



towns and Little
Joni Cheung



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Artist Statement

As a Canadian-born Hong Kong-Chinese person, my interdisciplinary research-based practice investigates the interdependent relationship between objects, place and identity. I use my lens as a woman of colour to navigate discourses of transnationalism, migration, and diasporas. My early family memories function as a point of departure to reflect and respond to global contexts and (hi)stories. I collect and reference still and moving images, texts, audio and soundscapes, objects, places and spaces, popular culture, and digital media. This research tends to present itself as installations, sculptures, performances and texts that sometimes incorporate photography and video, as well as accumulations of ephemera that bring attention to things often overlooked.

towns and Little (2017) is a postcard project consisting of six images and corresponding texts that came out of a conversation between my mother and me. Each section of text is taken from the place in which the image was photographed.

As I was heading to Berlin for a field school, right before I left, my mother told me to “check out the Chinatown.” She assumed that every major city *must* have a Chinatown — and honestly, so did I. Growing up in Vancouver as a person of colour, I never felt out of place because of my ethnicity. I had never travelled to any European country before this, so I didn’t expect Berlin to be any different, but when I arrived, I was surprised to learn that Berlin does not have a *Chinatown*. And for the first time in my life, I *felt* the gazes from those who were there before me, sometimes outright stares, experienced because of my race. My perspective, preconceptions, and relationship to my body immediately shifted.

Through this experience I became curious about the idea and phenomenon of Chinatowns, Little Saigons, and other similar cultural spaces around the world.

What political, economic, sociocultural circumstances led to their creation?

Why do they only exist in certain cities?

I began researching the diasporic communities who had moved to Berlin. I discovered that, historically, there has never been a large Chinese migratory movement to Berlin, explaining why a Chinatown was never established here.

However, through conversations with my field school professors, and by travelling to different stations and eating through the city over six weeks, I learned about the largest migrant population in Berlin: the Turkish community — who populate the neighbourhoods of Kreuzberg and Neukölln. Like some of the larger Chinatowns, Japantowns, or Koreatowns in other cities, these areas in Berlin are defined and expansive. Despite these characteristics, they aren't called "Turkeytown" or "Little Istanbul."

At the same time, I became interested in postcards as a form and medium. I was interested in how they are used to communicate on multiple levels. For instance, a tourist sends a postcard to a loved one at home, but there is another form of communication that happens between the postcard manufacturer/image-maker and the individuals who come in contact with it. This interaction can be physical (directly into one's hands) or non-physical (visually only). The specific landmarks, monuments, landscapes and architecture in a city and country chosen to be printed on these fleeting objects are considered significant. The image-makers are selective of the places and objects they disseminate into the world. Why some objects and places and not others?

I began this project as a way to document places and establishments that I felt are essential to the cultural fabric of Berlin, yet seemed under-recognized. The idea developed into a postcard project that looks at how migrant communities create and sustain identities in the spaces they willingly or unwillingly construct and inhabit. I was particularly interested in using postcards to carry these images into the world because of their function as objects to be circulated. I aim to disperse these images beyond the gallery and to have them interact with

people in their everyday lives while contributing to an alternative visual identity for Berlin -- one that lives in conversation with the famed and celebrated character that already exists in the public eye.

Bibliography

Cheung, Joni. _____ *towns and Little* _____, 2017. Postcards, 4 x 6 in. Vancouver.

About the Author

Joni Cheung is a grateful, uninvited guest on the unceded territories of the x^wmə θ kwəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, Stó:lō, Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwítlh, and Kanien'kehá:ka peoples. She is currently working towards her Masters of Fine Arts in Sculpture and Ceramics at Concordia University and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Distinction in Visual Art (2018) from the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. She has exhibited and curated shows at Centre A: the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Vancouver; the Capture Photography Festival in both 2017 and 2018; the Audain Gallery, Vancouver; and has been featured in CBC Arts; LotusLand; Canada Line Transit BC Public Art Program; and the Vancouver Art Book Fair, among other spaces and platforms.