

Art and Race in the Time of Covid-19: Focus on Asian Americans

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ABSTRACT

Trump and his administration brought with them an inflammatory rhetoric that reduced complex issues into the simplified polarity of "us" and "them." With this as the dominant paradigm, racism was encouraged and spread like a virus throughout the nation, appearing in heightened jingoism against other nations, anger towards fellow citizens and violence towards neighbors. When the pandemic Covid-19 spread throughout the nation and the world, it became politicized, used by Trump as a novel corona vehicle help inflame intolerance. He repeatedly associated China and Chinese people with the virus to forward his political agenda regarding US trade with China and he used the resulting demonization of China as a foil for his complicity with Russian crimes. In response to increased and well-publicized acts of violence against Black Americans, systemic racism against Black people is finally being noticed. However, anti-Asian violence has largely been disregarded. This paper discusses both the increased violence against Asian Americans and the lack of attention to it. Dividing the paper into three sections, I correlate an artwork to the main issue in each section: the state-of-affairs provide a context in which to understand the artworks. Reciprocally, because artworks evoke an embodied understanding, involving our senses as well cognition, artworks change our relationship with issues from topical to personal. The artworks recontextualize what we thought we already knew and present possibilities for constructing the world differently.

Keywords:
Covid-19;
artworks;
Asian American;
racism;
Trump;
Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom;
Phillip Chen;
Viết Lê

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What is so deceptive about the state of mind of the members of a society is the “consensual validation” of their concepts. It is naively assumed that the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas or feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings. Nothing is further from the truth. ... The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane. –

Philosopher and Psychologist Erich Fromm in *The Sane Society* (1955)

2020 was a year in which many Americans became aware of the bitter systemic violence against Black Americans. The Trump presidency not only made racism apparent but put its violence on steroids. On May 25, 2020, the murder of a Black man, George Floyd, by a White police officer was recorded by witness videos and went viral: we all became witnesses to the undeniable evidence of police brutality, racial injustice, and the need to take action. But no event catalyzed awareness in the general American public of the racial violence against Asian Americans.¹ Throughout the pandemic, while hate crimes arose at an alarming 150% in 16 major cities, the media was conspicuously silent. Until recently.

On March 16, 2021, the media and the nation became painfully aware of anti-Asian racism when a gunman entered three different spas in Georgia and mur-

dered 8 people, 6 of them Asian-Americans. Professor and poet Claudia Rankine is prescient by discussing, in 2015, how in the US, racism only becomes a subject of discourse when it becomes scandal, when we think of it as exceptional rather than the everyday fabric of life. Instead of attending to the racism in small things—how people look at you, or don't look at you—we only acknowledge it when it ramps up and we only pay attention when someone dies.²

World events and art are all generally presented as separate stories. But this paper is an enactment of intersectionality, addressing relationships between art and race in America and the Covid-19 pandemic. The subject of race is too broad and diverse to address the conditions, incidents, forms of racism and responses to it for all races. Therefore, this paper will focus on racism against Asian Americans and art created during the pandemic of

Covid-19. The paper is divided into three sections: 1) Rhetoric, 2) Vaccines and 3) Violence. In each section, I correlate an artwork to an issue relating to racism or to Covid-19: an in-depth discussion of the topic becomes the context for understanding the creation of particular works of art. The artworks, in turn, shed light upon the area investigated, transforming it from facts and social history to the personal.

Art is not window dressing or a decoration, art is a means of communication to the viewer. The artworks discussed in this paper were not chosen as *illustrations* for the issues of Covid-19 and race.³ Art can be thought of as a way to recontextualize specific aspects of our material world and symbolic spaces—“a new form of dividing up the common world.”⁴ Jacques Rancière makes this clear when he speaks of “politics’ of art which consists in suspending the normal coordinates of

1. Masood Farivar, “Hate Crimes Targeting Asian Americans Spiked by 150% in Major US Cities,” Voice of America, March 2, 2021 <https://www.voanews.com/usa/race-america/hate-crimes-targeting-asian-americans-spiked-150-major-us-cities>

2. Paraphrase of Claudia Rankine, in an interview with Lynell George, “Writer Claudia Rankine On White Blindness, The Black Body, and the Freedom to Live,” KCET, September 3, 2015 <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/writer-claudia-rankine-on-white-blindness-the-black-body-and-the-freedom-to-live>
In an interview, Claudia Rankine said, “The most surprising thing has been the number of Asian women who have come up to me at book signings with tears in their eyes to say: this is my life you’re writing.” Quoted in Kate Kellaway, “Claudia Rankine: ‘Blackness in the White Imagination has Nothing to do with Black People,’” *The Guardian*, August 30, 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/27/claudia-rankine-poet-citizen-american-lyric-feature>

3. Herbert Brün, *When Music Resists Meaning*, p. 128

4. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 22

sensory experience.”⁵ In other words, art recontextualizes what we thought we already knew. Through focusing our gaze, art presents new possibilities for how we can structure symbolic and material space. By visualizing alternative systems, it allows us to glimpse the system which is usually hidden.

At the time that I write, Covid-19 has taken the lives of 2,730,000 people throughout the world, 543,000 of them Americans. Many people have taken precautions of masking and social distancing. But disease is political; social distancing is a privilege. I do not see relationships between three spheres—pandemic, race, art—as causal, nor do I try to triangulate them: Covid-19 did not lead to racism, nor did racial events change the process of art-making.⁶ Rather I see the pandemic as the context in which the other two develop; Covid-19 set up conditions for them to change and accelerate: Trump and Covid-19 created a climate in which we could no longer ignore the fact of daily racism and where we could no longer accept the consequences. Covid-19’s imperative of sequestering provided time to witness and process the words spoken about race by Trump, time in which we were able to realize that his words and descriptions did not parse with the reality before our eyes. Art provides the vehicle that visualizes what is invisible, disseminating images for critical thought. The topic of art and race is approached by the three sections of this essay in the manner of the term coined by Wittenstein, “family resemblances”: there is no one definitive meaning or element shared by all.⁷ However, they create an overlapping network, “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

In ‘Section 1: Rhetoric,’ I begin with two images by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom,

posted on the internet, that vividly relates race to Covid-19, which become the point of departure for a close look at the brutality of verbal racism. In the second section: Vaccines, a set of etchings incorporating photography and drawing, created by Phillip Chen, raise the unknown consequences, positive and negative, of current work in sciences, opening a discussion on vaccines and limits to human knowledge. Section 3: Violence, focuses on the brutal mass-murder of eight people on March 17 in Atlanta, GA, contextualizing it through the lens of the history of violence against Asian women in this country. This, then, makes visible the links between verbal and physical violence and malfeasance in the Trump administration. I end the paper with exploration of the performative-based works of art by Việt Lê, designed toward community and healing. In different manners, the artists are cognizant of their Asian heritage in their works.

To comprehend the systemic nature of racial animosity requires establishing the context in which it is found. Context, however, is not always immediately present but often requires a more nuanced and more historical understanding. Here I borrow from WEB Du Bois a metaphor of lifting the veil, realizing that the veil still persists in America, dividing the nation into (at least) two overlapping realities. In this paper I follow his lead in looking behind the veil, for a deeper look into the relationships in the present and past to better witness and comprehend the continuing racism against Asian Americans during the time of Covid-19. The insights conveyed by artworks assist in lifting the veil.

Section 1: Rhetoric *Sanitizing Racism: Construe it as “Covid”*

In July 2020, then-president Trump asserted that the Chinese govern-

ment was “fully responsible for concealing the virus and unleashing it upon the world.”⁸

In an Instagram post, artist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom cautions: “Be careful what you wish for ... I’ve been complaining for decades about the lack of representation of East Asians in the West. I’ve been feeling neglected and overlooked. Well, not anymore. I’ve never felt more visible and monitored than now, and everywhere I look I see pictures of Asian people: Asians portrayed as sick, as infectious, as harbingers of death. Even people who label themselves “anti-racist” are happily sharing this type of imagery now with the excuse that they’ve no intention of harming anyone - the very same excuse they usually disqualify when calling out other people for sharing racist content. I’ve spent most of my life wishing I was white, something I’ve been glad to say I’ve moved on from. Now, however, I wish I was invisible instead.”⁹

Sjöblom’s art and writing on race and adoption appear on twitter and Instagram as well as more formally in her graphic novels. Korean by birth, Sjöblom was adopted and grew up in Sweden, and now resides in New Zealand. Originally, she posted in Swedish but her growing attention internationally convinced her to add English captions to her work.

Her drawing “I am not a virus” was motivated by seeing the words in a hashtag used by a French Asian group. The style is reminiscent of illustrations in a child’s book of poetry, supple line drawings of a figure or a small group, items of clothing occasionally filled in with muted colors. She characteristically allows the tan ground of the paper, similar to the color of a paper bag, to stand in for the background of the scene. In her most stripped-down and candid images, a female Asian figure, a young girl, really, wears a mask over her mouth and nose,

5. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 25

6. Although racist events did not change the process of art, racial events such as the creation of Black Lives Matter and the growing awareness of systemic inequities to Black Americans including inequities in the art world, lead to changes in the art market, which I discuss in an upcoming paper.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1953, p. 32

8. Nina Storchlic, “America’s Long History of Scapegoating its Asian Citizens,” *National Geographic*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.google.com/search?q=america%27s+long+history+of+scapegoating+its&oq=america%27s+long+history+of+scapegoating+its+&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i271l3j69i6112j69i60j69i65.8164j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

9. Instagram

the Covid-19 kind of mask, looking out of the picture plane squarely at the viewer. The caption speaks her words, declaring, "I am not a virus."¹⁰ The figure engages the viewer with quiet defiance while also conveying a sense of something wistful. We understand the deep sense of isolation arising from the solitary and masked figure, the only Asian person in an empty space, addressing an audience not present within the picture plane, an audience which has apparently been hostile. An audience in which we are included. Sjöblom said that the artwork represents herself and spoke about the palpable isolation, explaining: "A lot of my Asian friends and myself, we feel very lonely even within the anti-racist movement, because we always have to wait for our turn to speak about our experiences. When the attacks on Asians started to increase—because we've always been attacked in the West—when hate crimes started rising and people started defending them, I thought I had to comment on it in my drawings. I started drawing consciously about Asians and other people of color and felt my job is not just to portray people but also what we are going through, and draw people who are not white."

The image's strength lies in its candor. Her drawing strips away all but the most necessary detail, and the five-word caption at once asserts and refutes the racism of correlating Chinese people with the virus. Sjöblom's posts on Instagram have 7693 followers. Her postings on race receive requests for reposting, and comments saying how much works spoke

to them. But saying something directly also makes you vulnerable. From her first racial posting, she was targeted. "I write about how I've been quiet for quite a few weeks where I felt that I couldn't express what I felt. When I started writing about Covid-19 on my Instagram I got a lot of hatred, so much so that I deleted a lot of comments because I didn't want other readers to feel unsafe by them. I was told that I was doing Chinese propaganda, that I was in the service of the Chinese communist party."¹¹

How has it become necessary to challenge the equation of a whole people, all Asians, with a virus? Why has the virus allowed being Asian to become a justification for hate speech and hate crimes, and even cause un-ease and moral ambivalence in people who imagine themselves non-racist?

The short answer to all these questions is found in one source: the lies told by former President Trump who, with pretended amusement, insidiously and repeatedly spoke of Covid-19 as "the China virus" and the "Chinese flu," and found enjoyment in referring to it as "Kung flu." He added his voice and authority to those that erroneously perpetrated the theory that Covid-19 was created in a lab in China. The lies took effect – within a few months into the pandemic, an IPSOS poll found that three in ten Americans blamed China or Chinese people for the virus.¹² And Trump's Administration followed his lead: in their 57-page memo, the National Republican Senatorial Committee presented politicians with rationalizations to use in defending the conflation

of Covid-19 and "the Chinese virus" as non-racist.¹³ Nevertheless, Trump played innocent in response to questions about the effect of his words; for instance, when a reporter asked: "Do you think using the term "Chinese virus" puts Asian Americans at risk?" Trump answered, "No, not at all. I think people would agree with it 100 percent."¹⁴ And to no one's surprise, news footage verifies that his base did indeed agree: time and again when he says "Chinese virus," and "Kung Flu," each time it is greeted as a much-awaited punch-line, generating shouts and laughter and thunderous applause. The racism in referring to the deadly virus by its nation of origin becomes more apparent when we remember that the pandemic of 1918 – which killed between 20-40 million people world-wide—is often referred to as the Spanish flu due to the number of deaths it caused there, but never as the "US Virus" or "Kansas Flu" or the "Haskell County Virus," although that pandemic most likely originated in Haskell County, Kansas.¹⁵

Sjöblom addressed the derisive appellation, saying: "It's implied that there are certain people that are spreading the virus more. Trump wants to make it look like it's a problem with certain groups of people rather than a structural problem. In the West, for hundreds of years there is the idea that there is a threat and it has an Asian face. That is why Trump can so easily talk about how everything is the Chinese's fault – these are not new images of Chinese people; they have been with us for hundreds of years."¹⁶

The artist touched on the history of

10. March 18 MSNBC Chris Hayes Representative Ted Lieu dem California echoed her, stating "stop using racist terms... I am not a virus – and when you say things like that, it hurts the Asian community."

11. Zoom conversation between author and Sjöblom, September 16, 2020

12. IPSOS is a multinational market research and consulting firm with headquarters in Paris, France. Nina Strohlic, op cit.

13. Ibid.

14. On March 18th in response to a reporter's question whether he regretted using terms like Chinese coronavirus, Republican House Minority Leader McCarthy began by echoing Trump's old Chinese chestnuts and when he went into new territory became incoherent: "I would wait to see why the shooter did what he did, but the virus came from china and I think the knowledge we had at the time said exactly that. I don't think that people from the standpoint to go after any Asian from any shape or form and I condemn every action to that"

15. The virus arose from a combination of the hogs and migratory birds, both found in abundance in that county: "when a bird virus and a human virus infect the same pig cell, their different genes can be shuffled and exchanged like playing cards, resulting in a new, perhaps especially lethal, virus." John M. Barry, "How the Horrific 1918 Flu Spread Across America, Smithsonian magazine, November 2017. See also the Journal of Translational Medicine, January 2004, "the Site of Origin of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic and its public health implications," an NIH publication. the CDC website page on the 1918 pandemic sidesteps its probable origin in Kansas, stating only that "there is not universal consensus regarding where the virus originated." See CDC website article "1918 Pandemic (H₁N₁ Virus)" <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>

16. Zoom conversation between author and Sjöblom, September 16, 2020

Asians in America, a history that is never too far from the surface in the present, whether or not it is acknowledged. Trump's equation of the flu with Chinese was bolstered by traces of thought that remained active in the American consciousness. Tapping into our national memory banks, Trump resurrected defamatory ideas of Chinese as diseased and contagious, statements that arose in California in the 1870s due to the fear of competition from the newly arrived Chinese by White labor leaders. These comments were disseminated across the nation in the media. In 1873, sensationalized allegations, mainly from groups in California leading a vitriolic crusade against Chinese immigration, associated Chinese with small pox and leprosy. The New York Times initially rejected these unfounded assertions, describing them accurately as a form of slander by those opposing Chinese entry into the country. But continued contentions by California papers were reprinted in the Times, at times contextualized as "totally groundless and mischievous" but after a while, referred to as "moderate," or receiving no comment at all. And the East Coast was not without its own venomous version of Chinese contamination venom: as early as 1873 a Pennsylvanian legislator wrote a letter to the House of Representatives declaring Chinese habits to be so debased that they would degrade "all Christian communities brought into contact with them" (my emphasis). The Times represented the letter without commentary.¹⁷

Racism is also embedded in White Americans inability to distinguish between different Asian nations and groups; they simply lump the entire continent of Asia into one people, feared and disdained as a 'horde,' and placed under the umbrella category of "Chinese." A word—"sinologism"—was coined for such thinking, defined as an assumption that

informs the "hidden logic," the invisible misunderstanding in Western ideas of China and Chinese peoples.¹⁸

The threat of contamination is underscored in Sjöblom's image of two women seated side-by-side in public transportation, in which the White woman says to her Asian counterpart "I don't want to come across as racist, but shouldn't you perhaps get off this tram?" While the racist sentiment it expresses is understood worldwide, Sjöblom based her drawing on an actual incident that occurred in Sweden. In Sjöblom's drawing, the Asian girl wears headphones, preparing to be in her own self-contained world and obviously not anticipating an interaction with a stranger. It is the White woman who approaches. And, as in the image previously discussed, with a mere caption the artist creates a double view. We see how the White woman imagines that by prefacing her remarks, she can erase the racism. She is literally shown talking out of one side of her mouth, pretending that her racist remark is benign, without malice, based on some hidden logic that makes it a fact. Sjöblom captures the racism, the perpetrator's awareness of her racism, and her indifference to it.

Rhetorical violence anticipates physical violence, and Trump's rhetoric cultivated a culture in which anti-Asian violence increased and was tolerated. Professor Russell Jeung emphasized this connection: "I think the Republican strategy is to deflect blame and scapegoat and rile up their base... A clear consequence of using terms like 'Chinese virus,' of making China the central campaign strategy, is putting Asian American lives at risk." Indeed, after the website Stop AAPI Hate was launched on March 19, 2020, within its first two weeks it received 673 reports of hate crimes. By February 2021, the site had received reports of 3,795 incidents.¹⁹ The crimes described ranged from being

yelled at, receiving racial slurs, being spat upon—all while simply involved in the normal public acts of walking, jogging, waiting in lines.²⁰

Throughout 2020, anti-Asian violence received relatively little media attention. A major reason given for this lack of attention to the violence was that anti-Asian American crimes are often reported as a mugging and not a hate crime motivated by racism. Anchorman Richard Lui attributed some of the misidentification of the crime to the fact that "more than 2/3rds of Asian American/Pacific Islander adults were not born in the US and roughly the same [number] speak English as a second language—reporting not in [your own] language about hate incidents? That's kind of tough."²¹

Sjöblom, however, indicted the media for ignoring anti-Asian violence, wryly observing "There is a general idea that we can only talk about one thing at a time." Indeed, media attention is capricious and sporadic, it comes and goes. Throughout 2020 attention on race focused on the multiple murders of Black Americans. Many Asian Americans supporting Black Lives Matter did not want to distract from the rare national attention and media spotlight that Black lives were finally receiving. However, Asian Americans were not passive: throughout the year, activists and their allies, democratic lawmakers, repeatedly petitioned the Justice Department for legislation and for a hearing on anti-Asian hate crimes. Although well aware of the violence, William Barr's Justice Department paid no attention. The news media took little notice.²² Asian Americans were blamed for a disease they had nothing to do with and assaulted simply for sharing public space.

Section 2: Vaccines
Statistics and Race; Confidence and

17. Lenore Metrick-Chen, *Collecting Objects/ Excluding People: Chinese Subjects and the American Art Discourse, 1830-1900*, SUNY Press, pp. 136-138.

18. Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, Routledge, 2013, pp. xvi; 5

19. Stop AAPI Hate website, accessed March 15, 2021. <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>

20. Nina Strohlic, op cit. A3PCON asked the California attorney general's office to collect data. It declined, so the organization built its own reporting pipeline

21. Richard Liu, MSNBC American Voices with Alicia Menendez, March 20, 2021

22. Claire Wang, "Asian Americans have often needed to 'prove' racism," *NBC News*, March 5, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-americans-have-often-needed-prove-racism-then-social-media-n1258896>

Apprehensions

A major issue throughout the year was the question of when a Covid-19 vaccine would become available. We all know that prior to the availability of the vaccines in the US, other cures were suggested, most infamously, then-President Trump touted the use of hydroxy-chloroquine, and his science advisor appointee at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Paul Alexander, pushed for herd immunity.²³ Hydroxy-chloroquine was known to have no effect on Covid-19 and contrary to Alexander's of voluntary exposure, young people were at great risk if they got infected. The WHO warned that intentionally exposing oneself to the virus could lead to more infections and an increased risk of death. Because many did not use safety precautions, more young people died in 2020 than at any other time in our history.²⁴ The nation eagerly awaited a vaccine.

Many vaccines take more than a decade to develop. After nearly 20 years, a vaccine for HIV remains elusive. The Covid-19 vaccine is the most rapidly developed vaccine in history, taking under one year to be ready for roll-out. Prior to this vaccine, the previous record was held by the mumps vaccine which required four years for its development.²⁵

By March 5, 2021, most states have vaccinated between 6-9% of their population. By March 26th, 14% of all Americans have been fully vaccinated and 27% have received at least one dose.²⁶ 69% of Americans anticipate receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, a significant increase from November when only 60% said

they planned on getting a vaccination. Differences remain across demographic groups in the intent to be vaccinated, but the differences between racial groups – classified as Black, White, Hispanic or Asian—have generally decreased since December 2020.²⁷ But polls show disparities remain: African Americans are the least likely (26%) to say they will definitely get the vaccine, followed by 38% of Latinos, 47% of Asian Americans, and 51% of whites.²⁸

But trust in science in general has diminished. In 2019, 78% of White people said science has a positive effect on society; this year's polling showed that number has decreased to 69%, a decrease of 9 percentage points mainly among White Republicans or White people who lean towards the right wing. Polling that adjusted for race found 69% of White people felt that science had mainly positive effects on society compared to 63% of Hispanic people and 58% of Black people. Asians had the highest percentage in judging the effects of science on society as positive; 79%.²⁹

That sample, however, was comprised of English-speaking Asian Americans only, which is a skewed demographic. In fact, the skewed sample taken of Asian Americans shows more about the lack of understanding of that community by government and administrative agencies than it does about the preferences of Asian Americans. Looking at data from New York as a case study, Nadia Islam, associate professor in the Department of Population Health at NYU's School of Medicine, found enormous discrepancies between the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention regarding Asian populations and those from community level reports. Stella Yi, an assistant professor at NYU's Grossman School of Medicine agrees with this finding. CDC data found higher rates of infection in New York's Black and Latinx populations, but reported Asian rate of infection and death only slightly higher than that of White Americans.³⁰ However, an analysis of 85,000 patients in a New York City public hospital system revealed South Asians to have the second-highest infection and hospitalization rates for COVID-19. The mortality rate for Chinese Americans from Covid-19 was higher than for any other racial and ethnic groups.

Another reason for erroneous data is that the term "Asian American" includes 30 different subgroups sharing little if any ethnic background, language or income bracket. But the aggregation of all this data as "Asian Americans" essentially makes it meaningless. Compounding that problem is the flip side: members of the Asian American communities are "misclassified or counted as 'other' more often than other groups." There is also a discrepancy in terminology in how people classify themselves and how they are classified by others. "East Asians describe themselves as being Asian American. South Asians describe themselves as Asian American. But White and Black [people] and East Asians do not ascribe South Asians as being Asian American."³¹ Darker-skinned Asians who cannot speak English can be misclassified as Black. Professor Islam called out preconceptions about Asian Americans as a contributing factor in erroneous classification of that

23. A vaccine for Covid-19 became available to the general American public on 14 December 2020.

24. Jeremy Samuel Faust, Harlan M. Krumholz and Rochelle P. Walensky, "People Thought Covid-19 Was Relatively Harmless for Younger Adults. They Were Wrong," *The New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/16/opinion/covid-deaths-young-adults.html>

25. Jocelyn Solis-Moreira, "How did we develop a COVID-19 vaccine so quickly?" December 15, 2020 <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/how-did-we-develop-a-covid-19-vaccine-so-quickly>

26. "Guide to the Pandemic," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2021

27. Cary Funk and Alec Tyson, "Growing Share of Americans Say They Plan To Get a COVID-19 Vaccine – or Already Have," MARCH 5, 2021, PEW Research Center <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2021/03/05/growing-share-of-americans-say-they-plan-to-get-a-covid-19-vaccine-or-already-have/>

28. Dean Bonner, "Racial Disparities in Concerns about Getting COVID—and a Vaccine," Public Policy Institute of California, February 9, 2021 <https://www.ppic.org/blog/racial-disparities-in-concerns-about-getting-covid-and-a-vaccine/>

29. Ibid

30. Sojourner Ahébé "Without data, there's no equity": Deficient Asian American COVID-19 data masked community-wide disparities, PBS, March 14, 2021 <https://why.org/articles/without-data-theres-no-equity-deficient-asian-american-covid-19-data-masked-community-wide-disparities/>

31. Ibid

data.³²

As eager as the nation was for a vaccine, the rapidity of the vaccines' development has raised concerns about its safety, not only among people who are skeptical about science, but also in groups who tend to trust science. Their question about the quickness in finding vaccines have been reassuringly answered by the scientific community, who attribute the rapid timeframe to:

Numbers of researchers: The large number of researchers in labs around the world working on the vaccine led to more research.

Collaboration: Researchers shared their coronavirus data with each other

Previous knowledge: SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19 is a member of the coronavirus family, has been researched for 50 years.³³

Multiple funding sources: Research for vaccines is always costly, typically between 31–\$68 million. Funding came from both the government and organizations in the private sector.

Working on more than one vaccine: this made it more likely that a vaccine would be developed

Advances in genomic sequencing: researchers uncovered the viral sequence of SARS-CoV-2 in [January 2020](#)

Rapid completion of clinical trials: this was in large part due to the high number of volunteers for the vaccine studies

Large numbers of testing sites: more sites accommodated the higher number of volunteers, providing greater collection of data.

The development of mRNA vaccines: described as similar to the "landing on the moon moment," this was a major

breakthrough in vaccine development.³⁴

Other fears surrounding the vaccine have also been allayed. Two main concerns were about getting infected with the virus from the vaccine itself and the possibility of the vaccine altering DNA. But neither can happen. Explaining the science reassures most people: that the injection is not a small sample of the virus but instead a sample of messenger RNA and not the entire virus. Further, the mRNA never enters the nucleus of the cell, and so never contacts our DNA. Even more reassuring, the medical experts explain that the vaccines utilizing COVID-19 mRNA vaccines or with viral vectors "work with the body's natural defenses" in creating immunities.³⁵

The idea of using natural defenses provides a comforting image, the thought of nature being dominant in the modality of the inoculation and the realization that this highly technical procedure is a more sophisticated version of familiar interactions with nature, just at a microscopic level. Democrats are now 27 percentage points more likely than Republicans to say they plan to get, or have already received, a coronavirus vaccine (83% to 56%). This gap is wider than those seen at multiple points in 2020.³⁶

In an artwork commissioned by Peter Kwong, chief structural biologist for the NIH's AIDS Vaccine Research Center, Philip Chen's work captures the vitality and optimism in scientific achievement. His work creates an analogy to the scientific methodology involved. While the AIDS vaccine research was the foundation for creating the print, the artwork seems prescient now with all of the "vaccine" talk around Covid-19.³⁷ How many people are now familiar with the idea of an antigen/antibodies that had not been in the previous year? The NIH's AIDS Vaccine Research Center has been working for over fifteen

years to develop a vaccine and had cause to celebrate when it developed a broadly neutralizing antibody which has moved to the stage of being tested in animals. With this reason to celebrate, Kwong reached out to Chen to commission a print to hang in his new office when he transfers to Columbia University (he's taking over David Ho's lab). This will bookend an earlier print Chen created that was installed at the NIH in 2009 when Kwong started his hunt for an AIDS vaccine. Chen's print uses photo techniques and hand drawing that engage in a visual dialogue on paper. In the earlier print, Data and Theory, ancient pottery shards, photographically reproduced, are the point of departure for a fantasia of lines spiraling out into all forms and directions, including an anachronistic spigot. The work is both an analogy to any voyage of discovery: you have to have theories of what might be possible, even preposterous ideas; and a cautionary image: hypotheses ultimately have to be reconciled with facts, not fancy.

Working on a commission creates a challenge due to the need to adhere to the criteria imposed by the commissioner. Chen explained how he gradually elaborated the ideas contained in the newer print: "I tried to make an image independent of the scientific illustrations Peter provided me, one free from technicalities such as epitope and adjuvant--something more relatable to people without specialized knowledge." He also wanted to create a visual reference that removed the research from typical images of diagrams of molecules and linked the science to the natural world. "For Drift: Iteration, 2020, in order to become more emotionally involved with the project, I made a "bouquet" of corkscrew hazel branches that I collected from our front yard several years ago, anticipating that

32. Ibid

33. Jocelyn Solis-Moreira, op cit.

34. Dr. Yager, quoted in Jocelyn Solis-Moreira, op cit.

35. "Myths and Facts about COVID-19 Vaccines," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mar 11, 2021 <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/facts.html#:~:text=No.%20COVID%2D19,DNA%20in%20any%20way>.

See also COVID-19 vaccine myths debunked, Mayo Clinic Health System, DECEMBER 8, 2020 <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/featured-topic/Covid-19-vaccine-myths-debunked>

36. Sojourner Ahébé, op cit.

37. Conversation with Heather Skeens, Cultural Programs Supervisor, City of Cedar Falls, Hearst Center for the Arts

they might someday serve an artistic purpose.³⁸ The twists and turns of the branches create an energy and force that seems to eventually becoming channeled, first into a single common branch and then the turn of that branch echoes the curve of an elegantly rounded-back wooden chair, implying their fusion. A section of the branch shows the mechanism created, entirely of the wooden pieces, to lock the branch and chair. The connection from wooden branches to wooden chair create an analogy to the recombination of elements in creating a vaccine. Chen described his choice of this other element: "I think the Chinese horse-shoe chair is one of the most beautiful creations ever, and it wasn't much of a leap to visualize one of its specific joineries as a configuration that could "key" into a receptacle. In Peter's world, this half lap joint would be the structurally designed "epitope" of the antibody that conforms to the "N terminus region of the Fusion Peptide" of the antigen. The antibody is "boosted" by additions called adjuvants; my adjuvant can be seen at the bottom right, attached to the sinuous vertical element." The chair also references Kwong's and Chen's cultural heritage: both their fathers were born and raised in Toishan, a rural district outside of Canton.

While the branches are photographic reproductions, the chair is drawn schematically, diagramming its parts that have not yet fully come together to form one whole. The energy of the branches is echoed in a quieter way by the tension created by the spaces between the part-to-part elements. Our eyes anticipate their connection, but it has not yet happened. Chen's prints are on a golden tan paper, almost completely covered in the blackest ink. This surface is only interrupted by the objects that arise through the ink surface: the thin lines of the drawing, the tonal surface of the photographed objects. In other words, the positive elements are not the ink but the paper itself, and the ground surrounding them

is the ink.

But Chen is well aware that scientific advances such as vaccines, no matter how needed, are received with uneasiness. While specific questions can be answered, a vague suspicion hovers over the enterprise as a whole, and the greater implications of what the science can lead to. Rearranging nature can bring dire consequences, either deliberately by some malevolent power, or inadvertently by those seeking to be beneficial. This is implied in the twisting, almost atomic energy, lyrically presented. And Chen's title, *Drift: Iteration*, conjures an image of a natural movement, a force of nature that continues despite human intervention. This becomes explicit as the subject of the companion work, *Drift: Antidote*, 2020.

The second in this series continues the use of the black surface of the previous prints. But instead of a lyrical image emanating as a single narrative onto this surface, this work is more fragmented, divided into three discrete sections. Each section consists of three distinct layers of imagery: a a photograph of a rock, a violent re-interpretation of the rock, and a curative antidote. The re-interpretations of the rocks are not photographic but are line drawings depicting an instrument of power: a stiletto, a spearpoint, a handgun. These are overlapped with another line drawing in red—but not in red ink, but in mercurochrome. They show an implement of culture: a paintbrush, a pinwheel toy, a spoon. Chen creates a visual analogy among the three elements of each set: the rock has a shape roughly reminiscent of the weapon, which then is reconfigured by the corrective, the constructive device. But the direction of the objects, the sequence of which was first, second, third, is left up to the viewer. The rock is fully visualized, and therefore appears most solid, the basis for the other two. And the utensil or toy are drawn with the thinnest of lines. The weapons are thicker, bolder. I'd like to think they come

second and eventually become replaced by the tools for use, for play, for culture. But the red mercurochrome is both alarming and curative.

As in our own experience, the world in Chen's art leaves us with a choice. We hear the reassurances. But how can we ensure the outcomes? As viewers, we are confronted by the knowledge that, while processes are begun by others, the direction for the outcomes resides with us.

Section 3: Violence *A Sudden Shift, A Mass Murder: Acknowledging Anti-Asian Violence*

As we saw above in Sjöblom's artworks, all during the first year of the pandemic, very little attention was given to the daily violence against Asian Americans. But with a mass shooting this has finally changed. The murder of 8 people, six of them Asian American women, has been creating a wave of awareness, nationally, of racism against the Asian community, placing the mercurial rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans during Covid-19 into the spotlight.

Or, as the Washington Post described it:

The violent end to their lives has opened a window into the experiences of low-wage immigrant Asian and Asian American women in a stigmatized profession, and has ignited a difficult national conversation about race, class and gender in the United States.³⁹

In brief, the incident transpired on March 16th 2021, when a white male, Robert Aaron Long, 21, purchased a gun and that same day went on a shooting spree at three different spas: he killed four people at the first salon: two Asian women, a white woman and a white man at the first salon; three Asian women at the second; and one Asian woman at the third. He shot his victims in the head and the chest, but insisted that "he did not specifically target Asian American

38. All quotes by Phillip Chen are from an email correspondence with the author.

39. Ariana Eunjung Cha, Derek Hawkins, Tim Craig and Meryl Kornfield, "Atlanta spa shooting victims highlight struggles for Asian and Asian American immigrant women in low-wage jobs," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/20/atlanta-spa-shooting-victims-highlight-struggles-asian-asian-american-immigrant-women-low-wage-jobs/>

women.”⁴⁰ The victims were Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; Soon Chung Park, 74; Yong Ae Yu, 63. (Daoyou Feng, 44; Xiaojie Tan, 49; Paul Andre Michels, 54; and Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33. Authorities say that in his confession to the crimes, the gunman claimed that he struggled with “sexual addiction” and that the spas were “a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate.”⁴¹ Long was charged with eight murders in Atlanta, Georgia, arrested while driving to Florida where, he told police, he planned on killing more people.⁴²

News about the murders immediately went viral, not only because of the violence of the incident but also because of the anger that ensued when officials delayed (and still delay) in recognizing the crime as a racial hate crime.⁴³ This is in a climate in which, to reiterate the statistic, hate crimes against Asian Americans increased 150% in 16 American cities.⁴⁴

Seeming to follow the shooter’s lead, many resist viewing these crimes as race-based. J. Tom Morgan, a White male former district attorney in Georgia, found race incidental, stating: “This, to me, is a sex crime hate crime where the victims happen to be Asian.”⁴⁵ Georgia state Senator, Michelle Au, who is Chinese American, expressed the opposite viewpoint, that “people feel like they’re

getting gaslighted... frustrated by that lack of visibility and that aspect being ignored.”⁴⁶ Her opinion was reinforced by that of Georgia State University law professor Tanya Washington While police have said it’s too soon to tell whether the spa shootings qualify as a hate crime, she said it seems obvious the violence was motivated by bias given the people and businesses targeted. And Carol Leonnig, MSNBC contributor, stated this opinion concisely: Why did he show up at something titled ‘Yung’s Asian Massage’?⁴⁷

Frank Figliuzzi, former assistant director for counterintelligence at the FBI, attempted to split the difference: “If he says ‘I was addicted to sex’ and acted out against that – he was targeting women. A gender-based crime [is legally a hate crime]. He’s already confessed to a hate crime.” But as Figloosie continued his thought, he strongly asserting: “We are still taking about a subject with an intense, violent, fetishizing, objectifying view of Asian women...”⁴⁸

Can hate crimes against a particular gender be disassociated from race hatred? As early as 1991, philosopher Etienne Balibar wrote about sexism and racism as systems that are “mutually interconnected.” He clarified: “racism and sexism function together and in particular, racism always presupposes sexism.”⁴⁹

The artist Phillip Chen speaks for many when he stated bluntly: “Obviously race is inseparable.”

By taking a step back to view our world more intersectionally, we can better comprehend the antecedents of violence directed against Asian women. This was not an isolated incident but arises from a long history—the violence is not just in this moment but has a much longer historical moment.

Almost from the beginning of Chinese immigration to America, White Americans chose to read Asian women’s bodies in an overtly sexualized manner, using it as a method to curtail Chinese residency in the United States. In the early 1870s, California politicians recognized that defamation of Chinese women could provide an effective weapon against immigration: if Chinese men did come to America, they would not want to settle here without the possibility of family, they would merely sojourn here temporally. But how to ban Chinese women? Speaking before the House Committee on Foreign Relations in 1874, California State Representative Horace F. Page impressed the committee members with the evils of “importation” of Chinese women, playing on an image of Asian women as prostitutes that captured the imagination and has not disappeared in

40. Ibid; Amanda Arnold, “6 Asian Women Killed in Horrific Shooting Rampage,” *The Cut*, March 19, 2021 <https://www.thecut.com/2021/03/8-people-killed-in-atlanta-rampage-6-of-them-asian-women.html>

41. Teo Armus, “The Atlanta suspect isn’t the first to blame ‘sex addiction’ for heinous crimes. But scientists are dubious,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/18/sex-addiction-atlanta-shooting-long/>

42. Paulina Firozi, et al, “Suspect charged with eight counts of murder in killings at Atlanta-area spas, authorities say,” *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/17/atlanta-spa-shootings-live-updates/>

43. A hate crime is not a stand-alone sentence but is added to an indictment some time before going to trial: If jurors find it is a hate crime, the sentence received a mandatory enhancement of at least two years in prison and a fine of up to \$5,000 for a felony. Spurred in part by the murder of Ahmad Arberry, Georgia got its hate crime statute back on the books – it covers race and gender

44. Outrage was exacerbated when, while breaking the news of the rampage, the police spokesman, Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office Capt. Jay Baker said nothing about the victims but said of the killer “He was pretty much fed up and kind of at the end of his rope. Yesterday was a really bad day for him and this is what he did.” His comment prompted people to check out his social media where they found his Facebook page had posts promoting shirts with the slogan: “Covid-19 IMPORTED VIRUS FROM CHY-NA.” Meryl Kornfield, Hannah Knowles, “Captain who said spa shootings suspect had ‘bad day’ no longer a spokesman on case, official says” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/17/jay-baker-bad-day/>

45. Julie Bosman, Kate Taylor, Tim Arango, “A Common Trait Among Mass Killers: Hatred Toward Women,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/us/mass-shootings-misogyny-dayton.html>

46. Kate Brumback, “Spa shootings could be first test of Georgia hate crimes law,” *Star Tribune*, March 20, 2021 <https://www.startribune.com/spa-shootings-could-be-first-test-of-georgia-hate-crimes-law/600036559/>

47. Carol Leonnig, guest, *The 11th Hour*, MSNBC, March 18, 2021

48. Frank Figloosie, MSNBC, 18 March 2021; Kate Brumback, “First Test Of Georgia Hate Crimes Law,” Atlanta (AP), March 20, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-shootings-georgia-ahmaud-arbery-coronavirus-pandemic-cd68207150500f76e248fdc899717cd5> In 2009, President Obama expanded the federal hate crimes law to include crimes based on gender as federal hate crimes, CNN Politics, “Obama Signs Hate Crimes Bill into Law,” October 28, 2009 <https://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/28/hate.crimes/>

49. Etienne Balibar, “Racism and nationalism,” in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*, 1991, Verso, p. 49.

over a century. With that image in mind, Congress moved quickly and a year later enacted the Page Law prohibiting entry to “Oriental” women entering for “lewd and immoral purposes.” The burden of proof of morality was placed on Chinese women, and judged by White men. This was the nation’s first federal law to restrict immigration, prior to restrictions for mentally deficient and criminals, forever ending US open borders.⁵⁰

The equation between Chinese women and prostitutes became naturalized in the American imagination. The early 20th century saw Asian women in the US depicted as “Dragon Ladies”: sexy, exotic, attractive, who would seduce white men and corrupt their Christian morals.⁵¹ The wars in Korea and Vietnam led to familiar forms of conquest and power that encouraged soldiers to think of Asian women as “as playful sex toys.”⁵² In her book *Sex Among Allies*, Professor Katharine Moon investigated the relationships of American men with Asian women: “The main military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, encouraged soldiers to explore Korea’s ‘nighttime action,’ especially the kisaeng party, the ‘ultimate experience’: ‘Picture having three or four of the loveliest creatures God ever created hovering around you, singing, dancing, feeding you, washing what they feed you down with rice wine or beer, all saying at once, ‘You are the greatest.’ This is the

Orient you heard about and came to find.” Moon quotes a U.S. Army chaplain who told her that American men arriving in Asian countries had expectations of the women as “beautiful, subservient... property, things, slaves... Racism, sexism, it’s all there.”⁵³

The US government allowed American soldiers to bring Asian wives back to US, popularizing a new stereotype of Asian women. Known as “Lotus blossoms,” the women were conventionalized as “excellent wives, cute, docile, knowing how to please their husband and great homemaker.”⁵⁴ Both tropes emphasized the woman’s availability for sexual activities.

These stereotypes have migrated to the web where 40 million Americans visit pornographic sites regularly.⁵⁵ During coronavirus, the rate of visits to porn sites on the web has markedly increased in nations with high rates of coronavirus.⁵⁶ One of the most frequented pornography websites is titled “Asian Women,” ranked 9 in the category of most sexually explicit videos.⁵⁷

At the same time, violence against women has been on the rise since the pandemic began. Researchers have documented direct correlation between the male objectification of women’s bodies and violence against them.⁵⁸ Yet as a nation, we have turned a blind eye to this

violence. Speaking about the recent mass killing at the spas in Atlanta, Frank Figliuzzi said “Defining it as a gender-based hate crime begs attention to the frequency with which mass killers express hatred towards women and target them. a common trait among mass killers with hatred towards women – this is a reality of violence in America every day.”⁵⁹

(Asian males have not fared much better in the white gaze of dominant power. Chinese men arrived in America in a society with strongly polarized gender roles, in the Western states which had were more greatly populated with men. While many had been recruited to do the hard labor of laying tracks for railroads, creating paths through and around mountains, and working in mines, they also looked for other employment. Rather than vie for the already competitive male-tagged jobs, many Chinese accepted work that White males identified as ‘women’s work’: cooking, cleaning, laundering. Their beverage preference of tea over hard liquor also posed a threat to calcified ideas of gender. They further threatened the dominant male culture by their proximity to White women in their work in the house. Today we would understand how their sexuality disrupted the system of binary gender roles insisted upon in American culture, but at that time they received abuse by White society’s inability to fit them neatly into preset ideas

50. Lenore Metrick-Chen, *Collecting Objects*, op cit., p. 141; “Page Law (1875), *Immigration History*, website, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/page-act/>

51. Yanyan Zhou, Bryant Paul, “Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of “Asian Women” Online Pornography” *Sexuality & Culture* (2016) 20:1083–1100 DOI 10.1007/s12119-016-9375-9, p. 1088.

52. Ibid

53. Katharine Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in American-Korean Relations*, Columbia University Press, 1997, Pp. 32-33

54. Yanyan Zhou, Bryant Paul, op cit.

55. Internet Pornography by the Numbers; A Significant Threat to Society, Webroot: An Opentext Community <https://www.webroot.com/us/en/resources/tips-articles/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers>

56. The authors suggested that a reason for increased porn consumption “could be that some people are using sex as a surviving mechanism for coping with their loneliness, depressive symptoms, and even fear of death. Fabio Zattoni, Murat Gü, Matteo Soligo et al, “The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on pornography habits: a global analysis of Google Trends,” *IJIR: Your Sexual Medicine Journal*, 11 November 2020 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41443-020-00380-w>

57. Yanyan Zhou, Bryant Paul, op cit.

58. Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, “Men’s Objectifying Media Consumption, Objectification of Women, and Attitudes Supportive of Violence Against Women,” *Arch Sex Behav* (2016) 45:955–964 DOI 10.1007/s10508-015-0644-8, p. 955

59. Julie Bosman, Kate Taylor, Tim Arango, op cit.

of male-ness.)⁶⁰

Unlike the swastika against Jews or the burning cross against Black Americans, no iconic symbol signifies anti-Asian hatred. Many of the crimes are not physical assaults, 70% are verbal harassment.⁶¹ The myth is that Asian Americans are not experiencing real violence, that the 3,795 incidents received by the Stop AAPI Hate reporting center from March 19, 2020 to February 28, 2021, are not valid.⁶²

We previously examined the relationship between Trump and his follower's racial slurs and the rise in hate crimes. But now we ask: who benefits from this? What does Trump –and now others in the government–gain by maintaining this rhetoric?

Intelligence and foreign policy analyst Malcolm Nance connected the dots. He showed the triangulation between anti-Chinese rhetoric, hiding Russian disinformation campaigns, and the mass killings of in Atlanta.

The first pair in the triangle that Nance exposed was the hidden relationship between Trump's anti-Chinese rhetoric and his desire to obscure Russian involvement in his administration. By constantly mocking China and by exaggerating China's interference in our elections, Trump effectively obscured the role played by Russia in election interference, shifting attention from Russia to China.

As evidence for this assertion, Nance referenced a report released March 10

2021 from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, assessing the foreign threats to the 2020 US federal elections. The report, researched during the Trump administration, stated: "We assess that China did not deploy interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US presidential election. We have high confidence in this judgment." (my emphasis). The report also determined that Russia engaged in numerous efforts aimed at "denigrating President Biden's candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US."⁶³

Trump and his administration were all aware of the Russian disinformation campaign, as seen in the government report. Using rhetoric that cast China as the enemy accomplished two purposes: it created a diversion from Trump's mishandling of the pandemic, deflecting his personal and presidential failure in dealing with Covid-19 to China; and his substitution of China as the source of disinformation allowed Russia latitude to continue its covert operations.

The extent of the disinformation network is staggering: Rachel Maddow enumerated all those under the Trump administration who were complicit in propagating his lies, from Attorney General William Barr, to the Director of

National Intelligence, John Ratcliffe. The intelligence community under Trump had definitively concluded that Putin authorized influence operations targeting the 2020 election and that China was not involved, but officials with key positions in Trump's administration deliberately deceived the public, reiterating Trump's lies placing blame for a massive influence campaign on China, and exonerating Russia.⁶⁴

In a brilliant insight, Nance brought the relationship above into dialogue, triangulating it with the recent murders in Atlanta, saying "We may actually be able to see a direct arc from this report to the shooting that happened in Atlanta today." He spelled out how many right-wing people "adore" Russia and Putin's strategic goal of "dismantling liberal democracy and ... foster[ing] autocracy around the world.... the Russians have been amplifying the message from the Trump administration that all liberals are members of the Communist Chinese Party, and that the Chinese attacked us. And then we saw this multifold attack on Asian citizens in the United States. It is incestuous and it is all connected."

To paraphrase Rachel Maddow, the consequences of this complicity with Putin has consequences not just in foreign policy, the consequences resonate here in our daily lives.⁶⁵ Everything connected to the anti-Asian stereotyping is part of this violence.⁶⁶ Until it is not politically beneficial to certain members of the

60. And certainly, one size does not fit all: As R.P. Wong observes, "Asian American men are an extremely diverse group. The term "Asian American" alone is applied to over 43 different ethnic groups-groups which are also diverse in terms of residential preferences, country of origin, immigration, history, acculturation rates, language proficiencies, etc." But stereotypes are stronger than direct observation in many cases and the diversity has been eclipsed by typecasting all Asian American men as "model minority", "perpetual foreigners," and as "socially inept," and while also often seen as "patriarchal," often labeled as "emasculate and effeminate." Even traditions such as greater verbal restraint than most White counterparts are cast as "feminine." Rather than understand the cultural motives for such habits, judgements are based on standards formed in and by dominant cultural. In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said correlated "feminization" of Asian culture with the domination of Western power, stating that "The Orient is characterized by the West as feminine because it is "depraved", "lacking control," "degenerate," "weak," "silent," "passive," "submissive," and "an object" to watch and examine. Such stereotypes leach into American culture, even affecting Americans who work towards being allies.

61. Claire Wang, op cit. Russell Jeung, Aggie Yellow Horse, Tara Popovic, and Richard Lim, "Stop AAPI Hate National Report," *Stop AAPI Hate*, 3/19/20 – 2/28/21, <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>

62. Jennifer Liu, How to take action against anti-Asian racism at work and in your personal life, CNBC. Mar 18 2021 <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/18/how-to-take-action-against-anti-asian-racism.html>

63. National Intelligence Council Intelligence Community Assessment Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections, IO March 2021, p.7 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/16/politics/read-odni-foreign-threats-2020/index.html>

64. Maddow also mentioned deputy attorney general Jeffrey Rosen, acting attorney general trump administration Matthew George Whitaker and national security advisor Robert O'Brien. Rachel Maddow Show, MSNBC, 18 March 18, 2021

65. Rachel Maddow Show, MSNBC, 18 March 18, 2021

66. Thanks to Cora Metrick-Chen for this observation.

Republican party, the racist rhetoric will not stop, and aggressions will continue.⁶⁷

Healing Art/ Việt Lê

We again turn to art. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, race and art are seen against the backdrop of the pandemic. The content of Việt Lê's work is concerned with recent events but not as illustrations. Instead, the work emerges from the consciousness of the hierarchies of power, of the needs of the community. Throughout this last year of the pandemic, Lê has created performative paintings. "Around the time of the protests I was incredibly sad and empathetic about the protesters, but also about the historical violence and so I have been trying to think about ways of healing. I've been doing these cycles." Each work in his series *Cycle performance | paintings | object 2019-21*, begins with performance, a ritual of movement in time using incense, smoke, and minerals. The ritual is his response, both personal and political, toward loss and grief within his self and in the community: a healing process. The impetus to the work is the acknowledgment of what our society so often shies away from: an acknowledgment of grief and vulnerability. Rather than avoid these topics, try to "get over" them, Lê understands their importance in linking self and group, their ability to become "sites for political potential and solidarity."⁶⁸ To begin with vulnerability rather than power, and to acknowledge shared grief, creates an art that realigns the body politic.

Each of Lê's performances is a healing process through both destruction and purification involving ancestor offerings and cleansing, both of which require burning. They incorporate salt, which is a cleansing substance, and oil, which is incendiary, and layers and layers of other things found scattered around

his house. In his work we find hair, resin, rock. Moss is used as a medium. The ritual performance results in an object that is both an abstract artwork and a ritual object, both a painting and a burnt residue. These dimensional paintings speak of their own process of creation, and at the same time they signify in the present: their layered meanings are found in their simultaneous existence as traces and as things in themselves, synchronic and diachronic. The canvas itself is burnt through, resulting in holes through its surface that transform it from a solid ground to an active component, part of the matrix of the art work. Lê creates mandalas which when back-lit look like giant orbs, like the moon. Some works, such as *untitled (May 2020)* seem to bring us down towards the very substance of the earth, to an encounter with its varied textures, pebbled white and black and golden on a burnt black ground. Small areas of the burned surface are ripped, unfolding to reveal its ashy thinness, and we see the wall, the matrix underlying it. *untitled (altar/alter)*, 2021 fuses found household objects such as circular cans and rectangular containers and suspends them in a coating of gold leaf. Intermittently, through the gaps in the matrix, we see the red of torn rose petals. The vertical work has a feeling reminiscent of the luxurious abundance of gold found in Gustav Klimt's portrait of Block-Baur, the repetition of swirls and patterns. But in Lê's work is not a celebration of luxury but a reminder of how objects themselves are always transforming, the pedestrian and the transcendent encompassed in one object.

Viewing Lê's art, we start to comprehend how the works have both private and public meaning. Still, it might at first seem a stretch to imagine that an individual action in creating art can have political consequences. This becomes clearer

when we look to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who wrote about how our identity is not singular. An "I" becomes a "we": all individual quests for meaning interlace with memories of others.⁶⁹ Through sharing memory, an individual becomes anchored to a group, to several groups, and the self extends beyond its physical body. The ritual is part of the enaction of memory, linking individual to ancestors and present time to past and future.⁷⁰

Lê elaborates on this: "I think the individual is reflective {reflexive} of the social/political. I learned through my current illness: for me it is a sort of metaphor for larger spiritual concerns. We are individual bodies tuned into the body politic, so if there is something off-balance then I think we feel it." And conversely, while culture is collective, nevertheless we perpetuate it and link to one another only through our individual acts.⁷¹

Lê ultimately rejects the Freudian therapy for melancholia which describes how the sufferer continually revisits the site of trauma and through this can eventually be reconciled. "For some of us" Lê says, "there is no reconciliation." He asked "What do you do when you return [to the trauma] again and again? I argue that something shifts, a definite shift for a deeper understanding." He refers to Judith Butler's writing in which she discusses the movement beyond trauma: "Only once we have suffered that violence we are compelled, ethically, to ask how we will respond to violent injury. What role will we assume in the historical relay of violence...?" She answers that our rage and grief bind ourselves to each other. "In a certain way, and paradoxically, having suffered violence from others heightens our responsibility" and that responsibility is toward communal, even global justice.⁷²

67. A paraphrase of an observation by ICCI community activist for racial justice Laural Clinton

68. Việt Lê, email to author, 15 March 2021

69. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (1941), University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 171-173. A similar idea is expressed concisely by Aleida Assmann in "Memory, Individual and Collective." "We must not forget that human beings do not only live in the first person singular, but also in various formats of the first-person plural." in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 223

70. Lenore Metrick-Chen, *Elusive Monuments For Contested Memory: Statues, Architecture And Other Ephemera*, in consideration at SUNY Press

71. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Op cit.

72. Judith Butler, pp. 15-17, 25

Jewish thought, too, has a long history of regarding broken things, and discusses the importance of recognizing our own trauma as a prerequisite to working towards community and peace. The metaphor used in the Kabala is that we are all pieces of a broken vessel that had been sent crashing to earth. The origin of human life is through this shattering. The metaphor illustrates our unity through our brokenness, which is an intrinsic part of human experience; we are individually shattered and it is this vulnerability that links us collectively as a unity.

Lê's art is an answer to the question: "What do we do beyond trauma? How do you choose to continue after the trauma?" This endeavor is not something Lê takes lightly. His art is not the "instant fix" of new age – which wants the end result of healing but replicates only the outer appearance of ritual without any of the work in understanding the deep significance attached to each gesture or word. The endeavor to rebuild our commons to be more compassionate, healing and sustaining requires knowledge of ourselves, our own histories, and communal history. Aleida Assmann is instructive here: "Institutions and larger social groups... do not 'have' a memory; they 'make' one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments."⁷³ Lê's art begins from a new paradigm, from his comprehension of wholeness as including trauma, and responsibility stemming from embracing that instead of suppressing it.

Ritual work does not begin with the ritual itself. It rests on a deeper knowledge. And this is where Lê begins. His groundwork is embedded not just in his art but in his life: "I think it's very important to be cognizant of specific histories and lineages and do deep research and engagements. My family is part of a Vietnamese indigenous religion: one of my great grandfathers and my grandfather were founders of Cao Dai – the third largest religion in Vietnam – we have visions and seances. It is a syncretic religion combining Christianity, Vietnam-

ese nationalism, French anti-imperialist sentiment, Buddhism, all connecting to the larger history of spiritual ritual." His knowledge of history, however, leaves him open to using ideas and practices from other lineages and entirely different shamanistic groups. After all, as he points out, any idea of "purity" or "authenticity," is problematic. "Countries such as mine have always been hybrid, we have been colonized for a thousand years. It's a rich culture that is indebted to Chinese culture, there's a lot of overlap, there's a lot of the same words, and same traditions. We are also indebted to French imperialism, American imperialism. So on the one hand you can't just pick or choose without deep embedded historical understanding. And at the same time, how do we enable other solidarities? Who can speak for whom: how can I as an Asian queer activist be in solidarity with other communities? We need to speak about these structural violences, see through our pillars and our silos to really connect. In this way we see these things that are flowing through: the oppression and violences that are literally killing us, but also our healing." Our very sense of self emerges from the way we incarnate the past.

In Lê's work, nothing is seen as "merely residue" but each component retains its own importance. The ash left over from the burning is as elemental to his art, as essential, as the process. His interest in "positive and negative" reflect Eastern art and philosophies which recognize the void as equal importance as the subject. The strength of the void, the empty spaces, allow the work to have what he refers to as a 'shadow response,' an analogy to a Jungian term that refers to the dark or unknown side of the personality. His work sheds light on the unknown. As Lê clarifies "You embrace the shadow aspects of yourself, the dark, difficult aspects." They contain a different kind of energy than that emanating from burning. They have a strength in their stillness. And that stillness is not passive but is in itself a form of action, a different strategy of action. The shadow aspects Lê discusses resembles

in part to what the Chinese refer to as *wei wu wei*, 為無為: the action of non-action, an alert, deliberate waiting.

Lê's work takes us from the binaries of "either/or" and from their calcifying consequences which we see playing out today in US politics. Through his performance, we see how the shamanistic ways of addressing violence and trauma opens up different ways of thinking about how to repair the violence systemic in our culture; in his paintings we find palimpsests of political historical traces, recuperative representation, a type of solace and source for healing.

The art opens us to think of other possibilities in configuring our relationships with one another. "I mean for them to get at the idea that we don't need to continue to exist as it now seems [we must]: so separate, so isolated." Instead, they lead us to understand that our grief is shared, a first tentative individual movement toward a more generative society centered on understanding "the individual is the communal."

Coda

Although racism, art and the pandemic could not be triangulated, nevertheless, connections among three separate sections—rhetoric, vaccines, and violence—became more transparent when seen against their shared backdrop of Covid-19. Each section of this paper did not speak equally about three components. Rather, they worked in concert with each other, each providing another view of the relationship. Linked by what Wittgenstein referred to as 'family resemblances,' the three elements formed constantly shifting pairs: race and art, and Covid-19, race and Covid.⁷⁴

We become aware of the underlying structure girding our society more through its effects than through a direct view. Through the overlaps in each section, as through a *moiré* pattern, we see a structure that has been hidden by looking at them singly. In this way, the paper in its entirety makes visible the ideology underlying and connecting the verbal and

73. Aleida Assmann, "Transformations Between History and Memory" *Social Research*, Vol. 75, Issue 1, Spring 2008, p. 55

74. Ludwig Wittgenstein, op cit.

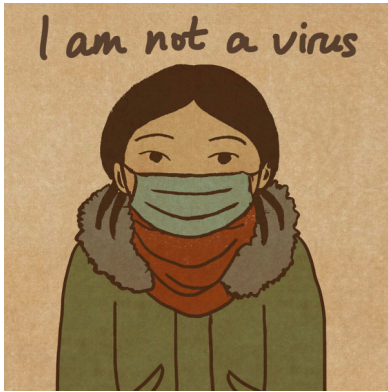


Fig. 1: Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, image posted on Instagram

Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Untitled (I am not a Virus)*, 2020, ink and brush and digital coloring on paper

physical violence and the malfeasance of the Trump administration in the time of Covid-19. And the artworks enable us to see and feel the world differently: while they present aspects of the world we currently inhabit, they lead to a next step;

Fig. 2: Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom image posted on Instagram

Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Untitled (I don't want to come across as a racist, but...)*, 2020, ink and brush and digital coloring on paper



they take us to the heart of possibilities.

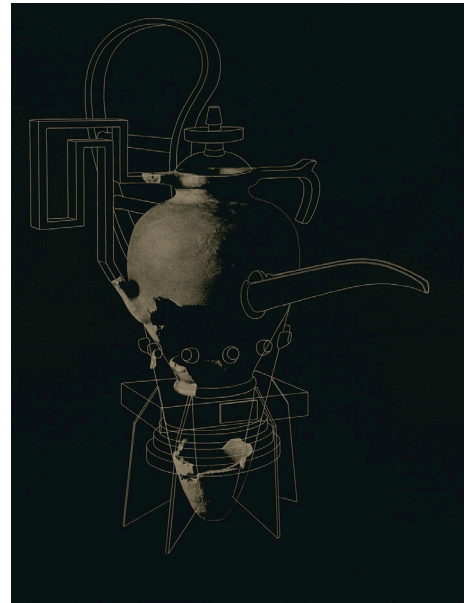
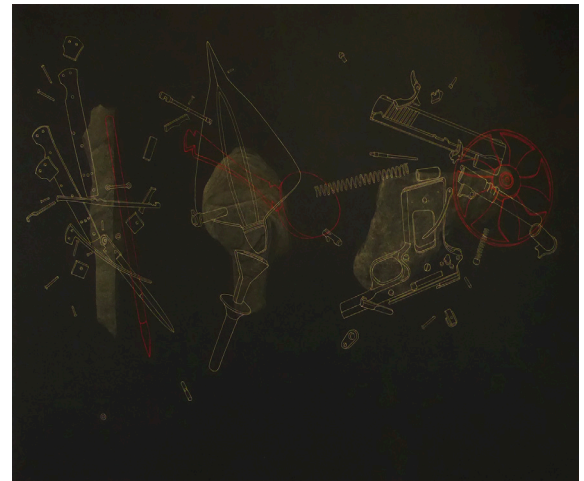


Fig. 3: Phillip Chen

Drift: Iteration

Etching with photographic and drawn elements,

Black ink on paper 23" x 31"



2020

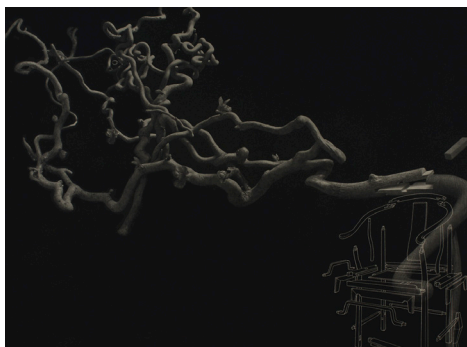




Fig. 6: Viêt Lê, untitled (May 2020)
Trace of a Performance
mixed media (oil, smoke, salt, dye, ash)
35" X 35" X 2"

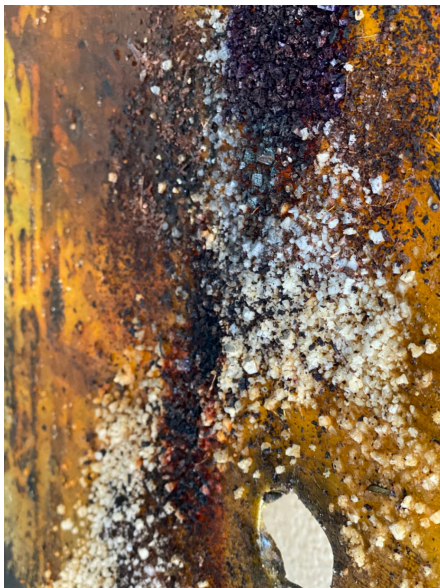


Fig. 7: Viêt Lê, untitled (May 2020), detail
Trace of a Performance
mixed media (oil, smoke, salt, dye, ash)



Fig. 8: Viêt Lê, untitled (altar/alter), 2021, detail
Trace of a Performance
Mixed media (resin, roses, found household items [cans, containers], gold leaf)



Fig. 9: Viêt Lê, untitled (altar/alter), 2021
Trace of a Performance
Mixed media (resin, roses, found household items [cans, containers], gold leaf) 78" X 32" X 1 3/8"

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