

Alan Chin
On the Shoulders Of
March 16 - April 7, 2024



Side of the Tracks. 2024
wood, ceramic, gold
96 x 192 x 2 in (243.8 x 487.6 x 5 cm)

Side of the Tracks addresses the 20,000 migrants from Taishan, China, who were among the early Chinese settlers in the 1850s, including some of my ancestors who played pivotal roles in constructing the first Transcontinental Railroad following the Gold Rush. The genesis of this sculpture lies in the historic completion ceremony, where Leland Stanford was slated to drive the last solid gold spike. It draws inspiration from Andrew J. Russell's photograph, the official image commemorating the railroad's completion, a portrayal that conspicuously omitted the Chinese laborers, relegating them to obscurity.

The sculpture's design is a nod to a cherished family artifact: a folding screen from my grandmother Daisy's living room. Crafted from intricately carved wood, it depicts a phoenix perched atop a mythical rocky mountain, adorned in gold and black lacquer. This screen served as both a visual focal point and a repository of ancestral lore, often serving as the backdrop to our family gatherings. *Tracks* intertwines elements of the railroad tracks from the Golden Spike Ceremony with cues from Russell's photograph. Just as the photograph expunged the Chinese migrant workers, leaving only white figures, the sculpture spotlights this historical erasure. It centers on the three vessels performing a toast, and mirrors their pivotal presence in the iconic image while symbolically reclaiming the silenced narratives of the Chinese laborers who were instrumental in shaping American history.



Elegy to the 34 of Snake River. 2024
found wood
45 x 60 x 32 in (114.3 x 152.4 x 81.2 cm)

Elegy to the 34 of Snake River, acknowledges the 34 Chinese migrant miners who tragically lost their lives in one of the largest recorded massacres of a minority group in American history. The massacre occurred in May 1887 at the Snake River at Hells Canyon in Wallowa County, Oregon where the miners were ambushed in their sleep, brutally murdered, and burned alive. Their killers were never brought to justice.

According to Hugh McMillan's account, the assailants, including individuals such as Robert McMillan, Bruce Evans, J.T. Canfield, Max Larue, and Frank Vaughn, launched their attack in late April 1887. The motive behind the massacre was the theft of gold dust amounting to \$5,500. Subsequently, the gang proceeded to another Chinese camp, located 4 miles away, where they perpetrated further violence, resulting in the deaths of 13 more individuals and the looting of \$50,000 worth of gold.

Sadly, it was not until February 16, 1888, nearly a year later, that ten of the twenty victims were identified: Chea-po, Chea-Sun, Chea-Yow, Chea-Shun, Chea Cheong, Chea Ling, Chea Chow, Chea Lin Chung, Kong Mun Kow, and Kong Ngan. Regrettably, little is known about these individuals, leaving their stories untold. Through this sculpture, we remember and honor the lives of those who perished unjustly, shedding light on a dark chapter in American history and advocating for remembrance and accountability.



Migrant Spiral, 2024

found wood

33 x 37 x 42 in (83.8 x 93.9 x 106.6 cm)

Crafted from a European White Elm tree originally cultivated by Chinese migrant workers employed by The Kelsey Ranch after the Gold Rush in 1860. *Migrant Spiral* embodies a rich historical legacy. Positioned adjacent to the Kelsey Family Estate Carriage House, the majestic elm tree not only exuded a stately presence but also played a pivotal role in naming the “Elmwood District” in Berkeley, California. The Kelsey Ranch served as a crucial hub, contributing botanical specimens and plants to the UC Berkeley campus, enriching the educational environment for generations of students from around the world.

The cause of death for this tree was Dutch Elm disease. It occurred because the tree's roots were eventually affected by fungi in the soil, weakening the tree and making it susceptible to bark beetles that spread the fungi throughout. If it had had a different rootstock, the tree might have survived for another couple of hundred years. Since the late 1900s, grapevines grown in California are all grafted onto Native American rootstocks to prevent the “phyloxphora” nematode from harming the vine. Even though the vine is a European or non-native species, it can survive if it has a native rootstock, sparking a dialogue on symbiotic relationships and beneficial coexistence. This work also prompts contemplation on how the classification of plant species correlates directly with imperialist exploration in identification, and its connection to the cultural classifications of societies and pictorial landscapes worldwide. This extends to people being categorized through eugenics, rooted in Charles Darwin's

evolutionary theories, in relation to class, survival of the fittest, and hierarchies that determine superior traits in human and subhuman evaluations, ranging from color, to the shape of an individual. For instance, the term “weed,” is leveled at any wild plant that is unwanted or unintentionally planted, even if it grew naturally or migrated from a distance through the wind, an animal, or perhaps floated like a coconut across the sea to find soil. This relationship is interwoven into the echoes of migrant spirals within our planet, shaping how we perceive our unique differences in an infinite spiral of dialogue seeking meaning in the origin of the beginning of the seeds planted and the seeds harvested.



Stack, 2024
glazed ceramic, wood
54 x 26 x 30 in (137.1 x 66 x 76.2 cm)

Stack is a tribute to my ancestors, mentors, influences, and community. The object draws inspiration from the profound notion of “adopted family,” coined by the late Chinese American artist Hung Liu, defined by Liu as the individuals we choose to include in our familial circle. It mirrors the reality that, unlike adopted children who may not select their parents, we have the freedom to choose those who will become a part of our family, shaping the legacies we wish to share with the future.

The form of the sculpture is a visual narrative inspired by the historical context of early Chinese miners, often referred to as “basket heads” by the media due to the protective hats they wore against the elements, be it sun, rain, or debris. Each hat delicately stacked upon the other symbolizes interdependence, where each element relies on the strength of the one beneath it. Additionally, this stacking pays homage to my Chinese American heritage, weaving in references to pagodas rooted in ancient Chinese spiritual architecture.

Beyond its historical echoes, this form operates as a metaphor for the many figurative ‘hats’ one must wear in life to actively engage as a community member. It becomes a celebration of the diversity of roles we undertake, each layer representing the multifaceted aspects of our communal existence.



Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage, 2024
ceramic, horse hair, glue, wood
27 x 27 x 24 in (68.5 x 68.5 x 60.9 cm)

Even if it is built of jade, it has turned into a cage, serves as a tribute to the indigenous Miwok people, as well as to the multitude of early immigrants who passed through Angel Island following the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the 1906

earthquake and fire in San Francisco, California. It recounts personal family narratives from my grandmother of her journey aboard the SS President Cleveland from Hong Kong to San Francisco during the 1920s, when she was just a young girl witnessing a person hang themselves in the bathroom because they had to go back to China. The title is borrowed from the last line of a poem by an unknown poet that was carved into the barrack wall as graffiti inside what was left of the Angel Island Detention Center.

Early Chinese immigrants faced numerous hardships at the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay, which operated from 1910 to 1940. A stark departure from the relatively quicker processing of immigrants from other regions, Chinese immigrants endured prolonged detention periods that often spanned weeks or months. Rigorous interrogations and examinations were commonplace, delving into intricate details of their families, villages, and personal histories. The isolating environment of the barracks, coupled with the uncertainty of immigration status and the potential separation of families, contributed to a challenging and emotionally taxing experience. The prevalent anti-Chinese sentiment of the time manifested in discriminatory policies, further complicating the immigration process. Living conditions within the overcrowded barracks were harsh, amplifying the physical and emotional strain on detainees. The looming fear of deportation under the stringent Chinese Exclusion Act added another layer of adversity, threatening to sever ties to the aspirations and dreams that led many to seek a better life in the United States. Despite these tribulations, the resilience and determination of Chinese immigrants persisted, forming an integral part of the complex tapestry of American immigration history.

Alan Chin (b. 1987 Berkeley, CA) lives and maintains a studio in Hawthorne, California. He attended Academie Minerva in the Netherlands and earned his BFA in ceramics and painting from California College of the Arts in 2011. For six years, Chin was studio assistant to the American artist, Raymond Saunders. His work has been shown in cities around the world and at institutions such as Berkeley Art Museum, California College of the Arts, The Kaneko, Richmond Art Center, Sam and Alfreda Maloof Museum, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. In 2017 he was selected to represent the USA at the first International Ecological Sculpture Biennale in Wuhan, China. In 2021 his work made for an anti-hate rally was added to the City of Torrance City Hall permanent collection.