves, ambushed them, shooting them until they ran out of ammunition, mutilated some of the bodies and threw them into the river, and made off with several thousand dollars' worth of gold. Although the eventual indictment listed 10 counts of murder, other accounts hold that the seven white riders killed a total of 34 people. The massacre was part of a broader pattern of racism and violence against Asians during the period. Anti-Chinese sentiment and the belief that Asian laborers were "stealing" white jobs led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banning the immigration of laborers from China. In 1885 and 1886, white residents of Tacoma and Seattle rioted and forced Chinese residents to leave the country, and San Francisco experienced three days of anti-Chinese pogroms in 1877.

September 2, 1885. The Rock Springs Massacre was a riot led by white laborers that resulted in a massacre of Chinese coal mine laborers in Sweetwater County, Wyoming. When the rioting ended, at least 28 Chinese miners were dead, and 15 were injured. Rioters burned 78 homes where Chinese laborers lived. Sixteen rioters were arrested and tried by a grand jury where no Chinese laborers were allowed to testify. No one was ever convicted for the violence at Rock Springs.

For American presidents and Congressmen grappling with the issue of Chinese exclusion, the challenge lay in finding a delicate balance between domestic attitudes and politics, which inclined towards an anti-Chinese policy, and maintaining positive diplomatic relations with China. The latter was crucial to prevent such exclusionary measures from being perceived as an affront and a violation of treaty promises. Unfortunately, domestic factors ultimately took precedence over international concerns. In 1888, Congress escalated exclusionary policies by passing the Scott Act, which rendered reentry to the United States after a visit to China impossible, even for long-term legal residents. Despite the Chinese Government considering this act a direct insult, it was unable to prevent its passage. In 1892, Congress voted to extend exclusion for another ten years through the Geary Act, and in 1902, the prohibition was expanded to include Hawaii and the Philippines, eliciting strong objections from the Chinese Government and people. Subsequently, Congress chose to extend the Exclusion Act indefinitely.

In 1904, Congress amended the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to also exclude immigrants from the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, and even Hawai'i.

1870's- 1950's. The reprehensible history of human zoos, where individuals were exhibited like animals, is a disturbing practice orchestrated by the US and Europe. These exhibitions, featuring Africans and conquered indigenous peoples, involved the kidnapping of individuals who were then showcased in dehumanizing exhibits. Tragically, many of these people faced a swift demise, succumbing to the harsh conditions of captivity, sometimes within a year. This deeply entrenched history persisted well into the 1950s. One poignant example of this egregious practice is the case of Ota Benga, a Congolese Pygmy forcibly brought to the United States by missionary Samuel Phillips Verner. In a disturbing episode at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Ota was exhibited as a carnival oddity. The dehumanization continued in 1906 when Ota was placed on display alongside an orangutan in a primate house cage at the Bronx Zoo. This inhumane treatment extended to housing him with other native indigenous "specimens" of the world, including the Apache prisoner of war Geronimo. Ota Benga's story stands as a stark reminder of the degrading practices perpetrated against individuals, reflecting the darker chapters of history that demand acknowledgment and reflection.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hastily signed Executive Order 9066, granting the U.S. army the authority to evict and forcibly relocate approximately 120,000 Japanese individuals residing in the U.S. from their homes. This action led to the separation of families and the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in U.S. concentration camps. The U.S. government subjected them to incarceration, intimidation, and exploitation for three years until the conclusion of the war in 1945.

Throughout their internment, the U.S. government compelled Japanese individuals to complete loyalty questionnaires, a process that resulted in the separation of families based on their responses. Those residing in the detention centers were coerced into producing wartime supplies and propaganda, with Japanese American men facing the choice of remaining in the camps or enlisting in the military. Shockingly, in 1943, evidence surfaced revealing that Japanese women were forcibly sterilized at internment camps. Testimonies during hearings of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in the 1980s indicated that Japanese women at the Tule Lake site were sterilized without their knowledge.

In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Acts were finally repealed, and this significant change in policy was driven primarily by the need to boost the morale of a wartime ally during World War II. The strained diplomatic relations between the United States and China, already complicated by historical events such as the Opium Wars and the Treaties of Wangxia and Tianjin, were further exacerbated by the increasingly stringent restrictions on Chinese immigration. Discrimination against the Chinese residing in the United States during the late 1870s to the early 1900s added to the diplomatic tension.

The notorious “Angel Island,” often referred to as the “Ellis Island of the West,” serves as a poignant symbol of this exclusionary stance, functioning as a detention and quarantine center for Asian Americans. Several members of the artist’s ancestral family passed through this facility in the early 1900s, establishing a personal connection to the challenges faced by Asian immigrants.

In 1905, the War Department transferred 20 acres of land on the island to the Department of Commerce and Labor for the establishment of an immigrant station. Although the exact number remains unknown, estimates suggest that between 1910 and 1940, the station processed up to one million Asian and other immigrants, including 250,000 Chinese and 150,000 Japanese, earning its reputation as the “Ellis Island of the West.” As the point of entry to the United States for those arriving from Asia, Angel Island remains a significant site for Asian Americans whose heritage and legacy are deeply intertwined with the history of the U.S. Immigration Station.

August 6, 1945. The United States drops the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing 20,000 soldiers and approximately five times as many citizens. The United States dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki three days later, killing almost all citizens.

1954-1968 marked a significant period where Asian Americans actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement, standing in solidarity with Black Americans against racial oppression and state-sanctioned violence. Unfortunately, this historical involvement tends to be overlooked or erased, often fueled by efforts to pit Asian Americans against Black Americans and discourage coalition building. This erasure is exacerbated by the introduction of the so-called model minority myth. Rooted in stereotypes, this myth perpetuates a narrative that portrays Asian American children as exceptionally talented whiz kids or musical prodigies. Within this narrative, Tiger Moms are depicted as pushing their children to work tirelessly to outperform others, while nerdy and effeminate fathers occupy prestigious, though not leadership, positions in STEM industries such as medicine and accounting.

The model minority myth constructs a narrow characterization of Asian

Americans as a polite, law-abiding group that has achieved a higher level of success than the general population, attributing this success to a perceived combination of innate talent and an immigrant's pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality. Regrettably, this myth overlooks the rich diversity present within Asian American cultures.

June 19, 1982, Vincent Chin was tragically killed while celebrating his Bachelor Party outside a club. The perpetrators, two white men named Ronald Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz, who were autoworkers facing economic challenges due to Japan's flourishing auto industry, assumed Chin was of Japanese descent and fatally assaulted him. Although Ebens and Nitz pleaded guilty, they denied any racial motivation behind the murder. The lenient sentence they received sparked a vocal outcry from Asian Americans, leading to protests across the nation. Chin's trial marked a pivotal moment as it was the first time existing civil rights laws were applied to Asian Americans, representing a critical turning point in the civil rights engagement of the Asian diaspora in the US.

As Chinese American activist and journalist Helen Zia aptly articulates, "racism only works when people can be portrayed as different." The scapegoating of Japanese Americans for the economic challenges faced by the US was just one episode in a prolonged history of anti-Asian prejudice. This pattern encompassed the unjust incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, as well as discriminatory laws prohibiting Asian Americans from engaging in mixed-race marriages, owning property, providing testimony in court, and exercising their right to vote.

In 1983, a pivotal moment in civil rights history occurred when the Korematsu decision was vacated. The decision had initially upheld the wartime internment of Japanese Americans. Professor Peter Irons, a legal historian, played a crucial role in this development by uncovering key documents that government intelligence agencies had concealed from the Supreme Court in 1944. These documents consistently revealed that Japanese Americans had not committed any acts of treason justifying mass incarceration. Armed with this new evidence, a legal team primarily composed of Japanese American attorneys reopened Korematsu's 40-year-old case on the grounds of government misconduct. On November 10, 1983, Korematsu's conviction was finally vacated in a federal court in San Francisco. Despite the challenges he faced, Korematsu remained an activist throughout his life. In 1998, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, from President Bill Clinton. The state of California further honored him in 2010 by passing the Fred Korematsu Day bill, designating January 30 as the first day in the US named after an Asian American. Korematsu's enduring legacy continues to inspire activists of all backgrounds, underscoring the importance of speaking up to combat injustice. 1987. The narrative then shifts to 1987, where the artist recounts the tragic murder of Vincent Chin by a White Father and son, reflecting echoes of past atrocities. These incidents, alongside contemporary issues such as the surge in Asian hate during the Covid-19 pandemic, contribute to the exhibition's exploration of the ongoing struggles faced by Asian Americans.

In modern American history, Asian Americans have been consistently scapegoated during periods of national duress. World War II witnessed the forced internment of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast — an estimated 62 percent of whom were U.S. citizens — in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Following the Vietnam War, refugees from Southeast Asia encountered regular discrimination and hate, including attacks by Ku Klux Klan members on shrimpers in Texas. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was fatally beaten by two Detroit auto workers who mistakenly believed he was Japanese. This incident occurred during a recession that was partially attributed to the ascent of the Japanese auto industry. Asian Americans have been physically attacked, verbally harassed, spat upon, and subjected to racial slurs. Since the start of the pandemic, Asian Americans have become the target of xenophobic attacks, much like Muslims were blamed and scapegoated after the 9/11 attacks.

In a survey from the Pew Research Center, three in 10 Asian Americans reported having been subjected to racist slurs or jokes since the onset of the pandemic. A recent study found that former President Donald Trump's description of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" led to a rise in anti-Asian hate online. Trump also used the racist term "Kung Flu" at a youth rally in Arizona. Additionally, previous research found that calling COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus," "Asian Virus," or other names that attach location or ethnicity to the disease was associated with anti-Asian sentiment in online discourse. The use of these phrases by politicians or other prominent public officials, such as former President Donald Trump, coincided with greater use among the general public and more frequent instances of bias against Asian Americans. This pattern occurred in the past and is recurring during the pandemic. It originated when some of our country's highest-ranking lawmakers repeatedly used racist characterizations of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" or the "kung flu" and urged Americans to "blame China" for the virus. Researchers found that the anti-Chinese rhetoric promoted by leaders directly correlated with a rise in racist incidents against Asian Americans. Former President Donald J. Trump, whose "Chinese virus" tweets were retweeted millions of times, was "the greatest spreader...of anti-Asian American rhetoric related to the pandemic," they argued, and inspired racist acts. While he tweeted, Asian Americans were attacked.

Since March of 2020, over 10,000 anti-Asian hate incidents have been reported in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism reports that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339% percent in 2021, surpassing record numbers in 2020. One national survey has found that 60 percent of Asian Americans reported that racism against them had increased during the pandemic. Tragically, many have lost their lives. On January 28, 2021, 84-year-old Thai American grandfather Vicha Ratanapakdee was murdered in San Francisco. On March 16, 2021, an armed gunman entered three Asian-owned businesses in the greater Atlanta area. At one location, he reportedly said that he wanted to "kill all Asians" before he shot his victims in the face and chests, resulting in the deaths of eight people, six of whom were Asian American women.

Less than a month after the shootings in Atlanta, Sikh Americans were the apparent targets when a gunman shot and killed eight people at an Indianapolis FedEx facility, with four of the eight victims being Sikh. In the winter of 2022, four more Asian American women were murdered: Michelle Go and Christina Yuna Lee in New York City, and Sihui Fang and an unknown woman of Chinese descent in Albuquerque, who were killed during two shootings at two Asian-owned spas. Notably, most of the hate incidents—68 percent—have been directed at women. Along with the murders in Atlanta, this pattern confirms how racism and misogyny continue to place Asian women at disproportionate risk of violence.

In the hours and days following the Atlanta killings, the shooter reportedly denied any racial motivation, asserting instead that he was driven by "sexual addiction." Authorities appeared to accept this claim, echoing the suspect's assertion that the spas represented his "temptation." The pervasive presence of sexual exploitation and violence within the sexual services industry is not a revelation; it is a poorly kept secret. The correlation between sexism, racism, and the perpetration of violence should also not come as a surprise. What is crucial in this context is that the Atlanta shootings provide an opportunity to elucidate the connections between sexism, racism, and various other forms of violence. To comprehend the origins of this racism, it is imperative to trace the historical and contemporary contexts that contribute to the hypersexualization, marginalization, and victimization of Asian women. Understanding how the dual and intersecting forces of racialized and gendered violence manifest on the bodies of Asian women, especially those in lower-income occupations who bear the brunt of abuse, becomes essential.