

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Between Heartlands / Kelly Wang

January 15–February 27, 2022



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Landscapes of the heart revolve around persons, places, or events for which one feels a sense of deep belonging and attachment. Such heartlands are not natural phenomena but creations of the mind and heart, and being caught between two or more heartlands often generates tensions that stem from human identity or crisis. Born in New York in 1992, Kelly Wang combines contemporary and ancient influences, as well as American and Asian traditions, to create multimedia works infused with elements of cultural identity and personal grief. Walking a tightrope between past and future, west and east, she explores the boundaries of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting while living in America. More recently, Wang has folded the process of mourning into her work after the loss of a parent at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Raised in New York City, a descendent of the collector who amassed the celebrated Jade Studio collection of Chinese paintings, Kelly Wang is caught between her American and Asian roots. For most Asian Americans, during childhood there comes a realization that others may see them as different, as alien. In Wang's case, this moment arrived when a classmate declared their wish to "kill all the Chinese people." This venom is captured in the first gallery, where a group of cosmetic compacts document slurs from Wang's school days through to the present, when COVID-19 sparked a rise in anti-Asian hatred. Women use mirrored compacts to look at themselves, yet Wang's intervention of words on burnt paper that cover the mirrors makes visible what certain others may see, think, and hate. Collectively titled *Thank You for Reminding Me of My Rich Cultural Past*, the compacts signal the artist's desire to engage with the Asian side of her heritage.

In the first two exhibition galleries, Wang builds on the calligraphy and landscape painting traditions of China but presents them in an unfamiliar manner. Each Chinese character that she creates is burned into the paper using incense. The characters may be real, but the assembled text is illegible and may be best understood by the title *Calligraphic Abstraction*. Calligraphy is also embedded in many of Wang's landscapes. The artist responds to the long tradition of the blue-green style of landscape painting in China by experimenting with ink brushed on paper that is then submerged under layers of epoxy resin infused with pigments that are manipulated using a blow torch. Creating a near-transparent depth in which the pigments seem to flow, the initially malleable resin transmutes into a durable substance. Frozen, almost as if by alchemy, the images that emerge are heartscapes—places of safety for the artist to withdraw from the hardships of the outside world.

The sense of safety and belonging that Wang achieved in her work was shattered in the spring of 2020; the outbreak of COVID-19 ultimately led to her father's death.

While he was isolated in the hospital, Wang began *Time Stands Still in This Room While I Wait*. With twists of paper set into a wood box adorned with beads and mirrors, the artist transforms what has traditionally been used as a flat painting or drawing surface into a sculptural form with texture and depth. This experimental work led to the *Microcosms of Mourning* series, in which Wang twists small strips of newspaper that she saved while her father was hospitalized and attaches them to canvas. With the twisted paper, the artist creates images of Chinese scholar's rocks (microcosms of immortal realms), still-life depictions of utilitarian wires reminiscent of cursive-script calligraphy, and a topographical map titled *New York City (Microcosm 6)*—the location of her grief and loss.

In contrast to the slow, meditative process of repeatedly twisting paper, Wang's *Picking Up the Trash Bag of Your Belongings*, with its raw emotion, was created almost spontaneously, in the aftermath of her father's death. While he was quarantined in the hospital, the family could not be by his side. After his death, Wang was sent alone to a side door outside the hospital, where rows of plastic garbage bags lined a room. *Picking Up the Trash Bag* cries with the anguish Wang felt at the moment she received her father's personal belongings.

Framing these moments of mourning, the exhibition begins and ends with a painting of the Water-Cloud Guanyin. One of the most beloved figures in the Buddhist pantheon across Asia, Guanyin is known as the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and the deity's full name, Guanshiyin 觀世音, means "Perceiver of Sounds [the cries for compassion of sentient beings] in the World." One of Kelly Wang's favorites and a gift to her mother, this depiction of Guanyin represents a place of infinite grace between heartlands.

Cary Y. Liu

Nancy and Peter Lee Curator of Asian Art

Gallery 1

This first room explores the beginning of my journey in developing an artistic language and identity, connecting my experience to the shared experiences of Asians and Asian Americans. The works in this room comment on traditional Chinese art and its significance in shaping how I think about the modern world. Many women carry compacts, but I have found myself using mine to check behind me discreetly while waiting on empty subway platforms, following violent attacks against Asian women. Thank You for Reminding Me of My Rich Cultural Past is a collection of portable art objects, comprising my own as well as found compacts that I imagine being used by different Asian American women for many purposes beyond applying makeup. With other works of art in this room, this series questions how inherited memories of a distant past and the perception of others impact our individual paths to self-definition. – KW



After Wang Xizhi and Song Ke, 2021
Xuan paper burnt with incense



After Zhu Yunming, 2021
Xuan paper burnt with incense



Spring Thoughts, 2018
Ink, pigment, xuan paper, and resin on panel



Thank You for Reminding Me of My Rich Cultural Past, 2021
Ongoing installation comprising found vintage and contemporary cosmetic compacts and burnt xuan paper



Mount Lu, 2017
Ink, acrylic, pigment, xuan paper, and resin on plexiglass



Water-Cloud Guanyin, 2015
Ink and color on paper

Gallery 2

The second room examines my appreciation for blue-green Chinese landscape painting and my efforts to transform this tradition, fusing ancient elements with new materials and approaches to tell my story and consider current issues. To create the Recluse Studio series in this room, I begin by making a collage on aluminum or plexiglass from torn fragments of ink-washed traditional Chinese paper. The original collage guides the structure of the emerging semiabstract landscape. I try to avoid allowing my own mental imagery to overpower the forms already present within the fibrous textures and washes. Pouring a mixture of clear resin, mineral pigments, solvents, and acrylic over the original collage in layers, I manipulate each layer as it is applied. With this process, I consider how modern technology and artificial materials simultaneously pollute and revitalize the landscape of the present to communicate with natural materials and traditional approaches of the past. – KW



Garland Cliff, March 7, 2018

Ink, pigment, resin, and paper on plexiglass
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of the
P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art (2018-107)



Recluse Studio No. 3, February 23, 2018

Ink, pigment, resin, and paper on plexiglass
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of the
P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art (2018-108)



Calligraphic Abstraction IV, 2020

Xuan paper burnt with incense, pigment, resin, and ink on aluminum



10-15-17, 2017

Ink, acrylic, pigment, *xuan* paper, and resin on plexiglass



Recluse Studio No. 2, 2018

Ink, pigment, *xuan* paper, and resin on plexiglass



Recluse Studio No. 16, 2018

Ink, pigment, *xuan* paper, and resin on aluminum



Recluse Studio No. 17, 2018

Ink, pigment, *xuan* paper, and resin on aluminum



Landscape IV, 2018

Ink, pigment, acrylic, *xuan* paper, and resin on aluminum



Night Shining White, 2019
Ink, pigment, resin, and xuan paper on panel



Landscape II, 2019
Ink, pigment, acrylic, xuan paper, and resin on aluminum



Secluded Valleys, 2015
Ink, color, and pigment on xuan paper board

Gallery 3

The series Microcosms of Mourning uses newspapers my mother and I saved in April 2020, while my father was hospitalized for COVID-19. After months of emotional and psychological upheaval following his death, I began twisting strips of the saved newspapers into strings, imagining that time could be frozen into a space generated by strings, as in string theory, and take on physical permanence. In my hands, the words on the paper collapsed into a feeling, the strings became lifelines connecting the present to memories, the living to the dead, light to dark matter, and the individual to the collective through a multidimensional labyrinth of space-time. Scholar's rocks, traditionally objects of contemplation, took on new meaning as entities that had undergone trauma, erosion, and bruising over time due to natural and artificial interference. New York City (Microcosm 6) is similar—each string of the map connected my suffering to the pain of the others and to the place itself. – KW



New York City (Microcosm 6), 2021
Newspaper on canvas



Microcosm 1, 2021
Newspaper on canvas



Microcosm 2, 2021
Newspaper on canvas



Microcosm 3, 2021
Newspaper on canvas



Microcosm 4, 2021
Newspaper on canvas
Private Collection



Microcosm 8, 2021
Newspaper on muslin



Microcosm 5, 2021
Newspaper on canvas
Private Collection



Microcosm 7, 2021
Newspaper on muslin



Entanglement, 2022
Newspaper

Gallery 4

The final room presents works created during the most emotionally volatile, chaotic period of my life, which resulted in the creation of a new series of work. Picking Up the Trash Bag of Your Belongings expresses the mind-numbing shock, memories, grief, and horror I felt the day after my father died at the hospital, where I went to pick up his belongings. Since my mother was still sick with COVID, I went alone. As the hospital staff searched among numerous trash bags for the one with my father's name on it, I began to panic, wondering how many trash bags were there. As I carried this bag, all the buildings looked like enemies, poised for a violent attack. The trash bag became the heaviest thing I had ever carried, and I collapsed onto the street, barely making it home. The Life & Death series confronts my existential terror in the aftermath of this experience. – KW



Picking Up the Trash Bag of Your Belongings, 2021
Ink and acrylic on unstretched canvas



Life & Death I, 2020
Ink, acrylic, and pigment on canvas



No. 1, 2021
Newspaper on muslin



No. 7, 2021
Newspaper on muslin



Life & Death II, 2020

Ink, acrylic, pigment, *xuan* paper, and resin on plexiglass



Time Stands Still in This Room While I Wait, April, 2020

Xuan paper, watercolor, transparent nylon thread, silicone beads, mirrors, and wood shelving unit

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the collection of the artist.

All works © Kelly Wang

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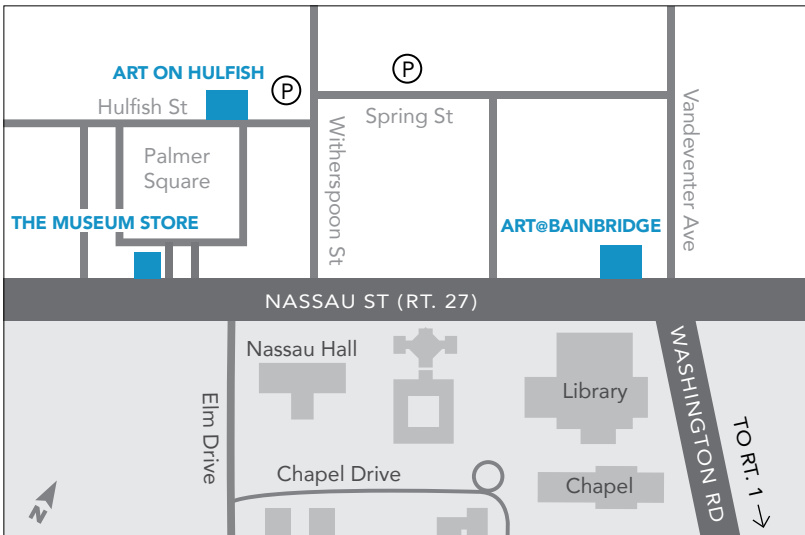
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