FLO OY WONG

University Galleries
University of Nevada, Reno
DIRECTOR’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

University Galleries is pleased to exhibit Flo Oy Wong’s You Gotta Be Brave at Artspace in downtown Reno. Exhibiting Ms. Wong’s work is an opportunity for our campus museum to consider the powerful role of immigrant narratives in defining what it is to be American. This exhibition shares memory through sight and sound in ways that mirror traditional ways of passing stories through the generations. Whether shared in the kitchen, the fireside, the front porch, or in a sewing circle, the telling of family stories is an activity at the center of many people’s lives. We hope that you can take this exhibition as an opportunity to draw your own circle together and exchange the tales that tell your histories.

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Paul Baker Prindle
April 2015

Flo Oy Wong
Flo Oy Wong, Storyteller
Melanie Herzog

A first-generation American-born artist and poet of Chinese descent, Flo Oy Wong interlays symbols and substances imbued with memory and meaning—rice sacks, beads, sequins, embroidery thread, photographs, rice, Chinese funerary paper, U.S. flags, and the material objects of people’s lives, along with fragments of text—in intimately scaled assemblages and large installations that tell stories previously untold. Art historian and curator Margo Machida writes of Wong’s deep investment in “the continual back-and-forth exchange between artistic intervention and lived experience” as she mines the meanings of these culturally laden materials.¹ For Wong, visual images and language—English and Cantonese—coalesce to bear witness to her own history and that of her family, the history of Chinese in America, and other immigrant experiences.

Born in Oakland, California in 1938, Wong grew up in Oakland’s Chinatown. Seeking a means to express the reality of her own life as a wife and mother, she began to take art classes in her late thirties. Wong’s first major body of work, her autobiographical Oakland Chinatown Series (1983-1991), emerged from what she describes as “an unarticulated need to see myself portrayed in a non-stereotypical way.”² Derived from family photographs, this series of drawings pays tribute to her family’s tightly interconnected lives and work as restaurateurs at the Great China Restaurant from the 1940s into the 1960s and illuminates a particular moment in the history of Chinese immigration and resettlement in the United States.

For Wong, rice is a primary signifier of this history of Chinese in America, the substance of physical, cultural, and psychic survival. “Eating rice—as a child as well as an adult—and the symbolic import of rice in Chinese culture and mythology both play a role in Wong’s fascination with rice sacks,” writes art historian Moira Roth of the rice sacks that have become Wong’s iconic medium.³ In Baby Jack Rice Story (1993-1996), she embellished rice sacks with silkscreened
photographic images and embroidered text to commemorate her husband Edward Wong’s childhood in Augusta, Georgia during the era of legalized segregation, and his deep and enduring friendship with two neighbors, brothers Boykin and Cush Cade. Ed Wong’s father, who had emigrated from China, ran a grocery store that served Augusta’s African American community—descendants of the laborers who, along with earlier Chinese immigrants, constructed the region’s canals and railroads at the end of the nineteenth century. Ed’s friends called him “Baby Jack,” after the colloquial Chinese term for a baby boy, Be Be Jai.

Fabric and the workings of the needle recur as metaphors in Wong’s conceptualization of her artistic practice, and are materially manifested in the substances and processes by which she produces her art: reinforcement of frail and wispy weaves, interlacing the warp of history with the weft of people’s lived experiences, tying together apparently disparate strands of knowledge, piecing fragments to make a coherent whole, mending torn and abraded social fabrics, closing a wound. In *My Sister: Li Hong* of 2008, Wong honors her developmentally disabled eldest sister and exposes issues of mental health and cognitive disability seldom discussed in the Chinese American community. The audio component of this installation includes Chinese opera music that references Li Hong’s musical ability; spoken family reminiscences substantiate the elaborated rice sacks that clothe the installation’s central dress form to envelop Wong’s sister with dignity and bind the wound of this cultural silence.

Cultural theorist and literary critic Lisa Lowe posits culture as the space in which identities are constituted and articulated, and where history is mediated, “the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however fragmented, imperfect, or disavowed.” Lowe stresses the fundamental importance of immigrant narratives told by writers and artists who assume what she calls “the task of recomposing history out of silence and fragmentation.” Wong’s assiduous assembling of objects, images, and bits of text bears visual resemblance to the narratives of which Lowe writes
that are composed of partial and elusive traces—of recollected memories, reminiscences of place and displacement, scraps of correspondence, and family stories that are often unspoken or only partially told. In *Ai Joong Wah (Great China)* of 2008, Wong recomposes the history of the Great China Restaurant through family photographs and objects redolent of the restaurant’s kitchen; poetic text summons the sound and rhythm of the restaurant workers’ lived reality.

Wong now writes poetry, words that proliferate with the narrative urgency of her earlier mark-making, stitching, and accumulative practice. Composed of fragmentary memories buried and exposed over time, and secrets long held close, these are stories that must be told—whether in words, images, or an amalgam of these. “I like the idea of us telling our stories from the inside,” Wong writes. “We tell them so elegantly and beautifully. Our voices are really needed. We add to the enrichment of America.”

Intimately personal, the stories revealed in Wong’s art are also integral to the larger historical narrative of this country, assertions of presence that counter silence and absence.


Baby Jack slipped on his light weight jacket over his cotton shirt and short pants. He wore his red baseball cap. He barely reached the Colonial “bread is good” sign on the front door of the Wong Choy Grocery. Baby Jack and his older brother, Jack Jack, waited for Mike Lowe, a trusted friend of the Wong Yet Choy family.

“Where is he?” Baby Jack asked as he peered through the window of the dusty front door. He was always waiting for someone.

“Where he takin’ us?” Baby Jack asked, hoping that his question would hasten the arrival of the family friend.

“Dunno,” Jack Jack, answered. “He’ll be here soon.”

Jack Jack put his right hand on his younger brother’s shoulder to reassure him. Baby Jack liked the warm touch.

Mike Lowe was taking the youngest Wong boys somewhere. Both boys were excited. Baby Jack knew he would have fun. Mike Lowe always planned surprises for them.

Their Mama, Sue Shee Wong, had come to trust this light skin Black man who had befriended her husband when he first opened up the Wong Choy Grocery. Now that her husband had left for San Francisco she cared for her American-born children with the assistance of her China-born son, Theodore, and Mike Lowe.

Sue Shee Wong arrived in the U. S. in 1933. She brought her younger brother, Robert, and Theodore, from China. Theodore was known as Kow Gaw. He ran the Wong Choy Grocery with his mother while acting as a surrogate father for Baby Jack and his siblings. Sometimes, Mama and Kow Gaw could not to tend to the needs of the younger boys. Mike Lowe helped.
As a family friend Mike Lowe built the bench, a gathering point for neighborhood men, in front of the Wong Choy Grocery. The men played checkers and joshed with one another there. It was a place where they could get away from their tiny shot gun houses. They didn’t have to listen to the shouts of their demanding women when they met their friends.

Mike Lowe also came to the bench. He first met Wong Yet Choy, Baby Jack’s baba, long ago. Wong Yet Choy opened one of many Chinese grocery stores in Augusta. These stores allowed Black families to shop near their homes, sometimes on credit. Quite often, Blacks cashed their checks there. That saved them from going to banks outside of the neighborhoods. Not many had cars to drive out of the railroad-bound Wrightsboro Road area. At the Chinese grocery stores Black men provided safety late in the night while keeping owners and their families company.

Baby Jack was happy Mike Lowe came to their family store. He loved the bumpy ride that this special man gave him on the grocery bike.

On that summer day as dusk was near Mike Lowe finally appeared. His reddish hair glistened in the hot sun. His fair skin—sweaty.

“Yuh boys ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” they shouted, waving good bye to Mama and Kow Gaw.

“Y’all be careful,” Kow Gaw called.

Baby Jack and Jack Jack were too overjoyed to pay heed.

They made an unusual site—a tall red haired light skin Black man with two young Chinese boys.

“Where we goin’?” Baby Jack asked, tugging at Mike Lowe’s short sleeve shirt.

“Yuh tellin’ us?” Jack Jack questioned.
Mike Lowe looked at the brothers.

“Y’all see,” he smiled.

They walked along the roadways littered with balls of branches. Soon, they were out of the familiar Wrightsboro Road streets and reached the hospital. Sirens pierced the air.

“He takin’ us there?” Baby Jack whispered to himself.

They passed the hospital and homes of White families. The brothers looked at one another. Jack Jack lifted his index finger to his lip to hush Baby Jack.

Just when Baby Jack thought that he could walk no longer Mike Lowe pointed. Looming in front of them was the Jennings Baseball Stadium, home of the Augusta Tigers of the South Atlantic League.

“Baseball!!! Baseball!!!” Jack Jack hollered. “A game! We’re seein’ a game!”

He darted ahead. Mike Lowe turned and grabbed Baby Jack’s outstretched hand. Together, they ran as fast as they could. Fans were already lining up in front of the ticket office, cash in hand, to buy their tickets. Mike Lowe stood in line.

Holding their tickets, they walked into the Jennings Baseball Stadium. Baby Jack jingled the coins Kow Gaw gave him. His mouth watered, thinking of boiled peanuts. They passed the White bleachers. Mike Lowe led them to the first base line towards the small gate marked “for blacks only.”

Baby Jack and Jack Jack didn’t understand, craning their necks towards the White section across the fence.

“We ain’t going up there?” Jack Jack pointed.
“Nah, gots us a bettah place,” Mike Lowe responded. “Dey gots to sit in dem seats. Too much sun deh!”

Mike Lowe hid his grimace from his young charges. They finally reached the Blacks-only seats. Baby Jack and Jack Jack recognized some of the Wong Choy Grocery customers. They weren’t sure if they should wave or smile to them.

“Heh! We be heh,” Mike Lowe said.

He helped the brothers settle in their seats.

Dusk turned to night. Baby Jack raised his hands to block the bright stadium lights.

“Play ball!” the umpire yelled.

The players stood, gloves in hand.

“Pea . . . nuts. Pea . . . nuts. Boiled or parched!”

The home team spilled onto the field to the cheers of the crowd. The visiting team was up to bat. The Augusta Tigers’ pitcher wound up, lifted his leg, and let loose a ball that pierced the air. The batter swung.

“Stre . . . rike!” the umpire hollered.

The pitcher wound up again.

Baby Jack wondered, “Why aren’t we sittin’ over there?”
Boykin sang in his throaty 14 year old voice—

There ain’t nobody here but us chicken
There ain’t nobody here at all
So calm yourself,
And stop your fuss
There ain’t nobody here but us
We chickens tryin’ to sleep
And hobble, hobble, hobble
With your chin
There ain’t nobody here except us chickens.

Boykin liked singing Louis Jordan’s song. As Boykin sang he gyrated in circles, throwing his hands and fingers in the air. Baby Jack and Jack Jack stared at their friend. What was going on? Boykin’s singing flooded the air. Swish. Swish. Swish. Baby Jack looked at his feet. Why was he suddenly moving? A Black boy and a Chinese boy dancing together on the powdery dirt of Wrightsboro Road in the historic Bethlehem District of Augusta. Such a sight.

When Boykin finished he, Baby Jack, and Jack Jack sat on the wood bench in front of the Wong Choy Grocery. The bench, a focal point for the community, was the secular pew of the Wrightsboro Road neighborhood. Today, the friends felt like they were the regulars, the grown men who sat there daily. Jack Jack was happy
that Boykin wasn’t singing anymore and that Baby Jack, stopped dancing. Silly! Real boys didn’t sing and dance.

“Sweet Je. . .sus! Sweet Je. . .sus!”

Baby Jack zipped around the corner running towards the music. He tiptoed at the window of the AME Methodist Church located at Wrightsboro Road and Linden Street. He strained to hear.

Just then Cush, Boykin’s younger brother came running, a basketball in his hand.

“Hey!” Cush interrupted. “Let’s play!”

They could have two teams—two against two. Refreshed by the music, the boys dashed across the street towards the Cade house on Linden Street.

Baby Jack, being the youngest, wanted to team with Boykin. Having his idol play with him would make everything okay.

From the Cade house a song from the radio rang out.

“Hi de hi de ho.”

It was Cab Calloway. Blacks in Augusta liked Cab Calloway even though they had to wait to hear him perform when he wasn’t singing for Whites.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The boys bounced the basketball on the sizzling pavement underneath the shady Elderberry tree. Cush looked up. Seeing the swing Cush tossed the basketball down the street. He climbed onto the wooden swing, feeling the pointy splinters through his thin cotton shorts. Boykin ran. He gave Cush a push. Cush flew towards stretched-out clouds. Boykin pushed harder, their rhythm going to and fro.
Before anyone could figure out what happened Cush CRASHED into the fence. Blood gushed from his head.

“I’m gonna tell Momma!” he howled.

Boykin, Baby Jack and Jack Jack didn’t know what to do.

Suddenly, Boykin ran to Cush who was crying on the ground.

“I’m gonna tell Momma!”

Boykin grabbed him.

“Don’t tell Momma! Don’t tell Momma! You gotta be brave! You gotta be brave!”

Their voices escalated.

Baby Jack froze. He didn’t know what to do. Should he run home to tell Mama? Would she yell at her sons? For playing with Blacks? For not being more careful?

Jack Jack tugged at his brother, pulling him towards the Wong Choy Grocery around the corner.

Baby Jack trembled.
Baby Jack Rice Story
Silkscreened rice sacks, thread, sequins, text, and video. 1993-1996. Seven panels, approximately 78”x36”. Video is 12 minutes.
In December of 1944 the cold winter wind whipped down Wrightsboro Road, the heart of the Black community in the historic Bethelehem District of segregated Augusta, Georgia. The wind crawled under the slight opening of the door of the Wong Choy Grocery located at the intersection of Linden Street and Wrightsboro Road, filling the interior with a chill that told 10 year old Baby Jack that Christmas was coming. A small papier-mâché tree sat atop a glass case filled with jars of whitening cream, cold cream, and cologne. The case, placed on the counter, gave off a pungent mixture of these odors. A 40 watt light bulb singed the tree, giving off an added aroma that blended with the fragrances of fatback, cornmeal, and other food stuffs—smells of Christmas in the Wong household. Strains of Silent Night sung by Nat King Cole floated from the radio.

Baby Jack and his siblings, Jack Jack, Rachel and Ginger scurried around, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Nina Williams who was coming to bake Christmas pies. Nina Williams was a regular customer who usually paid for her groceries at the end of the month. Kow Gaw, Theodore, the China-born son who ran Wong Choy Grocery with his mother, Sue Shee Wong, marked Nina Williams’ purchases in a book with a blue horse design on its cover. On this Christmas Eve Nina Williams was coming to the Wong Choy Grocery to bake in exchange for her December groceries.

During World War II sugar, butter, and meat were rationed. Rationing, a Federal program, allowed people to purchase a small amount in order to insure that everyone got their fair share. All Americans, including Kow Gaw, were issued rationing books. He dealt with rationing in two ways. Sometimes, he tore a coupon from a book that a customer had left behind. Other times, he received coupons from friends who were wholesale grocers.
The “Food for Victory” program was in place during World War II. Americans were urged to show their patriotism by eating leftovers and to grow their own food in Victory gardens. The U. S. Office of Price Administration (OPA) had frozen prices on everyday goods, including sugar. Sugar, a rare sought-after commodity for civilians, was needed to make chocolate bars for the soldiers. Somehow, Kow Gaw was able to get enough rationing coupons for sugar.

While waiting for Nina Williams to come Baby Jack wondered.

“Sugar? Lard? Enough to bake their pies?”

Baby Jack wanted to have plenty of sugar to make their long-awaited pies. He was happy Kow Gaw surprised the younger Wong siblings with the news that Nina Williams would bake their Christmas pies. Kow Gaw had heard their earlier plea, “Pies . . . We want pies!”
Baby Jack Rice Story
Silkscreened rice sacks, thread, sequins, text, and video. 1993-1996. Seven panels, approximately 78”x36”. Video is 12 minutes.
I.
I reach for the spotted banana,
More sepia than yellow.
As I peel the thinning skin,
Biting into the softness,
You come back to me.
I look at your face.
Soft eyes kissed by wrinkles
So, you aren’t gone after all.

II.
In the one-room grocery store
On Wrightsboro Road
Where the front door slams
In the whistling wind
Yellow green bananas hang
Above the meat counter.
Waiting for a customer to say
“Gimme one dem”
While plunking coin on the counter.

Before long,

Last ones turn brown.

Alive with spots.

You took them down.

III.

In the tiny kitchen behind the store front

You peel spotted bananas.

Smashing thumb-size ginger,

Turning on the Hotpoint stove,

You set pot atop swirling flames.

Grilling sliced bananas

in golden oil

You throw smashed ginger

into the pot.

Adding water, sugar granules.

Till the sweetened fruit carmelizes

Into dessert soup.
Out of Reach
Flo Oy Wong

She turns on the stove
In kitchen perfumed with life.
Nest of hair falling,
Greasy apron sagging.
She stretches over searing fire
Towards tattered cupboard.
Where gas station give-away
Cups and plates are stacked.
Shelf—out of reach,
Like litheness of youth.
Flames surge.
She wobbles.
I snatch her.
Brittle bones.
Wrapping arms we topple.
Falling on army-green linoleum.
No longer fearless woman
Of torrid South.
Raising children
In reign of Jim Crow.
Immigrant mother
Allowing yellow sons
To frolic with Blacks.
While waiting for customers
In Wong Choy Grocery.
Across from red-bricked church
Where Gospel spoke in tongues.
Now, a declining elder,
She clutches over flames.
Freeway cacophony.
Hissing.
Ai Joong Wah: Great China

Ai Joong Wah, Great China!

Tim Go, restaurant!

Ock Loon How Ngin Fow, Oakland Chinatown

Ghee Geong Bok, Ghee Geong Sim,

Uncle Ghee Geong, Auntie Ghee Geong!

Hoy goong lah! Start work now!

Gah seh! Coffee!

Min bow day! Parker house rolls!

Ping Gwaw Pie! Apple pie!

Bow woon hoon! Wrap won tons!

Kee key! Wait on tables!

Mought key! Wipe the tables!

Slate panon waven! Wash the dishes!

Slate gah feh woff! Wash the coffee um!

Hoy goong lah! Start work now!

Hoy goong lah! Start work now!

Ai Joong Wah
Historic cookie sheet, soup ladle and pencil (circa 1943-1961), archival photos, poem. 32”x18”x18”. 
I.
You are everywhere.
Perfume drifting.
You sit spread-legged.
On our family room couch.
Tearing bok choy.
Atop a newspaper.
Scolding, “Say So,
Fourth daughter-in-law!
Not enough rice!
I run to cook another pot.
Fingers hastily submerged.
Long grain granules.
Jewels of our lives.

II.
You hang
Along the hallway wall
In two photos.
One, an immigrant woman
Young, fearlessly filled with knowledge.
Large eyes looming.
Anxious?
To join your
Gold Mountain husband?
In Augusta.
Where crepe myrtle trees shaded sidewalks.
Where Chinese were declared “Honorary whites.”
Where Blacks attended tattered schools.
Consumed outdated books.
Be Be Jai, Jai Jai played with Blacks.
They weren’t supposed to be friends.
Jim Crow swooping everywhere.

III.
You saunter into the master bedroom.
Fingers poking the bed,
Questioning how often
I changed the sheets.
“Once a week,” I lied.
Not wanting you to know
Your beloved son
Slept on the sweat of his life.

IV.
You stand atop a ladder
In the front yard.
“This . . . my village,” you whisper.
Thrusting your body
Into the cherry tree.
Till I cannot see
Your flowered dress.
Head crowned
Arms reaching
To usher you home.

*Inspired by Sue Shee Wong, my late mother-in-law.*
My Sister: Li Hong

Rice sacks, thread, wire, sequins, photos, safety pins, mannequin. 2008.
57”x84”x12”
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My Sister: Li Hong
OBJECT LIST

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