

Op-Ed: Marin gallery features surrealist's work about human trafficking

SPECIAL

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Surrealist artist Cynthia Tom has been anticipating the installation of her "Discards & Variances – Tales from a Chinese American Family" exhibit at Route One Gallery in Point Reyes, nestled in one of Marin County's most rustically beautiful enclaves.

Route One Gallery director-curator Zea Morvitz took a few moments to discuss the significance of the exhibit. "Cynthia's exhibition is part of an ongoing series at [Gallery Route One \(GRO\)](#). Once each year the Project Space at Gallery Route One presents an exhibition with the general title *'Far From Home.'* This series features work by artists who are either foreign born or the children or grandchildren of immigrants."

Cynthia's work follows that theme poignantly. Her exhibit tells of a very harsh reality for immigrants, especially for those who were placed under a burdensome contract for labor. Cynthia has featured this painful and frightening subject in previous exhibits, like the one at the SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco last year. [The Marin Independent Journal](#) sent Lifestyles section editor Vicki Larson and she noted Cynthia's art as "compelling." Speaking to Larson for that showing that had been sponsored by [The Asian-American Women Artists Association](#), Cynthia said. "Human trafficking is out of control and nobody cares. Nobody even thinks about it. In San Francisco, in the Bay Area, it's rampant."

Even more painfully true for Cynthia, was the fact that she uncovered human trafficking in her family history. It was something never talked about. [In April of this year, Cynthia put together the exhibit in her studio at 1890 Bryant](#) in San Francisco's Mission District. The showing there urged her to continue. This is why Cynthia wanted to expand and bring the subject to the light of day even further.



Seen here is an actual photo of Hom Shee Mock, Cynthia Tom's grandmother. Hom Shee Mock was one of thousands of the detained at Angel Island, (San Francisco's Ellis Island). Hom Shee Mock was sold by her village in China, circa 1922 to a Palo Alto born, Chinese-American man of privilege. Surrealist artist Cynthia Tom has gathered personal photos and items from family albums to express a

"We are in the midst of a global crisis of



subject never talked about.

Courtesy of artist Cynthia Tom

Gallery Route One in Point Reyes in Marin County, less than a 40 minute drive from San Francisco.

Courtesy of Gallery Route One

populations fleeing or being forcefully expelled from their traditional homelands as a result of warfare, political upheavals, religious intolerance or economic hardship," said Morvitz. "And, so many are not welcome when they finally make it to a 'safe' country. The *'Far From Home'* series is meant to serve as a bridge between people and families who have recently arrived and those whose families have lived here for generations."

"While many issues around immigration/diaspora/refugees are being addressed by artists committed to social justice, at GRO we are committed to presenting artists who speak from their own experiences or the experiences of elders in their immediate families, she said. And we look at the experiences which have shaped them even as they grew up 'American'. In other words, we are looking for the personal dimension in this series. Telling their own personal stories turns out to be quite challenging for many artists, sometimes a painful past has been locked away. It takes courage to bring up these memories and experiences, Morvitz said. But the immediacy of the personal statement gives visitors to the gallery a very powerful experience."

"Cynthia's story — her family story — is unique," said Morvitz. "In our series thus far, though we have exhibited artists with backgrounds in many countries — China, Colombia, England, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Sweden, Taiwan — none have had parents or grandparents who were sold into this country. Cynthia's discovery about her parents and her grandmother propelled her to take up the cause to eradicate human trafficking, especially in the Bay Area. For our exhibition we asked Cynthia to approach this in a personal way, as she says, combining a 'sweet' aspect through her own family stories with the harsh reality that this is still happening today."

When this reporter asked Morvitz what it is about Cynthia's work that caught Gallery Route One's attention? Morvitz mentioned Cynthia's surrealist skills and command of a complex subject. "We were impressed by the strength of her work across different media and glad that she will be creating an entire installation, including sound, within our space. While two-dimensional artwork can be extremely powerful, a surrounding installation gives the visitor an enlarged, immersive experience. Cynthia is planning to be in the gallery at the reception and closing and her commitment and the strength of her personality will also be an important aspect of this presentation."

Morvitz then paused in all the describing and pointing out. And then she said: "The way our series works is for us to step back and let a powerful artist like Cynthia, who has an important message speak for herself."

Gallery Route One is a nonprofit (501 c3) art organization with two major exhibition spaces. The Center Gallery presents exhibits by Artist Members of the organization while guest artists exhibit in the Project Space. The Project Space exhibition program is devoted to several large themes: environmental issues (very pertinent to our location in rural West Marin). The spotlight on environmental concerns is a series that began after the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

"The *'Far from Home Series'* and other exhibitions dealing with social justice issues are also presented. The organization has two community outreach programs, Artists in the Schools for children and youth, and the Latino Photography Project for adults. We have managed to keep all these balls juggling up in the air, said Mortviz for over 30 years."

An opening reception will be on Sept. 25 from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. The exhibit will show until the end of October. Located on Highway 1 at Point Reyes Station. [For details visit Cynthia Tom's web site.](#)