

Gu Xiong: *The Unknown Remains*

Histories and memories that linger on the margins, paths of migration, hierarchies of citizenship, the precariousness of borders, the fragility of family and home—these are the themes that have continued to haunt the work of artist Gu Xiong. Having left his home in the massive and seemingly ever expanding city of Chongqing, in China's industrial heartland at the confluence of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, Gu Xiong has progressed from a dishwasher in the cafeteria at UBC, through part-time teaching and many exhibitions, to become a full professor. As an artist, he has been prolific and deeply engaged with examining the history of Chinese migration and settlement, locally and internationally, and has returned to China to explore its transformation in dialogue with Capitalism and *The West*. He has, further, extended his creative investigations to consider the conditions of those who labour on the margins, denied citizenship or relegated to less-privileged positions in society. He is consistently drawn into dialogue with those who must struggle to give voice to their presence, and who risk their presence here by doing so.

The Unknown Remains builds on this history of work. The exhibition features new works focussed on the specifics of Nelson and the surrounding region (its past and present informed by local stories and archival research), enhanced by the presentation of a selection of Gu Xiong's previous projects. In various instances, large installations previously presented in China, Peru and Canada, have been rearticulated, again, drawing them into a reflection on this community and its connections to the wider world of labour and commerce. The exhibition's title, typical of the artist, is poetic and has a double meaning (and throughout the exhibition you will encounter numerous poems as well). Gu Xiong offers up the *remains* (as a noun—the descendants, memories, objects, imagery, landscapes that shaped this place) that often linger unseen, incomprehensible or unacknowledged, and the present is poorer for this absence. As well, he employs *remains* as a verb (from the Latin *remanere*, meaning *to stay*), exhibiting things that trouble the present. As always, he presents us with a lot of material, there is much to work through, a strength as Gu Xiong refuses to water down or overly simplify his narratives.

I first met Gu Xiong in Vancouver in 1996, when I was Associate Curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Over the years, we have worked together across Canada, sometimes collaborating on projects, often in a curator to artist relationship, and I have written about him and his work often. I have always felt deeply privileged to be engaged with an artist who is defined by generosity and empathy, and who has clearly passed on these characteristics to his daughter Yu Gu, an award-winning documentary filmmaker who regularly collaborates with her father. Their work surfaces difficult questions and facts that demand a reckoning with accepted histories. Why did the Canadian government insist on severely limiting Chinese immigration (under the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1885 that imposed a heavy head tax, followed by the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1923-1947, the effects of which lingered into the 1960s)? Why did almost every community in Canada burden these committed Canadians with a short list of employment options (laundry, restaurant, domestic help)? Why did this community of Nelson force established Chinese businesses off the Main Street? These questions aren't hard to answer, such laws and restrictions have been applied to too many in this country, including Indigenous people and all immigrants who were not first British or of European descent. Such laws and restrictions have morphed and changed, yet

they *remain* too often *unknown* to Canadian citizens who are oblivious to the struggles of Indigenous communities, migrant workers, new Canadians, and the working poor.

What remains unknown to too many is their privilege; the privilege of being in a position to look away and to judge, set the rules and choose a path, unhindered, free of barriers but able to exclude. What Gu Xiong offers, consistently through his work, is an alternative privilege. To be open and generous, self-critical and engaged—to be aware, to know where we stand, and to stay in dialogue with the many.

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[Note: this short exhibition is a synopsis of a longer essay that will appear in the forthcoming catalogue for this exhibition.]