

**A
PHANTOM'S
VIBE**

Dinu Li: A Phantom's Vibe
On from July 22, 2023 until October 29, 2023
esea contemporary

INTRODUCTION

'A Phantom's Vibe' is a solo exhibition by artist Dinu Li, featuring newly commissioned and existing works that combine music, sculptural assemblages, and video installation. The exhibition explores the complexities of colonial history, cultural memory, and hybrid identities.

Li's work in the exhibition combines autobiographical allegories with a tapestry of cultural influences. Visitors are taken from the night markets of Hong Kong to the blues parties of Hulme and Moss Side, via Jamaican recording studios owned by the descendants of Chinese coolies. The reggae classic 'Always Together' runs through the heart of the exhibition, where music becomes a medium for cultures to meet, mix, and become hybrid.

As a child wandering through the working-class market districts of Hong Kong, Li overheard 'Always Together', mistaking it for a Chinese folk classic. Years later, the song unexpectedly reappeared like a phantom at one of the inner-city blues parties Li frequented during his 1980s Manchester youth, and decades after that, the song once again re-emerged on YouTube.

It wasn't until much later that Li learned the song was actually recorded in Jamaica in 1967 in one of a small number of Chinese recording studios, some of which helped shape the sounds of Lee Perry, Augustus Pablo, and Bob Marley. Through his work tracing the history of early reggae, Li's exhibition, 'A Phantom's Vibe,' serves as a means of unearthing the underrepresented history of Chinese coolies in Jamaica, subverting mainstream cultural hegemony.

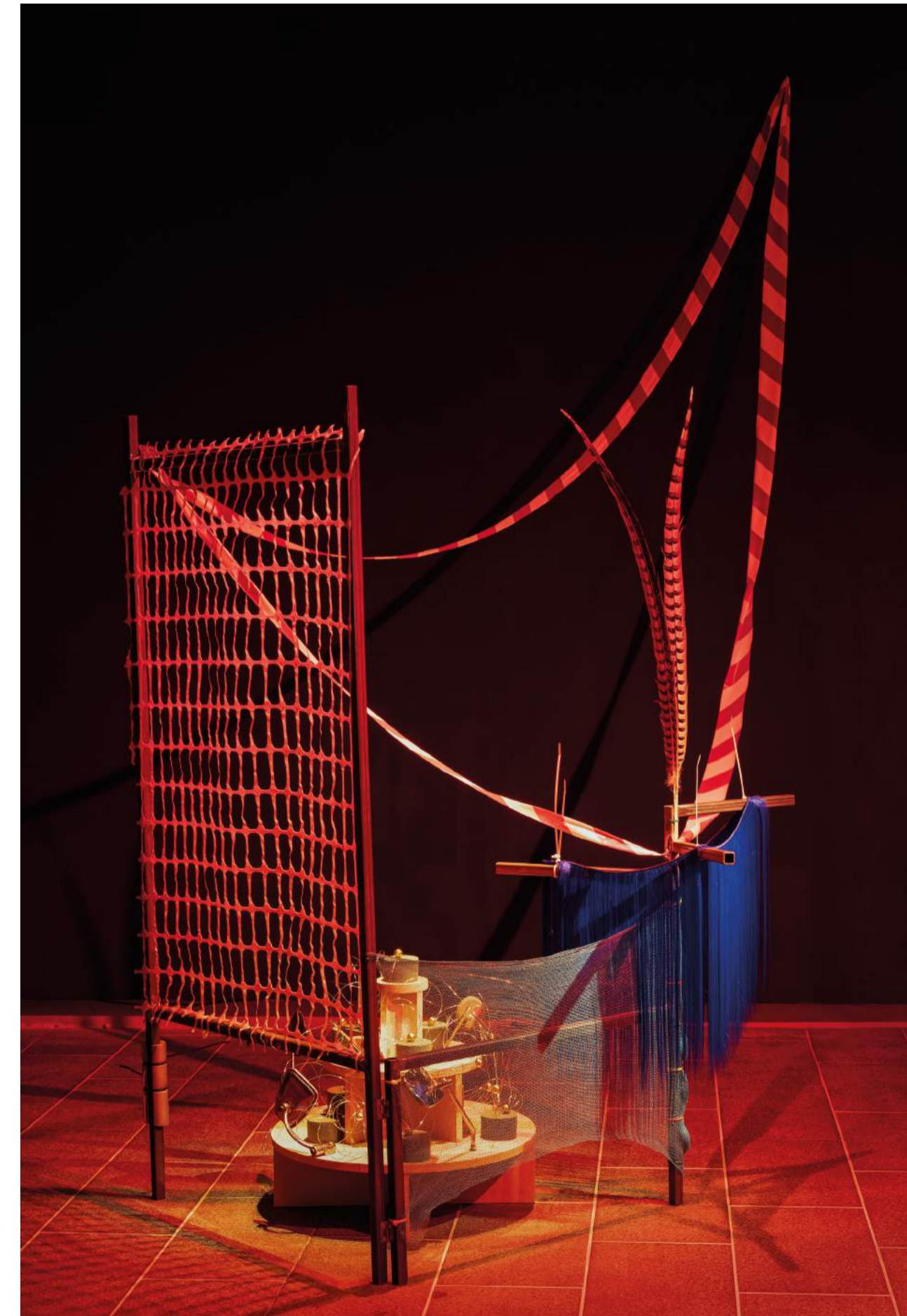
Li infuses the gallery with his own dub track, 'Skanking Hawker,' interspersed with sounds from a tribal mountain song recorded from the hinterlands of China. The composition is completed with a sampling of 'Always Together' sung in Chinese by Stephen Cheng, manifesting the ways in which music can offer a sense of escapism for marginalised groups as vibrations reverberating from their sound systems act as symbols of expression and defiance.

In 'A Phantom's Vibe,' Li brings the ambience of Hong Kong markets to the gallery through sculptural works informed by stalls and vendors' carts, featuring pom poms, hair extensions, fake pearls, and reggae-coloured cable ties that combine to form a new lexicon. Union Jack-coloured tarpaulins, ubiquitous in Southeast Asian street markets, act as screens or backdrops. Li's seemingly idiosyncratic arrangements avoid singular, linear narratives and instead attempt to forge new connections and alliances between slippery cultural boundaries.

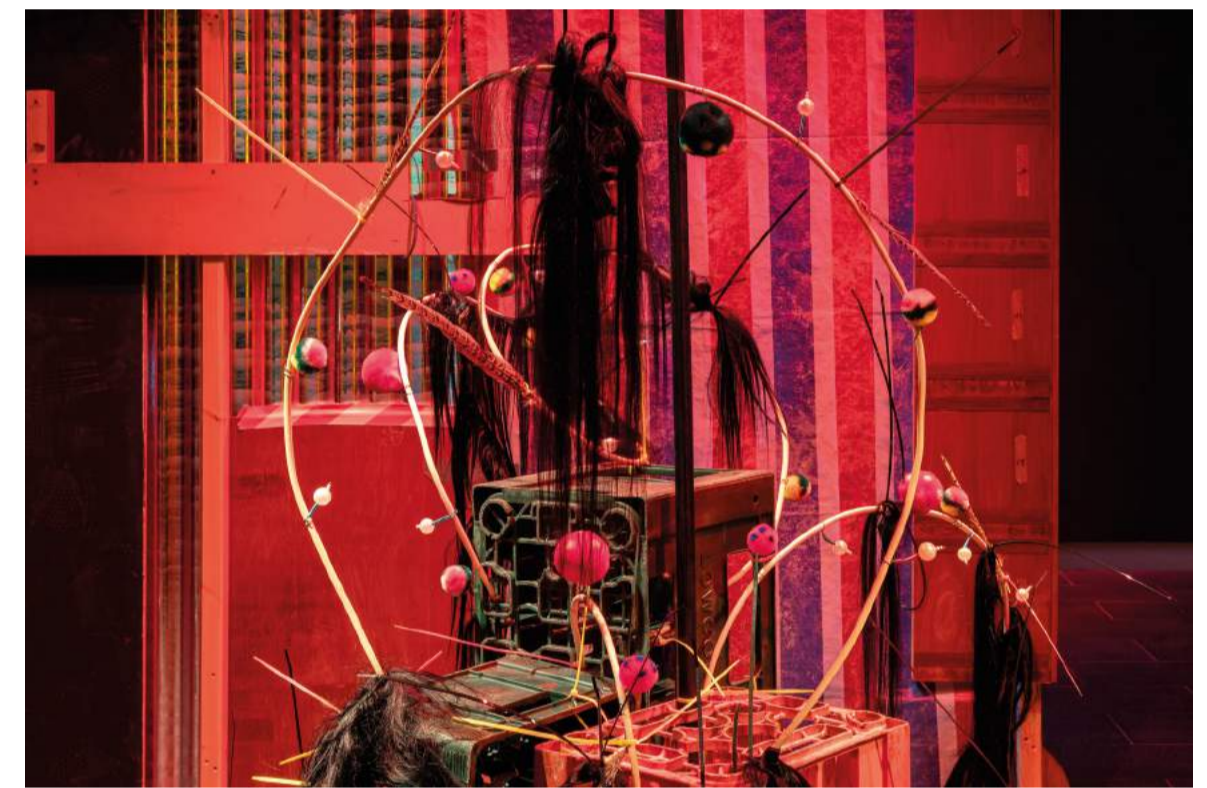
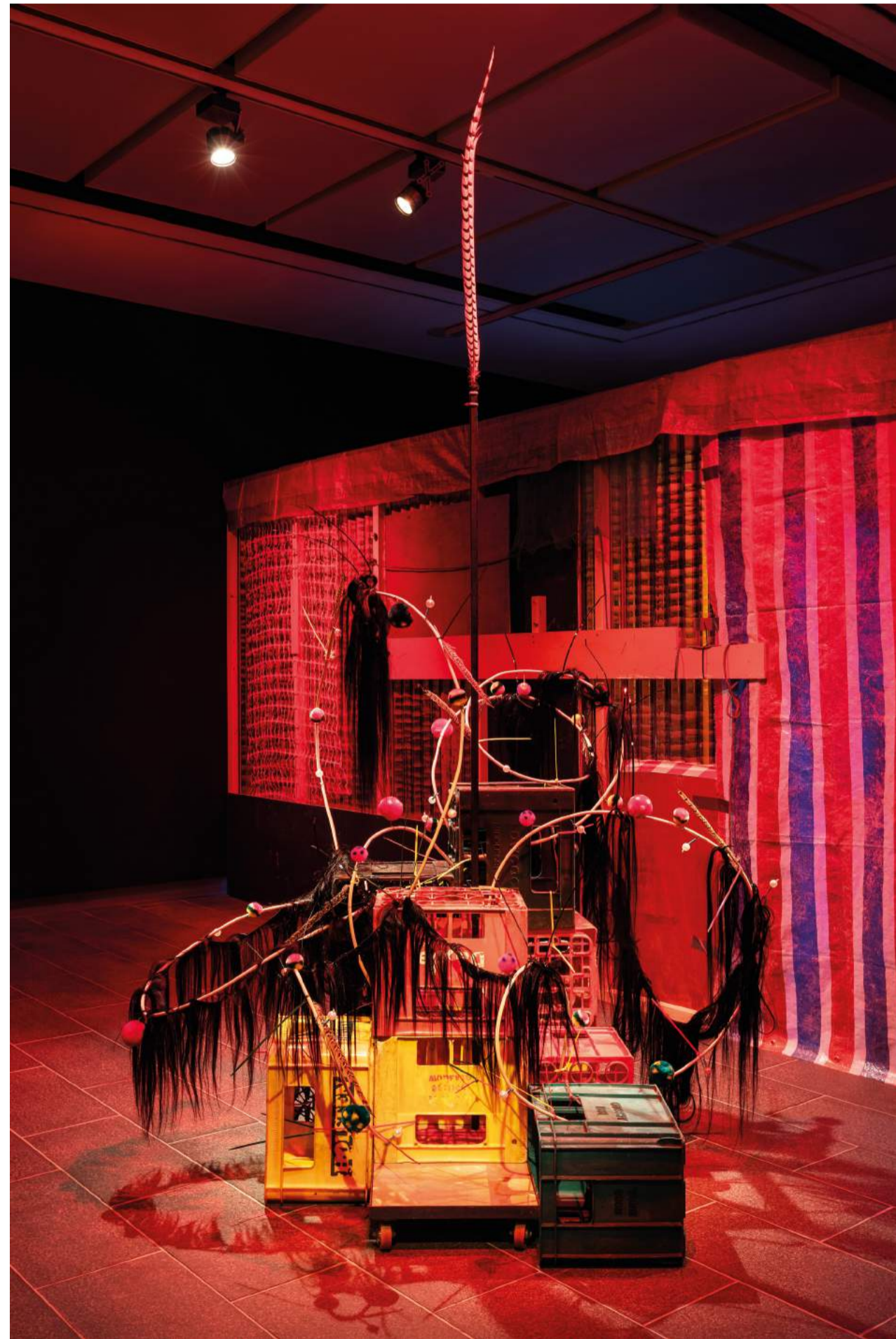
In addition to the six new works featured in the exhibition, 'A Phantom's Vibe' also includes Li's video installation 'Nation Family' (2017) and photographic slide projection 'Folk Songs' (2013).

Throughout his practice, Li creates a discourse on the intercultural complexities of contemporary identities. He challenges boundaries and classifications, exploring fresh perspectives and establishing novel systems of reference.





Natty Hustler (2023)
Sculptural Assemblage



Herb Vendor (2023)
Sculptural Assemblage



Tinker's Spell (2023)
Sculptural Assemblage
with photographic prints

BEING & BECOMING IN DINU LI'S 'SKANKING HAWKER'

Michael McMillan

For the late intellectual and cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, diaspora identity was not defined by essence or purity, but a continual negotiation through a 'complex historical process of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention and revival' (Hall 1993: 401). Our 'being' and 'becoming' 'belongs to the future as much as to the past' (Hall 1993: 395). In other words, our roots do always determine the routes we take in life. As a descendent of Caribbean migrants of the Windrush generation, born, growing up, and living Black in Britain, I carry Hall's words like a mantra in my back pocket. And in the being and becoming of Dinu Li's sculptural assemblage 'Skanking Hawker' are the roots and routes of diaspora migration that I share with him.

See here, a young Chinese boy wandering amongst the colour, smell, noise, and bustle of market stall vendors in the backstreets of Hong Kong. He overhears a classic Chinese folk song that will haunt him until he discovers years later on YouTube that it is in fact a rocksteady tune recorded in Jamaica in 1967 by a Chinese singer from Shanghai. This is Stephen Cheng's 'Always Together (A Chinese Love Song)' adapted from 'Girl from Ali Shan', a folk song originally from Taiwan, with Mandarin lyrics, and sang in a Chinese operatic style. The track begins with a classic offbeat 'skanking' rhythm with a bass lick that moves the body. Cheng's son Pascal also discovered his father's song on YouTube, which had been uploaded in 2010, when the single had been reissued by a Japanese record label specializing in Jamaican music obscurities (Hsu 2019).

The abolition of British slavery in 1834 was only possible if slave owners were financially compensated for their loss of property in slaves, rather than any moral desire to free them. Indian and Chinese 'indentured labourers' were subsequently recruited, often abducted by the British from their home countries, believing they would be working on former slave plantations for a period of time. But this was a lie, because as Lisa Lowe argues (2015), indentureship as an example of colonial hypocrisy, merely blurred the boundary between enslavement and freedom, because Chinese labourers

in Jamaica, like Indians in Trinidad and Guyana, became trapped to never return home. As a mark of their colonial servitude, they were called 'coolies', and to divide and rule the colonised majority, they were allowed to become merchants, like Chinese-Jamaicans, which created racial tensions with larger African descent communities.

Nevertheless, by independence in 1962, Chinese-Jamaicans would become vital enablers in the development of Jamaican music, such as ska, rocksteady, and later reggae. Leslie Kong, one of the original shareholders in Island Records produced Bob Marley's first three recordings, as well as British hits including Desmond Dekker & the Aces' 'Israelites' in 1969. Vincent and Patricia Chin ran Randy's Record Mart in Kingston, with Studio 17 on the first floor, where Lord Creator, John Holt, Alton Ellis, and Lee 'Scratch' Perry recorded their hits. The Hoo Kim brothers created Channel One studio, where recordings of The Mighty Diamonds' album *The Right Time*, The Wailing Souls' *Jah Jah Give Us Life*, Leroy Smart's *Ballistic Affair*, The Revolutionaries' *MPLA* would become reggae anthems. Bass and drums provide the rhythmic backbone of ska, rocksteady and reggae, and Byron Lee is known for introducing the electric bass guitar to Jamaica, created the Dragonaires band and set up Dynamic Studios, where recordings were made with The Melodians, Junior Byles, and Bob Marley (Tranquilheart 2020).

Working with Lee to produce 'Always Together', Cheng was amongst Chinese-Jamaicans with whom he shared similar but different cultural values and practices. Cheng's ability to sing in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Chinese, enabled him to tour the Caribbean with shows in Suriname and Trinidad, which connected to other communities of the Chinese diaspora. Cheng worked with the local government to stage a series of benefit shows for the National Stadium of Trinidad, bringing as he later wrote, 'the Chinese out of the confines of the strictly Chinese community to work with the other racial groups for the benefit of their whole country' (Hsu 2019). His fame had spread, and it was the Chinese Be-

nevolent Association who sponsored his trip to Jamaica where he made the eponymous recording. Returning to New York, in the early 1970s, Cheng started a band called the Dragon Seeds (Hsu 2019).

The Hoo Kim brothers also created and managed the Channel One sound system, which like many other custom-made mobile hi-fis used music to entertain poor Black communities across Jamaica. Through migration, sound system culture also spread across the African diaspora: it established reggae in Britain and later genres from jungle to grime, and in New York became the basis of hip hop. As a British colony until 1997, sound system culture also travelled to Hong Kong, and this is probably how Li first heard 'Always Together' being played amongst the market stalls in the backstreets. This reminds us of his 'Skanking Hawker' sound system installation on the street with car stereos and speakers, which symbolises the life poor people working on the street. Remember, reggae was initially dismissed by middle class Jamaicans, because it was the music of the down-trodden, sufferers of the ghetto, the poor.

Feel the vibrations of the bass coming from a sound system playing at a blues party in a council estate's disused building in Hulme, Manchester's innercity where Li migrated to. See micro-climates of dancing bodies illuminated only by a blue blub attached to the sound system deck. Smell the weed and see the smoke wafting upwards to meet condensation dripping from the ceiling. Come out of the darkness into the early morning sun, ears still ringing, heart still pulsating, body full of sound.

The Chinese translation of reggae is 'thunder demon' and in Li's Skanking Hawker installation, we hear his 'Organised Dub Old Man Sample' Mixdown soundtrack creating sonic vibrations that invoke the spirits of market stands. Black wigs as beards of Chinese Opera or long-haired apparitions of Hong Kong ghost movies permeate the gallery space. A single chinoiserie drape hung above speakers consists of a bamboo beaded curtain, made and popularised by Europeans, as interpretations of Chinese tra-

ditions. And as we walk around the assemblage, a perception is revealed from one side, quite different from an alternative perception viewed from the opposite side. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk, she warns us of 'The Danger of a Single Story' (TEDGlobal 2009), and Li's 'Skanking Hawker' refutes a single narrative in its mash-up of hybrid diaspora cultural identities about our being and becoming.

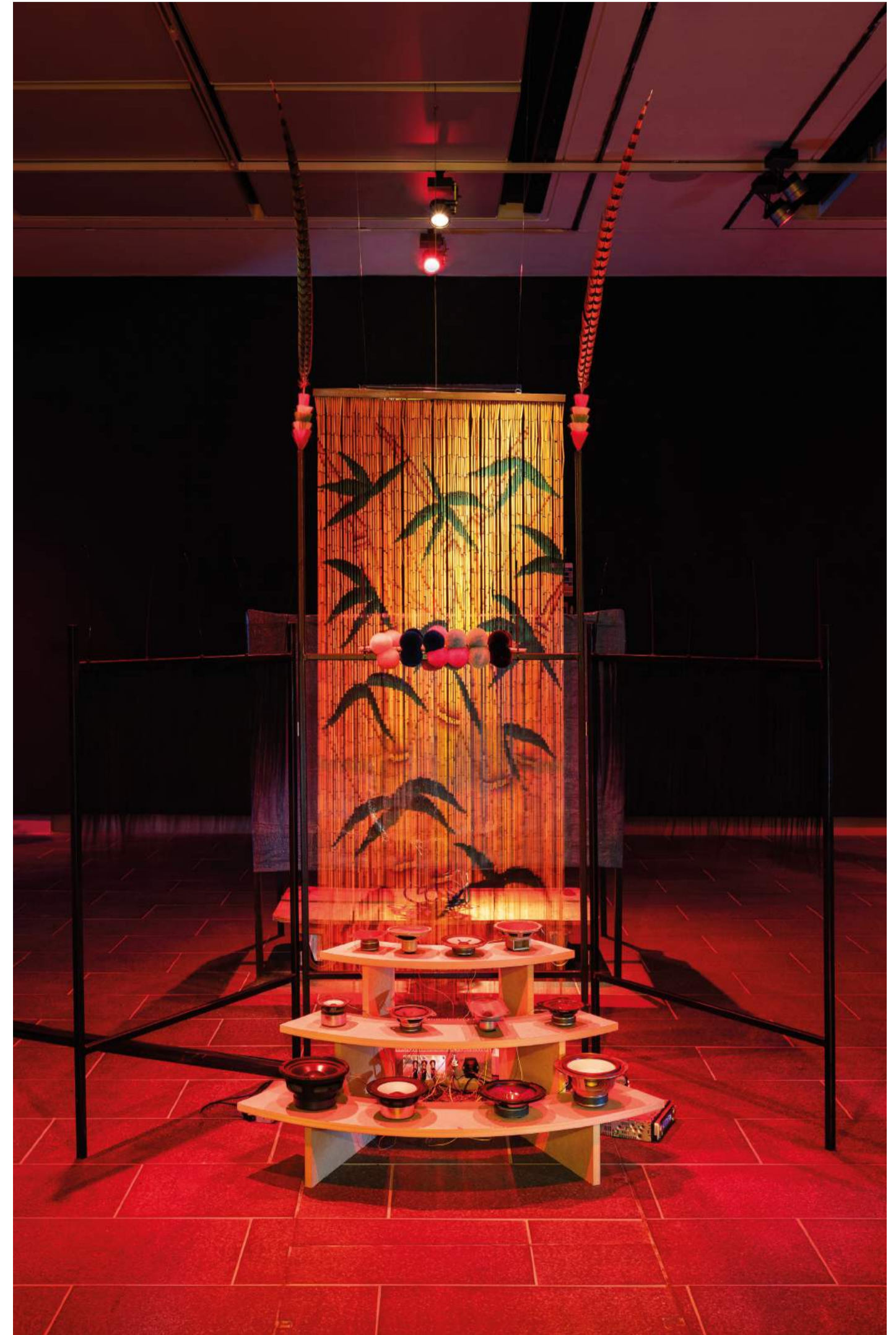
© Michael McMillan, April 2021



Scan to listen
to 'Skanking Hawker'
by Rocksteady Ray
and Li Babies.

References

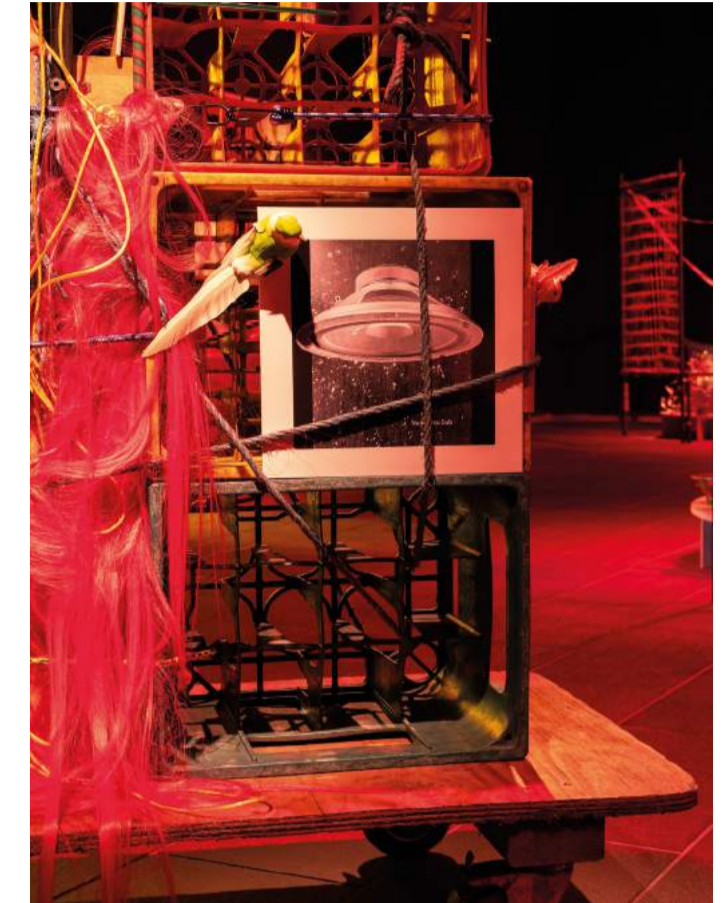
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Skanking Hawker (2023)
Sculptural Assemblage with sound







THE FUNDAMENTALS

Xiaowen Zhu
& Dinu Li

KINGSTON TOWN (Lord Creator) **NATTY DREAD A WEH SHE WANT**
(Tappa Zukie & Horace Andy) **THINGS IN LIFE** (Dennis Brown)
CURLY LOCKS (Junior Byles) **IRE FEELINGS (SKANGA)** (Rupie Edwards)
KING TUBBY MEETS ROCKERS UPTOWN (Augustus Pablo) **GIRL OF MY DREAMS**
(Cornell Campbell) **THE IMMORTAL DUB** (King Tubby) **KUNTA KINTE DUB**
(The Revolutionaries) **POLICE & THIEVES** (Junior Murvin) **DO YOU REALLY LOVE ME**
(Brown Sugar) **CREATION REBEL** (Dub from Creation) **COPPER BULLET**
(Inner Circle & Fatman Riddim Section) **GOOD TIMES (15,16,17) I'VE BEEN TRYING**
(Pat Kelly) **LOLA RASTAQUOÛÈRE** (Serge Gainsbourg) **SILLY GAMES** (Janet Kay)
ONE DROP (Bob Marley) **MOONLIGHT LOVER** (Barrington Levy) **PARADISE**
(Jean Adebambo) **CHEMISTRY** (Scientist) **GOOD THING GOING** (Sugar Minott)
DRUM SONG DUB (Scientist) **BAM BAM** (Sister Nancy) **THERE'S NO ME**
(George Nooks) **COKE SELLER** (Nicodemus) **STRONG ME STRONG** (Yellowman)
HERE I AM (Barrington Levy) **WHITE RICE DUB** (Jah Thomas) **FACTORY PRESET**
(Phase Selector Sound) **NATTY REBEL** (U-Roy) **KING OF MY EMPIRE**
(Rhythm & Sound with Cornell Campbell) **WELCOME TO JAMROCK**
(Damian "Jr. Gong" Marley) **HEAVY BASS LINE DUB** (Brother Culture)
INNA LONDON DUB (Tuff Scout All Stars)

A PHANTOM'S VIBE

When I first read your exhibition concept, I was captivated by the vivid, evocative descriptions of imagery, sound, texture, and space eliciting a sense of longing and curiosity. Could you introduce the process that has led to this new body of work?

I've been wanting to make work that is autobiographical and involves my love of music for a long time, but I've struggled for over a decade with how to connect between these two themes. Then in 2018, I stumbled across the song 'Always Together' by Stephen Cheng on YouTube. I first encountered it in a Hong Kong back alleyway when I was about five. I must have heard it through the closed shutters of a small business. At the time, I assumed it to be a Chinese folk song, as it was sung in Chinese.

My family relocated to the UK when I was seven, and years later — I would have been 14 or 15 — I heard the song again in one of Hulme's infamous Crescent housing estates. It was at a party inside someone's flat. Everybody was skanking to the tune, and I instantly understood Cheng had recorded the song in Chinese to a rocksteady beat.

When I heard it again decades later on YouTube, I learnt Cheng went to record the song in Jamaica in 1967. It was the only time he did such a radical thing. The song was recorded by Sunshine label, one of a handful of independent studios run by Chinese producers whose ancestors settled in Jamaica around the 1850s. As I dug deeper into this history, I found out that descendants of Chinese coolies helped shape the sound of reggae at its infancy. Local artists such as Jimmy Cliff, Lee Scratch Perry, Augustus Pablo, and Bob Marley had their music produced in those studios.

Cheng's song seemed to be my own personal phantom, disappearing and reappearing unexpectedly. The idea that an individual would risk alienating not only his fanbase but also a cultural norm resonated with me. It became the catalyst for the work I eventually proposed to you.

Why did you choose to realise this work in the form of sculptural assemblage?

I'm obsessed with the form and function of things when they are grouped together, especially if they bear insignificant status and inconsequential financial value. I think this may stem from my own working-class roots. For the first few years of my life, we lived in one of Hong Kong's rooftop shanty towns. Living in such a confined space meant constantly rearranging furniture and personal belongings so there's enough room to exist.

It is generally acknowledged that 'form follows function' is the guiding principle for many architects. But there's also the form and function found in spontaneous everyday situations. I saw an improvisation that captured my attention in London a few years ago. It looked like something that might receive recognition had it stood inside a cool white-cube gallery space rather than in the streets of Soho. I admire the formal qualities of the structure and the aesthetics of the red-and-white warning tape. Mostly, I was touched by the humble yet humorous staging of the two wooden blocks. They seem casual but are impactful in letting the scaffolding support the steel beams protruding from the wall.



Figure A

Another staging I got excited by recently was around the corner from my house in Cornwall. Again, there's consideration for public safety in the use of tape. But it's the audacity of resting the white metal bar against the wall plaque that looks so smart

yet unrehearsed. It's this one key decision that makes the bar feel secure, wedged under the plaque so there's less risk of it falling. Poetry flourishes as the warning tape waves gently against the summer breeze.



Figure B

When I work with assemblage, I'm not looking to arrive at a fixed point. I'm more interested in the work appearing to oscillate between completion and incompleteness, as if more pieces could be added or taken away. I want to locate the work in a space that speaks to ideas around temporality and permanence. I want it to be apparent that the assemblage can be pulled apart with no great effort. I'd like to assume the next time it's assembled, it won't look the same. I'm looking for flexibility and the chance to transform the formal qualities of my own structure. I don't want an established point of view, maintaining its position indefinitely. I won't rely on photographic documentation to reassemble, counting instead on the unreliability of memory to put things back together.

'A Phantom's Vibe' captures the critical cultural elements and geographies that have shaped you as an artist. Your trajectory and taste, moving between cultures, genres, communities, spaces, and histories, are truly fascinating. I believe that viewers will be intrigued by the diversity of your experiences and the way you've woven them into this new body of work. It's almost as if we're "reading" a memoir, but one that is hybrid and includes

other forms of writing such as research, investigation, poetry, and critique. What does the multiplicity of influences mean to you and how would you like the viewers to experience the intercultural microworld you built at esea contemporary?

I'd like to invite viewers to be open-minded about the way they perceive the world and to challenge themselves about alternative perspectives. I hope visitors subvert their usual patterns of behaviour in an institutional gallery. I just want people to have a good time and bounce around the space to the music playing out of my assemblage.

I was lucky enough to have spent my teenage years in Manchester, where subcultures once thrived. I went to a culturally diverse high-school and my best friends were mostly Jamaican. They got their hands on some cool vinyl, but finding a record player was more problematic. We used to sneak into our school's assembly hall at night and played all types of Black music, including jazz, funk, soul, R&B, and a lot of reggae and dub.



Figure C

My best friend Michael Suarez and I were followed by the same two cops in their car on our daily walk to school. By the age of eleven, we had first-hand knowledge of what police harassment and social profiling meant. We used the word 'Babylon' to describe them, Jamaican slang for corrupt authoritarian power. The two cops' campaign of intimidation went on for about a year and cemented my friendship with the Black community in a much more meaningful way.

At the same age, I went by myself to my first Notting Hill Carnival, as I had made enough money for my rail fare painting the window frames of B&B businesses in Manchester's Curry Mile. This would have been

1976 and at that carnival, Junior Murvin's 'Police & Thieves' became an anthem about police brutality.

It would be approximately another ten years before I went to my second carnival, and the song I remember most was from a sound system playing 'Expansions' by Lonnie Liston Smith. The way the sound is assembled from the triangle followed by the bass guitar, the wood block, the rattling of a maracas, the bongos, more maracas, the funky drum beats, and finally the stretched out sound of Smith's keyboard marking a shift from the introduction into the track's second phase.

The rich textures of Smith's track are intended as a transcendental experience. I distinctly remember riot vans circulating around us, and a police helicopter hovering above, using search light to disrupt the party. Far from dispersing the crowd, the effect added to the ambience, so we all bounced the streets even harder. The lyrics' first line goes 'Expand your mind to understand we all must live in peace on earth.' When we heard it, everyone just erupted into full expression.



Figure D

Between the two carnivals, and before Manchester became homogenised, it was a city with its own subterranean world. There was a gay club called 'Heroes' that played some of the best dance music, long before Manchester got its own gay village. I went there for the first time when I was around eighteen and became the club's mascot as I was always the first on the dance floor.

Around the same time, I started going to The Hacienda and saw The Smiths live. The following year, in 1984, I watched Madonna's first live performance in the UK. There were clubs for goths and joints for Morrissey wannabes. There were weekenders

where you could body pop and breakdance to hip hop for the entire weekend. You could be whoever you wanted to be. After clubbing, I'd go to a blues parties in Hulme or Moss Side.

Your use of found objects is at once imaginative and meticulously considered, such as the tri-coloured tarpaulin and Chinese opera pom poms. Why did you choose these materials and how did you establish connections between them?

I group things that seem disparately put together. I rely on visualising, then materialising my own memories of a place I once knew intimately. I'm looking to group things that allow for connections, however incongruous or ambiguous. I'm looking to create associations, and hope something metaphorical will emerge from the way I assemble objects. I want to use commonplace materials to question status, tolerance, and acceptability. I want to be open about what unexpected lexicon might transpire by things that don't necessarily go together.

In Chinese opera, pom poms fixed onto a performer's headdress act as antennas. In my assemblages, an assortment of pom poms are located near tarpaulin covers. Waterproof tarps are ubiquitous as cheap baggage or as market stall roofing. One of the most popular styles I have chosen includes red, white, and blue stripes, which corresponds to the union jack.

The use of hair extensions refers to the long-bearded characters in Chinese opera. Performers are classically trained to use all parts of their bodies to express themselves: from the curling of a finger to the lowering of an eyebrow, every gesture means something. Yet the long beards that conceal the mouths of these characters could be understood as offering half-told or incomplete stories.

Insects use antennas to detect air motion and sound vibrations. In 'Skanking Hawker', I've deliberately assembled an assortment of speaker cones without their wooden cabinets. Quality sound is rendered possible when speaker cones are enclosed in

boxes. This is what allows dub bass to push air in a space to maximise the feeling of a good vibe. Yet sound waves move across space in mysterious ways. You could live in a village near Glastonbury and never have to complain that your sleep is disrupted by a rock concert, but that same gig may upset people living miles away.

I wonder what sort of visual and sonic signals may get picked up when hair extensions are situated in close proximity to union jack-coloured tarpaulin, multicoloured pom poms, and against the backdrop of dub music. Sound waves move through air causing a displacement of particles. The visual and aural are as much about seeing and hearing as they are about feeling.

It's impossible to not mention the exhibition's captivating soundscapes. I am particularly interested in your collaboration with three different producers to create your dub tracks.

Could you speak about your collaborations and what you wanted to achieve?

Decades ago, while staying with the Long Horn Miao tribe on a mountain range in Guizhou province, I recorded a traditional song. I hadn't used it until now. The song is performed by teenage girls on a mountaintop at dusk. Their voices echo and reverberate across the mountains, calling out teenage boys in nearby villages as a match-making tradition.

As soon as this exhibition was decided upon, I wanted to make a dub track. Ray Wong, one of my colleagues at the university where I teach, shares my taste in music. I also knew he makes his own music, so it made sense to approach him as my first collaborator. I asked Ray to put a track together that transitioned from one epoch to another whilst transcending different geographic locations. I felt this might communicate a history of music from my perspective.

Ray used a small sample of Cheng's 'Always Together' and assembled it with my recording of the mountain song. He then produced his own dub track to create the transitions. I

explained I wanted something dense and atmospheric as if it were the sound of an inner-cityscape. I spoke about the element of danger when attending blues parties in 1980s Hulme, as occasionally there would be this feeling something was about to kick off. The idea of dancing to dub inside someone's flat you've never met before, in a notoriously risky housing estate, somehow added to the excitement.

I imagined Ray's track as the A-Side, which meant I needed another track for the B-Side. Whereas Ray's track speaks to a tapestry of sound, for the next track I wanted someone to convey the principle ideas behind my assemblages and why I group things together the way I do. One of my students, Vivian Almas, who produces her own music, introduced me to her Lithuania-based producer friend Ignas Balčius.

Ignas normally produces atmospheric soundscapes, synthesising his sounds from scratch. What he produced for me is partly in response to a dub playlist he'd been listening to. We introduced ourselves on a Webinar and spoke for no longer than ten minutes. Unlike the collaboration with Ray, where we work in the same building, the fact that Ignas and I were geographically separated was an opportunity to collaborate very differently. I decided to be hands-off this time and simply let him do as he pleased.

It was really interesting hearing Ignas claiming he was a vessel rather than a conductor of dub. Vivian and I recorded some toasting, using a simple voice memo software on her mobile phone. Ignas integrated our voices so that it formed part of the sound itself. It was Ignas's way of making our vocals and his beats move together. I think the result has some association to dub, but has traversed into a different zone. I titled Ignas's track 'Back-a-Yard Brew' in homage to Miles Davis's 'Bitches Brew'. It's one of those albums in music history where Davis, who was already a colossal figure, comes along with a new way of making music that redefined jazz. In 'Back-a-Yard Brew' I feel as if Ignas is taking listeners on a journey somewhere.

Once I had the double-sided vinyl in the bag, I was motivated to make more music. I also realised I needed an all-out hardcore dub track. I wanted something that would get people skanking inside a gallery. By that stage, the wider international reggae-loving community had been alerted to what I was doing, and I was suddenly inundated by hundreds of requests to work together.

My nephew's partner Aessi Gunawardhana, a violinist, introduced me to her friend Keefe West, whom she used to record with. Keefe himself had performed at the Notting Hill Carnival for twenty two years before moving to Australia. His father was a founding member of the carnival, and his godfather, another founding member, received an MBE as the first man to start the carnival procession.



Figure E

In my first message to Keefe, I said I was looking for a sound inspired by 'Kunta Kinte Dub' by The Revolutionaries, one of my all-time favourite dub tracks. I told him I wanted lots of bass, reverb, echoes, police sirens, all the elements associated with dub. I didn't need much high or mid-frequency sounds. We then agreed to meet online a few days later. By the time we met, Keefe had already put the bassline together and when he played it, I knew he had nailed it. I was obviously left with the difficult task of gently rejecting those hundreds of offers to collaborate.

Agreeing that the bassline needed minimal changes, Keefe and I set out to work on other aspects of the track. With him in Australia and myself in the UK, we linked up on Zoom and completed the tracks within 48 hours. We recorded our toasting as if we were talking to each other. During the process, we spoke about music and he asked me a lot of questions about my youth, which fed into the production. When I spoke about my best friend Michael and I trying to imitate Bruce Lee swinging his nunchaku sticks, that led to the tracks being

titled 'Nunchaku Dub' on the A-Side and 'Double Nunchaku Dub' on the B-Side. I tested out the tracks on my students and they were smiling from ear to ear.



Figure F

Hong Kong's street markets were also pivotal in your journey. It's intriguing to note that our gallery is situated in what was one of Manchester's bustling market districts, and previously housed a fish market. I am fascinated by your decision to enclose your installations within a constructed dark space in the gallery, which requires visitors to traverse half of our premises to access. Could you share the thought process behind this choice and how it contributes to the show's narrative?

I have vivid memories of the Northern Quarters, where esea contemporary is situated, before it was regenerated. I used to go to Tib Street, not far from the gallery, just to stare at the variety of freshwater fish in the aquariums. There were pet shops, kung fu shops, fresh produce markets, joke shops, and second-hand bookshops. It's amazing that some of these independent businesses still hang on after all these years.

In my staging at esea contemporary, I refer to my five-year-old self wandering through the local street markets in my old neighbourhood. I was raised on 974 Canton Road in a district called Mong Kok, loosely translated as 'prosperous corner,' and it's one of the busiest places in the world. The area is labyrinthian and used to be characterised by old ladies selling bucket-loads of kimchi, aquarium shops with hundreds of goldfish swimming in transparent bags, vendors carting candied hawthorn skewers, and gangsters rubbing shoulders with

residents against the backdrop of a fragrant flower market.

I was particularly drawn to Temple Street, which is a twenty-minute walk from my old home. It came alive at night. You could watch a Chinese opera for free, performed by die-hard amateurs who practised in front of a live audience. Locals called it 'a poor man's night club.' It was a magnet for anyone who didn't own a TV. Temple Street is now Hong Kong's last remaining night market.



Figure G

Hong Kong gets extremely hot in the summer, so a lot of my wanderings took place at night. My exhibition at esea contemporary starts in the summer, so I'm presenting visitors with a nocturnal experience. Some vendors won't pack up until everything is sold. I find those closing hours an exciting time to visit, when some stalls have already pulled down their shutters or covered up for the evening. There's something enigmatic about a stall's contents obscured by covering; you're left to imagine what's underneath. I also look for traces of a day's activities where shoppers may have rummaged through a stall to get at something. I enjoy watching peddlers prowling the streets, desperately trying to offload goods before calling it a day.

You transform our gallery to create an immersive experience, blurring the lines between the exhibition space and the outside world, giving physical manifestation to the themes your work explores. Darkness allows for a heightened sensory experience, emphasising the importance of sound and texture in your sculptural assemblage. Furthermore, the act of walking through the space can be interpreted as a journey, a metaphor for the journey that diasporic communities undertake in search of identity and belonging.

This makes me think of two movies. First, the opening scene in 'The Sound of Music', where Maria, played by Julie Andrews, stretches out her arms singing 'The hills are alive with the sound of music.' I then think of 'Yellow Earth' by Chen Kaige, a film about a soldier sent to remote parts of China to record mountain songs. Both movies are about the sounds of a place and its people. Mountains and land feature in these films as both significant and symbolic. Barring any shifts in Earth's tectonic plates, mountains offer a sense of permanence and stability.

In the exhibition, visitors will see a slide projection, called 'Folk Songs', of photographs taken in several People's Parks across China. They show retirees singing in public. Inside the market stall in one corner of the gallery is a video installation called 'Family Nation', where three versions of the song 'Somewhere My Love' appear in different settings, yet none of them is the original from the movie 'Doctor Zhivago'. Visitors will also see two photographic prints mounted on the wall. They depict a Long Horn Miao tribal funeral on a mountaintop and a rooftop roller disco.

Just before the millennium, I travelled to the hinterlands of Guizhou province in southwest China, in search of the Long Horn Miao tribe. I was interested in how they retained their cultural identity in a changing world. When I heard their mountain song, I realised it was like nothing I'd ever heard before. But the tribe doesn't live in absolute isolation. Once a week there's a market held at the foot of the mountain, where different local tribes gather to trade with Han Chinese. There, younger generations of the various tribes are exposed to pop music playing from a hotel rooftop. I've seen them roller-skating to 'Boogie Wonderland' by Earth Wind and Fire.

The backdrop to my identity is not a distant mountain-scape. I was born in the teeming urban sprawl of Hong Kong and lived my youth in inner-city Manchester. The visual and sonic stimulus of the urban environment have defined me.

Can you tell us more about the sound system you've created in the newly commissioned piece 'Skanking Hawker'? Why are the speakers exposed?

Instinctively, I knew the track produced with Ray needed to be embedded within a sculptural assemblage with its own sound system. I wanted my song to play out of a deconstructed system with a diminished sound. This was in direct reference to my five-year-old self, overhearing Cheng's rocksteady tune through the closed shutters of a backstreet shop all those years ago. The completed track was eventually called 'Skanking Hawker', in reference to market vendors dancing to a radio tune whilst selling fake jewellery.



Figure H

My ensemble of bare speaker cones also corresponds to my experiences of watching Guangzhou's African community testing speaker cones in district specific to second-hand hi-fi equipment. They were testing for quality before buying anything, so they could assemble their own sound systems at home. In those markets, speaker cones are laid out on tiered display stands.

When did you feel that you made your first artwork, and has that reverberated in how you work today?

That would be around the age of five or six. There was a school class where we had to recite basic Confucius analects every week. We wrote his sacred philosophical principles over and over again using a paint brush and black ink, also to help us improve our classic calligraphy skills.

I had been inspired by another form of ancient Chinese art called Bian Lian, or face-changing, used for hundreds of years in the dramatic arts. I was mesmerised by the performers' skills in switching multiple face masks quickly and seamlessly. So instead of following the strict discipline of my class, I would paint my face instead, and use my own saliva to wipe off one mask before painting another.



Figure I

Thinking back on my calligraphy class, I can't help but revisit a quote from American architect R. Buckminster Fuller's 'I Seem To Be a Verb':

"I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process — an integral function of the universe."

July, 2023

Image Credits

A. Photo by Dinu Li
 B. Photo by Dinu Li
 C. Michael Suarez and Dinu Li on a bus to school. Photographer unknown
 D. Dinu Li at the Notting Hill Carnival. Photographer unknown
 E. Production stills by Keefe West
 F. Album cover. Artwork by Dinu Li
 G. Street performers, Temple Street, Hong Kong. Photo by Viola Gaskell
 H. The Long Horn Miao tribe. Photo by Dinu Li
 I. Photo by Dom Allen

Nunchaku Dub
 Lyrics by Dinu Li aka Li Babies

Nunchaku Style Dub
Nunchaku
Yeah

Nunchaku Mike: *To all dem Reggae lovers round the world*
 Li Babies: *Yessir*

Nunchaku Mike: *To all dem back-a-yard dub stars*
 Li Babies: *Dem a top rankin and ting*

Nunchaku Mike: *Dem dancehall skanking gangsta*
 Li Babies: *Yeah we salute dem too*

Nunchaku Mike: *King Tubby, Prince Jammy, Lee Scratch Perry*
 Li Babies: *Dem is da golden G.O.A.T*

Nunchaku Mike: *Hey Li Babies?*
 Li Babies: *Yeah man*

Nunchaku Mike: *You like Police & Thieves?*
 Li Babies: *Yessir*

Nunchaku Mike: *Augustus Pablo?*
 Li Babies: *Oh man, big-time royalty*

Nunchaku Mike: *What about Kunta Kinte Dub?*
 Li Babies: *Yeah man, dem a jammin and ting*

Nunchaku Mike: *Janet Kay, Carrol Thompson, Jean Adebambo*
 Li Babies: *Yeah, we got dem goin and ting*

Nunchaku dub
Yeah man, bring the nunchaku
Badman Choco, bring the nunchaku
Look after Li Babies man
Peril Erroll, bring the nunchaku
Nunchaku dub
Symphony Sid, bring the nunchaku
Yeah Li Babies, come a back-a-yard man
Bring the nunchaku,
Yeah man, alright
Keep it tight man
Hey
Bo
Rhatid man
Yeah
Nunchaku style



FADE AND GLOW

Sacha Craddock



Dinu Li, plays on expectation, at many levels. In 'Nation Family' he seems to look back in order to find out; working through layers of anticipated film genre to search between the leaves of everyday life. We follow the apparently logical questioning of someone who already looks back and forward but never so much at where he is. The man, dashing beyond belief, is there within this regime. Every single camp 'inmate' had to tap rubber from 150 trees a day, every day. But he comes and goes. The sound that carries a perpetual metaphor of elsewhere is emitted, humming, from loudspeakers bound to trees in the camp, as well as in Cantonese in a black-and-white film playing on a crackling television set in an empty living room. This sort of film, based on fiction, comes over as fact, and the other way round. The theme tune, already in popular culture, and therefore in real life, helps us inhabit and revisit different places in between.



This long-lost relative is looked back on as well as up to in a film that morphs decisively between documentary account and filmic fiction. This handsome man, something of a hero, is also obviously, well, definitely, a spiv. We imagine how he shifts backwards and forwards, probably in and out of the oppressive camp. At some point a pair of high-heeled shoes materialise, better than clogs, obviously, and lights shift, fade and glow in the dark in-between. The path to the unknown, perhaps leading to sophistication and freedom, beckons, yet two women, appearing as much part of the past as now, work near plastic bowls in the open kitchen. All the man could think of was escape, however, but there was still drill every day.



The Friendship Hotel provides a metaphor for experience, those high-heeled shoes and ambition have already been absorbed into the old, new film. Documentary brings close what cannot be seen, found or understood. But the past is inhabited in film by music, in life by the parallel between what we imagine and what we know. '23 fucking years'; but then the protagonist seems to disappear; and there is light on water, a sparkling sea, and a group of friends obviously taking a holiday, or a break from work, or both.



And then, the last, separate section, with a masked 1970s Pan's People, provides well-lit, film of brilliantly choreographed dancers swirling round and round, forced back onto each other, against artificial indoor plants. At some point they remove their masks. Violin sound is manufactured and the whole memory seems made up right now. The implication is that the hero has walked into another place, we have followed, yet we still can't see. This section is about trying to equate the process of searching the past with that of constructing evidence through labour; it is about the awkward and natural level of projection that forces the construction of myth.

© Sacha Craddock, February 2021



The seemingly innocent trajectory of sound as it moves from its source towards a listener, without forgetting all the surfaces, bodies, and other sounds it brushes against, is a story imparting a great deal of information fully charged with geographic, social, psychological, and emotional energy.

Brandon LaBelle¹

PHANTOM LOVE SONGS

Wenny Teo

Somewhere, My Love

The title of Dinu Li's exhibition, 'A Phantom's Vibe', derives from an old family photograph that captured the artist's imagination when he first saw it as a young child, and continues to speak to him today. In the black-and-white image we see a young man — Li's older cousin — seated casually in what appears to be a park or garden, soft light pushing through the lattice-work of tropical foliage in the background. He is dressed for the warm weather in a white short-sleeved shirt and slacks, one sandal dangling from his raised foot. His gaze rests intently on the transistor radio cradled in his hands. Years later, Li asked his cousin if he remembered what song he'd been listening to when the photo was taken. His cousin responded that it was the theme song from the epic film 'Doctor Zhivago' (1965) — a sweeping orchestral score that was re-recorded with lyrics and released in 1966 as the worldwide hit *Somewhere, My Love*³.

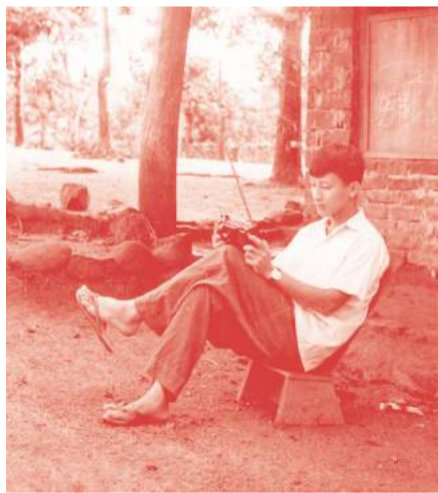


Figure A

It is easy to recognise the pull that the photograph has had on the artist. It is a resonant, dreamy image that perfectly captures the densely interwoven textures of music and memory; a testament to how certain songs can so vividly pull us back across the warp and weft of space and time, and allow us to escape into a private realm of unspoken desires, longing, reverie, and fantasy. But that's not the end of the story. Upon closer inspection, we notice several jarring details that reveal the scene to be a fabrication: the radio's raised antenna is actually fashioned from a thin culm of bamboo, and in fact, it isn't a radio at all, but a brick painted to look like one. As Li later discovered, the photo isn't quite of a young man leisurely listening to music in the park, whiling away the hours on a lazy afternoon.

It was taken on a rubber plantation labour-camp on Hainan Island, off the south coast of China, where Li's cousin had been sent to live and work during the Cultural Revolution⁴. The music on this makeshift 'radio' was a phantom love song playing in the young man's head, perhaps even retrospectively laid over the image in the eidetic editing room of memory like a movie soundtrack. The photo is a fabrication — much like the ersatz radio in Li's cousin's hands, which becomes a symbol of improvisation and resourcefulness, emblematising the human need to carve out a space of imagination and escape against all odds, with whatever tools available. Above all, the image speaks to the mnemonic entanglement of music — whether real, imaginary, or misremembered — with our personal origin stories, intergenerational histories, and geographies, no matter how dislocated these trajectories might be.

Another word for musical improvisation is extemporisation, which carries the charge of spontaneous, unscripted, and emotive forms of expression that riff on and unsettle the compositional fixity of a given score, out of time and place. 'A Phantom's Vibe' is an exhibition that could best be described as an acoustic assemblage of extemporaneous sonic frequencies. It is made up of several installations, photographs, and videos, all sampled and remixed from the various leitmotifs of Li's personal soundtrack, triggering in turn, mnemonic associations and histories in the audience. As the sound theorist Brandon LaBelle phrased it, 'sound reroutes the making of identity by creating a greater and more suggestive weave between self and surrounding (...) filling relations with local sound, sonic culture, auditory memories, and the noises that move between, contributing to the making of shared space.'⁵ In his book *Acoustic Territories: Sound culture and everyday life* (2017) LaBelle maps out the critical resonances, detours, networks, and circuits of aural experience by taking the reader on an imaginary journey through the 'soundways' of urban space; from the city's echoey underground tunnels to its clamorous streets and neighbourhoods; from the private realm of the home to the public infrastructures of transmis-

sion towers and satellites. Weaving together the sights and sounds of our everyday urban environment, LaBelle accentuates how, 'from its source to its destination, sound is generative of a diverse range of experiences, as well as remaining specifically tied to a given context, as a deeper expressive and prolonged figure of culture.'⁶

It is thus fitting that 'A Phantom's Vibe' is exhibited at esea contemporary, a site built on what used to be a fish market in Manchester's bustling Northern Quarter — a lively commercial district once lined with hawker stalls and trade shops. Its changing fortunes and demographics amplify wider socio-historical, cultural, and global developments, from the industrial revolution to gentrification, coloured by resultant waves of migration. Since the early 1900s, Manchester has been home to one of the largest Chinese populations in the UK, particularly those emigrating from the then-British colony of Hong Kong, including Li's own family who moved there in the 1970s. The various works in the exhibition echo the history of the site in the clamour of sound that it constellates and the seemingly makeshift character of the installations, set up like booths or market stalls throughout the space. They also carry the imprint of other places, cobbled together from both real and imagined aural histories, and other love songs.

Always Together (A Chinese Love Song)

In 2018, Li was browsing YouTube when he stumbled upon a song by Stephen Chun-Tao Cheng (1921–2012) titled 'Always Together (A Chinese Love Song)'. The piece is set to a loping, rocksteady beat familiar to Li from the Afro-Caribbean communities he had grown up with in Manchester, but features lyrics from a Taiwanese folk song, vocalised by Cheng in a keening, almost operatic register. Its rhythmic, skanking overture served as an 'acoustic madeleine' of sorts, vividly transporting the artist back to two specific moments from his childhood. The first occurred in the back alleys of the Hong Kong neighbourhood he

frequented as a very young child, when he first heard the song playing from behind the closed metal shutters of local shops at night. The second time he heard it was in the 1980s, as a teenager at a blues party in the infamous Crescent housing estates in Hulme, Manchester. Li has described the song as his 'personal phantom, disappearing and appearing in unexpected fashion,' over the course of his life, playing sporadically on loop over time and refusing to leave his head, like an earworm.⁷

That this song has resonated so strongly with the artist reveals something of Li's own phantasmic experience as a young Chinese migrant growing up in the UK. Much has been written about the stereotype of overseas Chinese populations as a 'silent', 'invisible', 'model minority' who work hard at minding their own business (quite literally) and keeping to themselves, seldomly seen or heard amidst the cacophony of public life and discourse. As sociologist Diana Yeh put it, 'The Chinese in Britain are constructed as a success story due to their relative success in education and employment across class and gender, but their invisibility in the political and cultural realm is erased as a concern, as is the racial violence and discrimination towards them.'⁸ By the 1980s and 1990s, amidst vociferous debates on multiculturalism and identity politics in the artworld and in other spheres, the term 'Black' was, in the words of art historian Kobena Mercer and artist Isaac Julien, 're-articulated as a political term of identification among diverse minority communities of Asian, African, and Caribbean origin, rather than as a biological or racial category.'⁹ Yet subsumed under this umbrella term, as the artist Susan Pui San Lok remarked, 'Chinese has often been positioned as the "unspoken and invisible" other of Black as well as white aesthetic discourses.'¹⁰ While the semantic slippages across the scale of racialised difference is a matter of critical concern that has yet to be resolved (as the dissatisfactory, institutionalised catch-all term BME — Black and Minority Ethnic — attests to), Li is very comfortable with the term Black both as a descriptor of his minority ethnic British Chinese identity as well as his artistic influences.

Music is our witness,
and our ally. The 'beat' is the
confession which recognises,
changes, and conquers time.
Then, history becomes a garment
we can wear and share, and not a
cloak in which to hide; and time
becomes a friend.

*James Baldwin*²

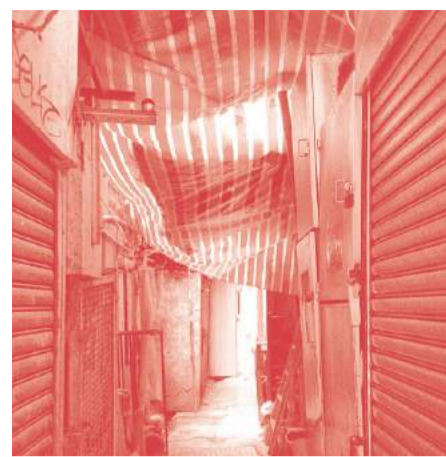


Figure B



Figure C



Figure D

As one of the few Chinese pupils at his school in Manchester, Li was often subject to racist bullying until a group of Jamaican kids took him under their wing, introducing him to a vibrant subculture of Black music, including jazz, funk, soul, R&B, reggae, and dub, played in house parties, youth clubs, pub lock-ins, and community centres. This made Li far less invisible as a teenager, for he recalls numerous instances of police harassment, brutality, and discrimination that he experienced by association. At the same time, he was shunned by the Chinese community because of the company he kept, not to mention how he dressed and spoke. Although Li was on the fringes of both groups, it was his love of music that fomented a greater sense of comradeship and kinship with the Afro-Caribbean community, frequenting their familiar haunts throughout the city, a vibrant subterranean world that has gradually been lost to increasing gentrification and homogenisation.¹¹

Echoing Li's hybridised identity, Stephen Cheng's 'Always Together (A Chinese Love Song)' is a piece that marries two distinct musical influences and speaks of their imbricated cultural histories. Cheng, a Shanghai-born singer and composer who emigrated to America, had recorded the lilting rocksteady track

in Kingston, Jamaica in 1967 (only a year after 'Somewhere, My Love' from 'Doctor Zhivago' hit the charts). 'Always Together' was produced by the acclaimed Byron Lee, one of several influential figures in Jamaican music history who was of Chinese ancestry.¹² The Chinese arrived in Jamaica in the 19th century at the height of British imperial rule when, following the abolition of the slave trade, thousands of Chinese and Indian indentured labourers or 'coolies' were shipped to the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas to work in plantations alongside slaves from the African continent, under no less inhumane conditions.

In her book 'The Intimacies of the Four Continents' (2015), Lisa Lowe explores the elusive and emotive ties forged by colonialism, slavery, imperial trade, and Western liberalism between people across the globe, centring on 'the "residual" and "emergent" ways of construing the sense of intimacy as "close connection", that is, the implied but less visible forms of alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonised peoples beyond the metropolitan national centre.'¹³ Li's own experience of growing up among the Black diaspora in the metropolitan centre of Manchester has been one marked by such intimacies, a connection deepened by a shared love of music.

Always Together, as its subtitle A Chinese Love Song discloses, is actually a cover of a folk song beloved by Chinese-speaking people across the globe called 'The Girl of Alishan', also known as 'Green Is the High Mountain.' Its lyrics tell the story of a romance between a girl from the Alishan mountains of Taiwan who is 'as beautiful as the water' and a boy 'as strong as the mountains.' The song is a timeless and moving ode to young love in an idealised landscape or homeland sung by Cheng in a plangent and powerful voice that requires no translation. Yet the melancholy undertones of this Chinese love song also speak to the more ambivalent facets of Li's extemporaneous narrative, keyed in the discordant tenor of unresolved trauma, mis/recognition, in/visibility, discovery, and loss. In Manchester, Li was singled out by bullies in his school for being Chinese until he found

refuge and kinship with the Jamaican community, only to be ghosted by the Chinese community as a result. Or perhaps it was Li who ghosted them, wilfully forming new alliances and identifications, refusing to conform to the 'prescribed otherness' of his apparent 'Chineseness'.¹⁴

As cultural theorist Ien Ang observed, 'it is the myth of the (lost or idealised) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject.'¹⁵ She continued, one may be 'inescapably Chinese by descent,' but 'only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics.'¹⁶ Indeed, there is a particularly resonant passage in the literary theorist Saidiya Hartman's moving study, 'Lose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route' (2007) that comes to mind when considering the poetics and politics of Li's diasporic experience:

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on (...) But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none?¹⁷

Tinkering – Long Horn Miao Love Songs

In 2007, incidentally the same year Hartman's 'Lose your Mother' was published, Li completed a long-running photo series titled 'The Mother

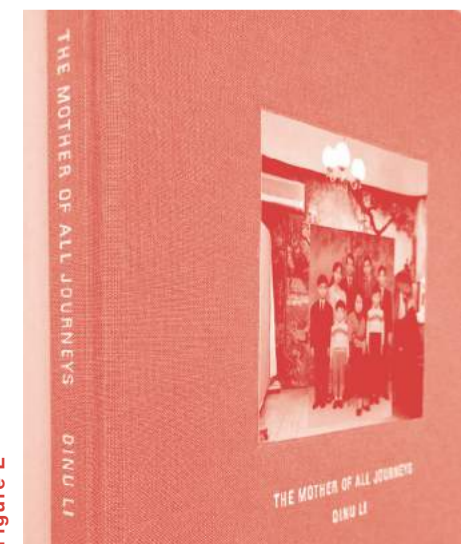


Figure E

of All Journeys', which documented an epic voyage undertaken by the artist and his mother over several years, re-visiting all her previous haunts from Mainland China to Hong Kong and England. It was an intimate portrait of one woman's migratory story, seen through the eyes of her child and through the medium of photography, which offers an immediate lens into the past, but also a critical distance and reframing of it.

Li has described 'A Phantom's Vibe' as an autobiographical exhibition. Facing the impossibility of critical distance, it is fitting that he has chosen to voice his story through soundfull installations that represent a homecoming of sorts to the city of his youth, as well as a homage to the music that has so profoundly shaped his experience of the world and his artmaking. Although intensely personal, the narratives and stories that Li weaves through this acoustic assemblage are not insular, exclusionary, self-absorbed, or self-serving. Working against the stereotype of the Chinese 'model minority' rarely seen or heard in public life, the exhibition gives voice to the often discordant polyphony of diasporic experience, its ambivalent and often clashing tones sounding out what Ang called the 'politics of autobiographical discourse' – the 'deliberate, rhetorical construction of a "self" for public, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a useful identity, an identity which can be put to work.'¹⁸ This notion of strategic fabrication recalls the photograph of Li's cousin and his ersatz radio: an utterly dysfunctional object that was nevertheless made and used with purpose, evoking the transportive powers of the imaginary.



Figure F

In the exhibition, we encounter a number of sonorous installations that echo and amplify this makeshift alliance of materiality, memory, and music. Each of the works are pieced

together from everyday materials and found objects: textiles, striped tarpaulin in red, white, and blue (evoking the Union Jack), exposed sound systems mounted on staggered wooden platforms reminiscent of the clattering mobile displays wheeled out by street vendors in night markets to showcase their plastic fantastic bric-a-brac of wares. Some of these assemblages are festooned with odd details, such as hair extensions and feathers, commonly used in the elaborate costumes of Afro-Caribbean carnival processions as well as Chinese street opera. The titles of these works – 'Herb Vendor', 'Natty Hustler', 'Skanking Hawker', 'Back-a-Yard Brew', and 'Tinker's Spell' – allude to the patois of trade as well as Li's own working-class background (his parents worked in Chinese restaurants in Manchester); a cacophony of interpersonal exchange, negotiation, bargaining, and persuasion, inflected with Jamaican slang and coloured by the look and feel of Hong Kong's back-alley markets. The busy traffic of commerce that resonates throughout 'A Phantom's Vibe' faintly echoes Walter Benjamin's notion of phantasmagoria, the nineteenth-century visual spectacle of an incipient commodity culture, and its resultant ideological mystification and fetishistic imaginary, encapsulated by the impressive glass-and-steel atriums of Parisian arcades. However, one gets the sense that the kind of commerce that the exhibition sounds out, although certainly related to systems of exchange and the mystical value we place on things, is distinctly other.

The term bricolage is often used to describe ragtag assemblages of readymades and found objects. It stems from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's definition of the bricoleur as one who 'speaks not only with things... but through the medium of things.'¹⁹ The historian and cultural critic Michel De Certeau would later elaborate upon the term in his seminal text 'The Practice of Everyday Life' to describe how people tactically tinker (bricolent) 'with and within the dominant cultural economy to obtain innumerable and infinitesimal metamorphosis of its law into their interests and their own rules.'²⁰ Nicholas Bourriaud also referred to the term when drawing

a parallel between the practice of sampling music and globalised art practices since the turn of the millennium: 'we tinker with production, we surf on a network of signs, we insert our forms on existing lines.' This new 'culture of use', he continued, enacts a 'profound transformation of the status of the work of art: going beyond its traditional role as a receptacle of the artist's vision, it now functions as an active agent, a musical score, an unfolding scenario (...) It makes the forms and cultural objects of our daily lives function.'²¹ Indeed, tinkering – a word imbued with onomatopoeic musicality – is a useful term with regards to Li's strategic fabrication. A tinkerer is a repairer, an itinerant tradesperson who goes from home to home; to tinker or tinkering infers the attempt to mend, fiddle, adjust, hack, and play. It's suggestive of a certain amateurism and non-conforming mischievousness.

As we wander through the exhibition space, we also become attuned to how Li tinkers with the music that has so profoundly inspired him, sampling and remixing these songs both aurally and visually. The work 'Nation's Family' plays variations of 'Somewhere, My Love' through a video that centres on the photograph of Li's cousin and delves into its troubled history. Meanwhile 'Skanking Hawker', the sonic backstory of the exhibition, features a new dub track remixed by the artist in collaboration with a music producer from Always Together and spliced with Li's recordings made during a visit to the remote villages of the Guizhou province in the People's Republic of China. The latter is another love song, traditionally sung by teenage girls from the



Figure G



Figure H

ethnic minority Long Horn Miao tribe, calling to other youths from villages all across the mountains.

As LaBelle reminds us, 'Sound is promiscuous. It exists as a network that teaches us how to belong, to find place, as well as how not to belong, to drift. To be out of place, and still to search for new connection, for proximity.'²² Li's tinkered fabrications reveal identity to be a construct woven together from happenstance intimacies and histories, inviting us to reconsider practices of shared speaking and listening, a calling out to others across the gulf of time and space. Li's makeshift approach is far from didactic, but it does prompt us to also think of the ways in which we might listen more intently to others, strengthen our own voice, and make ourselves seen and heard amidst the clamour of an increasingly fractious and divisive world.

In this vein and on a final note, we might turn to an exercise that Stephen Cheng advocated in his book 'The Tao of Voice: A New East-West Approach to Transforming the Singing and Speaking Voice' (1991), written some years after he recorded 'Always Together' in Jamaica. Throughout the text, Cheng places great emphasis on the 'importance of imagery and the imagination, which can be used in singing in the same way they are used by a Chinese classical painter', as he gently guides the reader through a series of psychophysical techniques he had developed from Taoist philosophy – interspersed with anecdotes from his life and childhood memories from China – to 'open up a new channel for the voice as well as for personal growth and transformation.' He begins with a simple exercise called pulling in sound: first, you take a deep breath and imagine that you are drawing all the sounds from the world around you, and as you begin to sing or speak, 'imagine that your voice is as round, radiant, and warm as the sun; that your sound is chasing very fast after an imaginary ball, down towards the centre of the Earth; or that you are embracing someone you love in order to re-create a glowing feeling.'²³

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Footnotes

- Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, (New York: Continuum, 2010) p xvi
- James Baldwin, 'Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption' in *New Edinburgh Review* 47 (1979); pp 18-22, p 18.
- The orchestral score in the film was composed by Maurice Jarre, originally titled 'Lara's Theme'. It was re-recorded by numerous artists like Connie Francis and Ray Conniff under the title 'Somewhere, My Love' by lyrics by Paul Webster. See Stephen C Meyer, *Music in Epic Film: Listening to Spectacle* (London, Taylor & Francis, 2016)
- For further context, see Hualing, Fu, 'Re-Education through Labour in Historical Perspective,' *The China Quarterly*, no. 184 (2005): 811-30.
- LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, p xxi
- Ibid, p xvii
- Dinu Li, in conversation with Zhu Xiaowen in this catalogue.
- Diana Yeh, 'The Cultural Politics of In/visibility: Contesting "British Chineseness" in the arts', in *Contesting British Chinese Culture*, Ashley Thorpe and Diana Yeh (eds), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p 36.
- Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'De Margin and De Centre', in *Screen* (23-4) 1988, pp 2-10, p 5.
- susan pui san lok, 'A-Y' (Entries for an Inventory of Dented "I"s) *Third Text* (17:1) 2003, pp 63-70, p 65.
- Dinu Li, in conversation with Zhu Xiaowen in this catalogue.
- Michael McMillan uncovers this history in greater detail in his essay in this catalogue.
- Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of the Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) p 19.
- 'Prescribed otherness' is a term used by Rey Chow to describe the purported authenticity that the ethnicised Chinese subject must adhere to. Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)
- Ien Ang, 'To Be or Not to Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture and Postmodern Ethnicity' in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, (21:1) 1993, pp 1-17, p 5.
- Ibid, p 14
- Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) p 100.
- Ang, 'To Be or Not to Be Chinese', p 4.
- Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) p 21.
- Michel De Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien, Vol 1: Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) p xxxvii, cited in Anna Deuze, 'Assemblage, Bricolage and the Practice of Everyday Life', *Art Journal*, Vol 67, No 1, Spring 2008, pp 31-37, p 33.
- Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction – Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Has & Sternberg, 2002) pp 19-20.
- LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, p xxi
- Stephen Chun-Tao Cheng, *The Tao of Voice: A New East-West Approach to Transforming the Singing and Speaking Voice*, (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1991) pp 2-3, 14-15.

Image Credits

- A. Cousin in Hainan. Photo provided by Dinu Li
 B. Hong Kong backstreets. Photographer unknown
 C. Hume Crescents. Photo by Richard Davis
 D. Hong Kong backstreets. Photographer unknown
 E. The Mother of All Journeys by Dinu Li
 F. Mum and I. Photo provided by Dinu Li
 G. The Long Horn Miao. Photo by Dinu Li
 H. Guizhou. Photo by Dinu Li

BIOGRAPHIES

Sacha Craddock

Sacha Craddock is an independent art critic, writer and curator based in London. A co-founder of ArtSchool Palestine, Craddock is also a co-founder of the Contemporary Art Award and council member of the Abbey Awards in Painting at the British School at Rome, Trustee of the Shelagh Cluett Trust, and President of the International Association of Art Critics AICA UK, the British section of International Association of Art Critics. She was Chair of the Board of New Contemporaries and selection process from 1996 until December 2021.

Michael McMillan

Michael McMillan, Arts.D. is a British born writer, playwright, artist, curator, and scholar to parents from St Vincent & the Grenadines, who is best known for the much-loved and critically acclaimed 'The Front Room' installation that has been iterated nationally and internationally. His interdisciplinary practice centres on the praxis (theory and practice) of the creative process, ethnography, oral histories, material culture and performativity.

Wenny Teo

Wenny Teo is a writer, curator, and Senior Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art specialising in modern and contemporary art with an emphasis on China and Chinese diasporas. She was previously a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, and assistant curator at Tate Modern. Teo co-curated 'A Beautiful Disorder' at Cass Sculpture Foundation, Chichester (2016), and was Associate Curator of the eighth Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial (2014). Her writing has appeared in academic journals, exhibition catalogues, and art magazines, and she serves on several editorial boards, including Oxford Art Journal, for which she is also Book Reviews Editor (post-1800s).

Xiaowen Zhu

Xiaowen Zhu is the director of esea contemporary. She has worked internationally in Shanghai, New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin as a director, author, and lecturer. She was previously Assistant Director at Times Art Center Berlin and has conceived exhibitions with established and emerging artists from all over the world. Zhu is the author of 'Oriental Silk' (Hatje Cantz, 2020) and 'Encounters' (Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2022). She is a prolific speaker and has lectured about contemporary art and culture at universities around the world. Zhu has been featured in Apollo magazine's 2022 list of 40 Under 40 Asia Pacific Thinkers.

Dinu Li

Dinu Li was born in Hong Kong and currently lives and works in Cornwall, UK. Li is an interdisciplinary artist working with the moving image, photography, sculptural assemblage and performance. In his practice, Li examines the manifestation of culture in the everyday, finding new meaning to the familiar, making visible the seemingly invisible. Archives play an active role in Li's work, and they are often used as points of departure for his projects. His methodology is research based, with an emphasis on appropriation and reconfiguration. Li's work is often characterised by problematising the document as part of the *modus operandi*.

Li has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including the 53rd Venice Biennale; the 3rd Bucharest Biennale; Tashkent Biennale 2007, Uzbekistan; Tatton Park Biennial 2012; EVA 2005; Contact FotoFest 05, Toronto; PPhotoEspaña 13, Madrid; Bildmuseet, Umea, Sweden; Oldenburger Kunstverein, Germany; the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art, Dublin; White Space 798, Beijing; the V&A, London; OCT Loft, Shenzhen; Konsthall C, Farsta, Sweden; Chalk Horse, Sydney; San Antonio Art Gallery, Texas; Alternative Space Loop, Seoul, and the He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen.

Li's works are held in private collections in Berlin, London, St Gallen and Zurich. He has undertaken international artist residencies through ArtSway in Sichuan; OCAT in Shenzhen; an Artists Exchange Residency in Central Asia through the British Council, Space and Cornerhouse. Li's work features in many publications as well as his own monographs and is featured in Phaidon's 2013 survey book 'The Chinese Art Book' showcasing artworks by two hundred significant Chinese artists since the Shang Dynasty. He has presented papers in several conferences including Urban Encounters at Tate Britain in 2017. In 2019, Li's film Nation Family was selected by Sacha Craddock and Mark Titchner for the Exeter Contemporary Open Art Award as the Overall Winner. In 2022, Li was a nominated recipient of the Henry Moore Foundation Artist Award.

esea contemporary

esea contemporary is the UK's only non-profit art centre specialising in presenting and platforming artists and art practices that identify with and are informed by East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) cultural backgrounds.

esea contemporary is situated in an award-winning building in the heart of Manchester, home to one of the largest East Asian populations in the UK. Since its inauguration as a community-oriented visual arts festival in 1986, esea contemporary — previously named Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA) — has continuously evolved to establish itself as a dynamic and engaging space for cross-cultural exchanges in the British art scene, as well as in a global context.

esea contemporary aims to increase the visibility of contemporary art practices from the East and Southeast Asian communities and their diasporas. It is a site for forward-thinking art programmes that beyond exhibitions also include commissions, research, residencies, publishing, and a wide range of vibrant public events. esea contemporary values creativity, compassion, interconnectedness, and collectivity in implementing its mission.

Dinu Li has created
two EPs for the exhibition.
Scan to listen now.



*Listen to
Back-a-Yard Brew*



*Listen to
Nunchaku Dub*

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Dinu Li
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