

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*City Beneath the City* has been a rich journey for me, from the first iteration of the installation at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art to its present incarnation at Stanford Archaeology Center. It has been a deep journey through time and space, limned by fragmentary objects from Market Street Chinatown San Jose: a journey to apprehend, to acknowledge, and pay quiet tribute to the fullness of Market Street Chinatown as a vibrant community before its rupture in May 1887 from arson fire.

In the first installation of *City Beneath the City* at the ICA, I was concerned with the spatial unfolding of these material traces in the built environment of a contemporary art venue that is within walking distance of the former Market Street Chinatown, and sought to create a metaphorical space that dialogued between the intimacy of shelter and the brusque sweep of history. Here at the Archaeology Center, the academic context and the constructed environment of display cases inspired a different spatial articulation that is by necessity more compressed. In what has become the physical home of the Market Street Chinatown artifacts, the installation borrows from the language of museological presentation to explore the materiality of absence.

A series of intertextualities plays between object, materiality, and texts in the installation, and disrupts expectations of factual explanations with juxtapositions that probe and query: who were the men, women, and children who occupied the same space-time as these artifacts, what were their lives played out among these quotidian objects against the backdrop of hostility against the Chinese in their adopted country? If the display cases were to embody the metaphorical Market Street Chinatown space, then the drawers represent the guts, the depths, of that history. It is the sole zone of interactivity in the installation, where the visitor becomes the agent of discovery and re-enacts the process of revelation and burying. Words on the cases are culled from a MSCAP text for their poetic succinctness, and words on the tags are from texts by Professor Barbara Voss and by Connie Young Yu.

From delicately decaying shoe soles to shattered rice bowl, from tarnished brick to burnt seeds, each artifact is eloquent with untold histories. More than any human intervention, that material eloquence is the power of what remains today of Market Street Chinatown. That history is made cogent by the remarkable work done by the Market Street Chinatown Archaeology Project, and I hope that *City Beneath the City* is yet another step toward the re-entry of that history into public memory. I find this refraction of the historical whole through its broken remnants a necessary and invigorating act of affirmation and honesty: we confront our history, and for a moment, we are our own ghosts. Rather than intellectual haunting, the installation aims for a visceral knowing; perhaps the chafing from that small lump of knowledge might guide our steps forward. And a pottery shard speaks, and we hear.

I am honored and deeply grateful to the Stanford Archaeology Center and History San Jose to have been part of this journey, and give my thanks to the ICA for the initial commission. Above all, I want to thank the members of the Chinese Historical and Cultural Project for launching this journey for all of us.

Rene Yung