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Circles and Circuits I: History and Art of the Chinese Caribbean Diaspora

Circles and Circuits II: Contemporary Chinese Caribbean Art

Curated by: Alexandra Chang and Steven Y. Wong, in coordination with Mar Hollingsworth

Exhibition schedule: *Circles and Circuits I*: California African American Museum, Los Angeles, September 15, 2017–February 25, 2018; *Circles and Circuits II*: Chinese American Museum, Los Angeles, September 15, 2017–March 11, 2018

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Reviewed by: I. A. Choudhury, PhD Candidate, Stanford University



Fig. 1. Installation detail from Katarina Wong, *Fingerprint Project: Murmuration Unfolding*, 2017. Wax casts of fingerprints, pins, sumi ink, graphite, 84 in. x 16 ft. x 2 in. California African American Museum. Photography courtesy of the artist

Circles and Circuits is an apt title for this two-part exhibition tour addressing the art of the Chinese Caribbean diaspora. The exhibition begins in the early twentieth century at the California African American Museum and brings us to the present day at the Chinese American Museum. The imagery within the title is symbiotically resonant of diasporic routes inherent within the history of the Caribbean archipelagos, and more subtly, of those we might overlook. It is a reminder of how such circuits can navigate into deeper and perhaps unfamiliar circles, such as the transcultural and transnational connections located within the art created by Chinese migration to the Caribbean.

The exhibitions include works by thirty-nine artists divided between the two venues. They encompass works in a range of media, from paintings, installation, video collage, and photography to sculpture, extending another inflection upon the title. The exhibitions link mediums and practices as well as artists, connecting cultural traditions that reverberate within the contemporary works, such as Katarina Wong's blue-and-white glazed animal ceramics in part two. Wong is an interdisciplinary artist of Cuban and Chinese descent, born and currently working in the United States. Her animal ceramics interweave a personal memory of a childhood dinner in Cuba with a nod to Ming porcelain. Additionally, the inclusion of archival material within the historical exhibit casts a wider net around the notion of tradition, memory, and personal experience that is followed through into the second exhibition and undercuts reading only linear trajectories between the past and present. As the title *Circles and Circuits* implies, we are further imbricated in a temporal as well as historical circumference that is literally and metaphorically manifest throughout both exhibitions.

Part one begins in the 1930s, and it follows through to contemporary artists reiterated in part two. Thus, Wong is also featured with a site-specific installation, *Fingerprint Project: Murmuration Unfolding* (2017), in the first exhibition (fig. 1). Using fingerprints by family and friends, cast into hundreds of elliptical wax discs and held to the wall by metal pins, Wong creates two arcs that seemingly float off the wall, demarcated by a wash of pale blue paint. She heightens this illusion through shadow effects that produce layers of multiple discs via lighting and sumi ink, as used in traditional Chinese calligraphy. The overall effect is like watching a flock of birds caught midflight in migration. The work is a paean to both capturing a transitory moment and the longer historical unfolding of mass migration alluded to by the physical materiality of individual fingerprints (fig.



Fig. 2. Installation detail from Katarina Wong, *Fingerprint Project: Murmuration Unfolding*, 2017. Wax casts of fingerprints, pins, sumi ink, graphite, 84 in. x 16 ft. x 2 in. California African American Museum. Photography courtesy of the artist

2). Exhibited within part one, the work recalls the other fingerprints of the earlier generation of artists surrounding Wong's installation. Similarly, the ink and light impressions are, in one sense, a material acknowledgment of Wong's own artistic heritage, but in another sense, they are the temporal shadow of one's history seen collectively in transit. As the title *Murmuration Unfolding* invokes, the history of such migrations are perceived in sonic, spatial, and temporal waves, and, correspondingly, the premises of the two exhibitions work in much the same way. The exhibitions may be viewed separately or in conjunction. The correlative threading between works and artists in each of, and between, the two exhibitions enables viewers to understand the necessary confluence of visible and often invisible interconnections. There is a porousness within these interconnections, whether via individual artists in both exhibits, or between larger networks between and through them that speaks to the greater permeability of these overlooked diasporic threads between Chinese, Latin American, and African communities in the Caribbean.

Conceived by Stephen Y. Wong three years ago as a project for the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA program, he and co-curator Andrea Chang have highlighted a little-known and under-researched history of artistic production and convergence via Chinese migration within the Caribbean. The idea of simultaneous multiple exhibitions representing the overlapping hybrid and synecdochic idea of the Caribbean may not be new: one precedent may be the much larger 2012–13 tripartite exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, which was presented across three museum venues in New York. Nonetheless, it is the interconnections within *Circles and Circuits* that make the bipartite exhibition form coherent and legible in terms of its subject matter and assertions. Indeed, the dual nature of the exhibition, with its reiteration of some artists in both parts, reaffirms the very nature of the artistic and cultural networks under investigation. Expanding the inference of a Chinese diaspora as well as a Caribbean diaspora, the two venues and their individual approaches extend thematic areas and artists ripe for further research and scholarship. *Circles and Circuits I* and *II* validate the existence of a far-reaching art history and its cumulative circuits still redolent today.

The history of the Chinese presence in the Caribbean occurred in three waves. Beginning in the sixteenth century mainly via trade and commodities, "it brought with it an imagined China."¹ It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that indentured labor for sugar and tobacco plantations, plus work on the Panama Canal Railroad, bought foundational settlements of more than seven million Chinese to Cuba, the British West Indies, and Panama. The second and third waves occurred ostensibly in the postcolonial period, between 1900 and 1940, and in post-1980s immigration.² The exhibitions are not limited to Chinese diaspora artists in the Caribbean but accommodate a wider hub of diasporic artistic communities in North America, London, and Paris. Such breadth of travel and migration allows the viewer to perceive the global networks of Chinese diasporic artists.

As may be expected, *Circles and Circuits I: History and Art of the Chinese Caribbean Diaspora* flags the most well-known artist in its circuit, Wifredo Lam, as a necessary prerequisite within any narrative of Chinese Caribbean art. As a Cuban-born artist of Chinese, African, and Spanish ancestry, Lam remains preeminently emblematic of both Sino-Cuban and Afro-Cuban cultures. His presence in the exhibition draws attention to the less acknowledged status of the former, partly through Lam's own insistence on being primarily defined as Cuban. Lam's sketch of his Chinese father, "Enrique" Yam Lam, from 1922, alongside archival photographs of Lam with André Breton in Marseilles in 1941 and Aimé Césaire in Martinique in 1977, situates the artist within his familial and artistic communities. Trained in both Cuba and Spain, Lam made a pivotal move from Madrid to Paris in 1938, coming into contact with both Surrealist and Cubist artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and André Breton before returning to Cuba in 1941. Lam's collaborations with Breton, such as the *Jeu de Marseille* playing cards from 1940–41 (exhibited as reprints), signal these wider global cosmopolitan circuits as well as the transposition of given identities and their hierarchical order.

The fluidity of identity can be most palpably felt in Lam's *Croiseur Noir* prints (c. 1972) in another collaboration, this time with the writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues. These metamorphic figures have a strange animas and brooding intensity, as in much of Lam's work. They are simultaneously machine-like and organic in shape and form. The deployment of repeated pairs of blank white eyes against a blackened corpus as a collection speak to both a disjuncture of identity and the production of new beings that cannot be identified. Together these works exemplify how Lam's art slips between and beyond the

labels of either Surrealism or Négritude. Lam's presence in part one is a salutatory demonstration not just of his shared ethnic and cultural heritage with the other artists in the exhibitions but also of how such works both demand and resist categories and periodization within the often-monocular lens of Western modernism. Part of the work of *Circles and Circuits* is to enable us to see formations and patterns of a different shared iconography outside of that lens.

If Lam provides a recognizable reference point, it is the figure of Chinese Trinidadian artist Sybil Atteck and her work that become a recurrent touchstone in this exhibition. Atteck provides a route map, if any claim can be made for one, through both exhibitions. Atteck's role as a seminal artist in part one is well earned, despite being virtually unknown outside of Trinidad. Trained in Lima, London, and Washington, DC, she was a founding member of the Trinidad Arts Society in 1943. Her works presented in part one are a testament to her role and influence as well as her practice. The exhibition documents her oeuvre from her training in London in 1934, anticipating the burgeoning Caribbean Arts Movement there, to the contemporary period, where it comes full circle via her extended family. Works by Atteck's nephew, Richard Fung, and his cousin, Adam Williams, are featured in part two, delineating Atteck's own historical trajectory and yet another type of circuit. Atteck's works are interspersed throughout the first *Circles and Circuits* exhibition, underlining her artistic development and the depth of her oeuvre as an artist of Chinese Caribbean heritage and a diasporic artist. Castigated to some extent for her seemingly European early expressionistic tendencies, Atteck produced vibrant depictions of island culture and traditions following Trinidad and Tobago's independence in 1962 from the United Kingdom. These later, larger works—such as *Spirit of Carnival II* (1966; Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Art Collection) or *Horsay (Moon Dancers)* (1973; Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Art Collection)—use color and form that blur the distinction between abstraction and figuration, enfolding and creating existing and new myths of native identity. In contrast, *Still Life with Fruit* (c. 1955; Collection of Helen Atteck) is an example of an early work that was accepted for the Royal Academy's 1955 Summer Exhibition. Whereas this earlier work attests to Atteck's English training, the progression between this and her postcolonial works belies the predominance of European influence within her oeuvre.



Figs. 3, 4. Right: Installation view of Sybil Atteck, *Self Portrait*, c 1943. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 16 1/2 in. Collection of Helen Atteck. Courtesy of the Chinese American Museum, photography by Ian Byers-Gamber; Left: Sybil Atteck, *Self Portrait*, c.1970. Oil on board, 17 1/2 x 23 1/2 in. Collection of Helen Atteck

Two self-portraits by Atteck are important inclusions in the exhibition. If the attenuation to cultural identity is marked by the need to reassert Lam's ethnic inheritance from the beginning, these portraits confound the idea of a singular assertion and, simultaneously, the necessity for self-determination. The contrast between the two self-portraits is revealing as much for the need to assert identity as for its slippage within all diasporic identities. The earlier portrait (c. 1943; Collection of Helen Atteck) is muted, in dull tones of brown and black—its tonal hues highlighted by the whiteness of Atteck's dress (fig. 3). Her skin tone ranges from hues of pale to deep brown, sharply demarcated by the lines of her face. Her gaze is turned away from the viewer, but her mixed heritage is assigned by the epicanthic fold of her eyes and the gradation of her skin tone—almost defiantly so. There is a tension between the averted gaze and Atteck's ownership of her racial and gender identity. If this earlier portrait is a self-realization of her subject position, Atteck's later self-portrait (c. 1970; Collection of Helen Atteck) deploys a much broader color palette and deeper abstract lines, making her identity more mutable (fig. 4). Skin tone is a *mélange* of different hues, ranging from blue, green, and yellow to deepest brown, making her heritage less apparent. While this later portrait still clearly distinguishes the artist as a nonwhite subject, this Atteck—with her direct gaze, bold hues, and sharper lines—conjoins her art with her subjecthood, rather than making it an object for study. In an age in which identity politics has reemerged as a defining marker of political contestation vis-à-vis national identity, citizenship rights, and global migrations, Atteck's self-portraits comment on the pull between the right to assert one's own identity and the many layers of subject formation that inscribe all identities regardless of origin.



Fig. 5. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Finding Balance*, 2015. Composition of 28 Polacolor Polaroid photographs on aluminum panels, 105 1/2 x 159 1/4 in. Photography courtesy of the artist and Samsøñ

Part one of *Circles and Circuits* can be divided thematically between a historical exploration of modernism and postwar independence and a thematic cataloguing of identity and landscape. Portraiture and representational politics play a large part: Atteck's presence raises the question of female authority and equality within a non-Western model, reverberating in María Magdalena Campos-Pons's monumental recasting of herself as a hybrid Chinese empress in *Finding Balance* (fig. 5). Balance is a keyword for the exhibition

project as a whole; these works are negotiating between different representational politics, as well as between Western and non-Western paradigms. Similarly, questions of gender norms and themes of queerness are resonant in many works, from Lam to the contemporary period, that are balancing between these same modes of negotiation and reception.

Circles and Circuits II: Contemporary Chinese Caribbean Art is a smaller undertaking, but with broader thematic streams. Questions about identity and landscape are engaged with the body, popular culture, and, significantly, questions of hybridity and authenticity are investigated in relation to larger global narratives—past and present. As a purely contemporary show, this second exhibition engages with these more readily visible global concerns against the conception of Chinese Caribbean identity, allowing the viewer to consider the latter in relation to expanding our notions of globalism—or not. Such are the concerns of the artists and their works themselves. Maria Lau's photographic installation, *71: A Cuban Chinese Journey* (ongoing), and Richard Fung's video installation, *Sea in the Blood* (2000; courtesy of the artist and Vtape), use corresponding techniques to similar effect. Like Fung's use of collaging, Lau's double-exposure layerings are meditations about the reclamation of memory as a way to locate one's own authentic self. The mosaic and multidimensional effects of each work both refute and mourn an essential self. In contrast, Margaret Chen's large-scale installation, *Ovoid/O void* (2003) resembles both an open wound and a primordial ooze in which ideas of origin and authenticity are reworked and revoked through the juxtaposition of natural and synthetic materials and allusions to reflection and copy. The dialectic within the imagery of her title is simultaneously an irreverent nullification and an affirmation of origin.

If the processes of globalization negate specificity of place and personhood, both parts of *Circles and Circuits* assert the necessity of reexamining the circuitous and sometimes tangled threads of continuities and discontinuities in our global diasporic makeup. Figures such as Lam continue to disrupt canonical formations, and artists such as Sybil Atteck, Amy Leong Pang, Carlisle Chang, and Albert Chong require us not just to disrupt but to recalibrate notions of the canon itself. By no means definitive, these exhibitions interrogate binary distinctions and their usefulness in revising not only issues of representation but also the very discourses around them. Definitiveness is a trope that these exhibitions usefully deconstruct. Complicating notions of origin and hybridity as an infinite process rather than stasis, *Circles and Circuits* delineates a much wider circumference and reach than we may imagine.

Notes

¹ Alexandra Chang, *Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art: Research Presented by Alexandra Chang* (Los Angeles: Chinese American Museum, 2017), 15.

² See *Caribbean Quarterly: Special issue on The Chinese in the Caribbean* 50, no. 2 (June 2004) for a useful summation of the history of migration and settlement.