



Turn the Light

January 17—March 7, 2020

Herman Aguirre
Floating Museum

Jin Lee

Hương Ngô

Jefferson Pinder

Derrick Woods-Morrow

GALLERY **400**

UIC

The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.

—Ida B. Wells

The artists in *Turn the Light* examine particular histories that are crucially present in our current lives and ask critical, often confrontational, questions about why these histories have not been fully scrutinized. Exhibition organizers Lorelei Stewart and Marcela Torres asked the participating artists to share their thoughts on some of the central concerns of the exhibition.

Lorelei Stewart and Marcela Torres:

In organizing this show, we take the position that there are resonances between the histories you artists are exploring and the conditions in which we are now living. What are your thoughts on those connections? How do you view the relationship of past and present?

Herman Aguirre: [My works in the exhibition reveal] the living conditions of my family and neighborhood who are subjected to mayhem here in Chicago and Mexico. Focusing on public and personal events that shape the world I live in, the issues represented in the paintings include Mexico's War on drugs and Chicago's inner-city violence. These topics have been the conversation growing up in Chicago and during my visits to Mexico. ... The corruption, crime, and violence experienced continue to plague the streets.

Huong Ngô: Coming from a family of refugees fleeing Vietnam after the war, there were many reasons for my family to avoid speaking about the past. [Because I was distanced] from Vietnam geographically and from its culture and people linguistically, learning about history has been a healing process for me. I am not

searching for a continuum, but accepting rupture and finding spaces in which I can intervene upon and add to the archive and our collective memory.

Jin Lee: My work is informed by multiple histories. I think about the history of the land and the landscapes that I photograph, the history of the urban and rural spaces that I traverse, the history of this country, the history of photography, and my own history as an Asian American immigrant who has lived on the East and West Coasts but now settled in the Midwest. Seeing, visualizing, uncovering, and understanding the relationship of these pasts and the present moment is one of the themes and subjects of my work.

Derrick Woods-Morrow: I'm thinking a lot about mortality these days, but not my own particularly, rather the life and death of our shared histories. I have questions of how far reaching concerns can be felt for my own freedoms and the freedoms of the black folks who my film is representing. And I feel stunted from a cultural education standpoint because we lost so many black men to the ongoing AIDS crisis. If alive, so many of these men could have been history-bearers of an already underrecognized community of space-makers, for what we would now call the LGBTQIA+ community. *Much handled things are always soft*, is trying to connect some of the dots and make aware my own inability to connect fully with them. It's so important that Patric McCoy's voice is narrating the important dialogues. He lived through a past that is continuing to reckon with our present moment of attempting to center identity and sexual liberation.

Floating Museum: [In our piece *Cultural Transit Assembly*] we were very interested in working with our community partners in the neighborhoods to activate one of the last truly democratic spaces in the city, [the CTA train

system. In one aspect of the project,] we created a mobile monument, *Founders*, to move up and down the Green Line next to the train tracks to address underrepresented histories and origin stories. *Founders* is a mobile monument and collaboration between Floating Museum, Chris Pappan (Kanza/Osage, Lakota) and Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi/African-American/German). The inflatable sculpture features four busts facing the four cardinal directions. The form is a mix of interpretations of items from the collections of the DuSable Museum of African American History, the Field Museum of Natural History, as well as interpretations of various historical figures. The busts feature Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable (Chicago's first non-indigenous settler), Kitihawa (du Sable's Potawatomi wife), Harold Washington (first African American Mayor of Chicago), and a bust of a young boy by artist William Artis. The pattern on the inflatable monument was inspired by Potawatomi textiles in the Field Museum collections.¹

LS and MT: What unique qualities do you see in Chicago's social justice work?

FM: Like all cities, Chicago is composed of layers upon layers of infrastructure. Each of these were conceived and implemented according to the goals and ideals of people empowered to design them. Consequently, even in seemingly mundane moments, we are receiving and negotiating messages everywhere encoded in our environments. Because Chicago has many artists, musicians, performers, community organizers, and activists to activate the fabric of the city, Floating Museum collaborates to transform spaces into critical and constructive environments to question the systems in which we operate and what we might do to improve our relationship to them.

HN: My research on the French Sûreté Générale, specifically on women in French Indochina who were involved in the anti-colonial movement, has ironically brought me back to examining the US COINTELPRO program, which similarly used tactics of infiltration and disruption to counter social movements, often with devastating and traumatic effects. I thus see the history of Fred Hampton and Jane Addams, who both had FBI records, through this lens. I can't help but think that that past fracturing of networks has created an imprint on present day Chicago social justice work, which relies on intense community trust and reciprocity tried through time.

LS and MT: How do you see your project in relation to processes of self-narration, whether from your own identity or of communities of which you are a part?

HA: Painting has become therapeutic and at times a spiritual practice, aiding me with the issues and concerns I've mentioned. The work is very autobiographical—pulling from my identity, culture, and traditions, allowing me to be completely honest and transparent. My environments and family conversations are my subject matter, ultimately inspiring me to speak on these issues we face collectively.

HN: I would not say that I grew up in a family that was political, revolutionary, or feminist, but that was often because those identities were often represented in ways or by bodies through which I did not see myself reflected. My research has taught me that resistance does not always look the way that I might expect, and it makes me want to hold a space for the many different forms it might take, even when it is just starting to come into being.

¹ *Founders* is scheduled to appear in an outdoor one-day program at UIC this spring. Contact Gallery 400 for details.



Floating Museum, Austin Town Hall installation as part of *Cultural Transit Assembly*, 2019. Photograph by Eric Perez.

Related Programs

Reception
Friday, January 17
5–8pm

Additional programs to be announced.

All events at Gallery 400 are free and open to all.

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