

**Painting Lesbian Worlds in Portraiture: Lenore Chinn, Asian American Lesbian Visibility
and (In)Scrutability**

By Olive Xia

Advised by Professor Anthony Lee, Professor Lisa Haber-Thomson, and Professor Sarah Stefana
Smith

A Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of Mount Holyoke College in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Bachelor of Arts with
Honor
Department of Art History
South Hadley, MA 01075

May 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would only have been possible with the support of my lesbian community back home in California, at the Bay Area Lesbian Archives, where I first discovered Lenore Chinn's work while serendipitously archiving. I want to thank both Sharon De la Peña Davenport, advising archivist of the Bay Area Lesbian Archives, and Kerby Lynch, director of the Bay Area Lesbian Archives, for helping me grow as an archivist, supporting my knowledge of lesbian history and art, and encouraging both my archival and thesis work.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Anthony Lee, for entertaining my frenetic rants and exasperated explanations of my work and my process. You have always been so kind, considerate, understanding, and supportive of my work, and without your support, I would have been too scared to believe in myself. Thank you for always believing in me and for believing in my ability to accomplish such a big task as this. I would also like to thank my committee members, Professor Lisa Haber-Thomson and Professor Sarah Stefana Smith, for supporting my work and helping me develop my thesis into what it is now. I also want to thank Professor Jessica Maier for being my longtime advisor and always cheering me on, whether in South Hadley or Rome.

I want to thank my community for always helping me keep going when writing seems tough. Thank you to AASIA for supporting my work and to Michelle, who has enthusiastically encouraged me and pushed me to present at both the 5 Pan conference and the Association of Asian American Studies. Thank you for being the first Chinese American lesbian I have ever met; I would not have been able to fully embrace this work without you

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	1
List of Figures	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	6
Social and Educational Context: 1960s to 1970s	8
Social Context: 1980s to 2000s	10
Lenore Chinn and Portraiture as Radical Practice	13
Postmodernism and Lenore Chinn	15
Background: Portraiture and Community in the Bay Area	18
Thesis overview	19
Chapter 1: <i>Déjà Vu</i>: Fractured Visibility in the Asian American Lesbian Self-Portrait	20
Chapter 2: <i>Bing</i> Reparative Citation and the Asian-American Lesbian Imaginary	35
Chapter 3: Before the Wedding and Inscrutability in the Marital Portrait	50
Conclusion	68
Bibliography	74

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Richard Estes, *Telephone Booth*, 1967. Acrylic on masonite, 122 X 175.3 cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Fig. 2. Lenore Chinn, *Déjà Vu*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 40 in. Collection of Viv Hamill And Linda Sandman.

Fig. 3. Lenore Chinn, *Lineage*, 1998. Digital collage, dimensions variable.

Fig. 4. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 46 ¼ x 26 ⅞ in.

Fig. 5. Lenore Chinn, *Bing*, 2001. acrylic on canvas, 48 x 64 in. Image courtesy of artist.

Fig. 6. Martha Holmes, photograph of Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine, “Jackson Pollock: Is He The Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” August 8, 1949.

Fig. 7. Bernice Bing, *Lotus Circle/Lotus Goddesses*, 1968 to 88. Watercolor and mixed media on board, 88.3 x 87.9 cm. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

Fig. 8. Lenore Chinn, *Before the Wedding*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 44 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 9. Herbert Vos, Portrait of Cixi, Empress Dowager of China, 1905-6. Oil on canvas. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fig 10. Xunling, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, ca. 1903-5. Photograph. From *Cixi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908, Photographs* (FSA.A.14). National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 11. Catherine Opie, *Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 1998, Inkjet print, 40 x 50 in. Collection SFMOMA.

INTRODUCTION

When I first encountered Lenore Chinn's paintings, I became acutely aware of the two worlds I was inhabiting. My body was in the Bay Area Lesbian Archives, a dense space packed with bookshelves, featuring the likeness of Lenn Keller, the founder of the archives, positioned across from me. I spotted Keller frozen in time, pointing directly at me, encouraging discovery within the boxes of the archives. Meanwhile, in my hands, I had just pulled out Chinn's monograph *Cultural Confluences: The Art of Lenore Chinn*, with Chinn's painting *Bok Kai Temple on the cover*. The painting on the cover of the book features a Chinese boy looking at himself in a mirror. With the Chinese book in my hands and my surroundings, the lesbian archives, it felt like two of the most important aspects of my identity were actively converging. Looking down at the cover of *Cultural Confluences*, I gazed at the cover image: a red-lit Chinese ancestral shrine, the same type I always saw in my childhood best friend's home, and the similar shrines that occupy that one corner of the Chinese restaurant. I felt as if one part of me is in this space, the lesbian archives, the community I want to be in, the community I partially identify with, while my ethnicity felt implicated in this book of what is clearly Chinese painting. I immediately wondered what it would be like to have a rare glimpse of the merging of lesbianism and Chinese identity, finally able to converge. Upon opening the book and observing Chinn's painting *Déjà Vu*, I perceived Chinn gazing back at me. I recognized an individual embodying the dual aspects of my identity—lesbianism and Chinese heritage—staring back at me.

This thesis focuses on three subsequent examples of Chinn's portraits of Asian American lesbians to understand the mutual gaze I felt when I encountered Chinn. I wanted to understand how that similar sense of relationality played out in Chinn's practice and within her queer Asian American community. Across the three paintings: *Déjà Vu* (1986), *Bing* (2001), and *Before the*

Wedding (2000), I argue that Chinn creates a world of Asian American lesbian imagery as a radical intervention into the genre of portraiture. With these three case studies, I argue that, beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the early 2000s, Chinn constructs a visual language across the three works depicting Asian American lesbians as Asian American lesbians and investigates the parameters of her representation and the representation of her mutually identifying subjects, as reasons to radically intervene in normative pictorial space by destabilizing formal portraiture, stripping portraiture of its supposed neutrality, all via the act of Asian American lesbian feminist citation, ultimately to accommodate her underrepresented community.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is based on archival research, primarily using the Lenore Chinn papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. The collection spans 1978 to 2024 and includes professional files, printed materials, and photography books. I analyze correspondence, exhibition materials, artist statements, ephemera, photographs, and organizational documents. My research, combined with my own reading of Chinn's paintings, examines how her practice functions and how she contextualized it within queer and Asian American art historical and theoretical frameworks. The thesis also draws heavily on an oral history conducted by Ann Cvetkovich at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art on November 27 and December 11, 2023. This oral history is integrated as a sustained chronology tracing Chinn's early life from the 1950s through her exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in 2024. The oral history is also an important source for understanding Chinn's various affiliations with arts and AIDS-related advocacy groups, as well as for tracking how her career developed across her personal, professional, and social activist life.

I also utilize Lenore Chinn's 2011 monograph, *Cultural Influences: The Art of Lenore Chinn*, as well as materials from Chinn's website, simply titled www.lenorechinn.com, to compile interpretive and primary materials for my analysis. Chinn's monograph includes three catalog essays that discuss the importance of Chinn's portraiture and her community-based approach to painting. These essays include contributions from art historians Tirza True Latimer, Moira Roth, and Valerie Soe. The monograph also includes several primary sources related to Chinn's practice, as well as a narrative chronology and high-quality multiple plates of Chinn's paintings. Additionally, Chinn's website offers an extensive collection of resources related to her work, including her exchanges and correspondence with Moira Roth, mainly concerning the

painting *Before the Wedding*, along with a curated selection of images of Chinn's painted portraits.

I combine archival research with close formal analysis and art-historical scholarship on portraiture, postmodernism, and queer of color critique to understand Lenore Chinn's paintings as worked acts produced through dialogues between community and queer relationality, all within methods of citation and disidentification of portraiture. Following Margo Machida's insistence that Asian American art must be understood as socially saturated and dialogical, I read Chinn's portraits through the materials at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in tandem with different types of theory.¹ I draw on Jose Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification and Vivian L. Huang's writings on Asian American lesbian feminism to consider how Chinn's portraits negotiate viability and identity in the context of art history without simply assimilating Asian American subjects into one broad genre and within one seamless label. I similarly use Craig Owens's theory of postmodern allegory to help me understand Chinn's use of citation, especially as it pertains to her appropriation and reworking of art-historical imagery and genres. I then draw upon Sara Ahmed's writings on queer orientation and relationality to demonstrate how a reading of Chinn's attention to interiors, objects, and spatial arrangements constitutes what is understood as embellishment of lesbian worldmaking. Finally, I draw upon art-historical scholarship on portraiture, including Richard Brilliant's work on normative portraiture, to examine how Chinn's portraits operate within the constraints of conventional portraiture. Together, these methods allow me to read Chinn's portraiture as a practice of Asian American lesbian feminist citation and reworking, in which she builds an Asian American lesbian community.

¹ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 28.

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: 1960s-1970s

Lenore Chinn was born and raised in San Francisco. In 1951, Chinn's family was the first Asian American family to move to the Richmond district, which influenced her perspectives on the world. Art historian Moira Roth notes in the catalog *Cultural Confluences: The Art of Lenore Chinn*, in an essay titled "Lenore Chinn's Travels in Life, Politics & Art 1949-2010," that Chinn moved to the Outer Richmond district in the 1950s, a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood, and experienced her Chinese cultural background alongside non-traditional and non-Asian ways of living, which became a "cross-pollination of other world views."²

Chinn's experience with cross-pollination was exacerbated when she completed her A.A. and her Bachelor of Arts degrees in San Francisco at City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State, respectively, in the 1960s and 1970s. Chinn's artistic training at the City College of San Francisco in the late 1960s unfolded within a large, rapidly changing public institution. By 1970, the year she completed her A.A. in Advertising Art and Design, CCSF enrolled roughly 11,500 students and had just reorganized into the San Francisco Junior College District, reflecting its central role in California's transfer system. The college served a broad urban population and functioned as both a gateway to four-year universities and a site of vocational and technical training.³ Chinn was enrolled in a professionally oriented design program, but that program was embedded within a larger campus shaped by political upheaval and shifts in student demographics. In the 1960s and 1970s, CCSF was fundamentally affected by events such as the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State; campuses across the Bay Area experienced intensified protest and administrative backlash. CCSF's student newspaper

² "CCSF To Be Separate From S.F. School District," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), April 8, 1970; "Transfer Survey," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), May 1970.

³ "CCSF To Be Separate From S.F. School District," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), April 8, 1970; "Transfer Survey," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), May 1970.

documented anti-war rallies and campus responses to national unrest.⁴ Chinn later recalled that in 1970, the year of Kent State, Bay Area campuses were marked by the presence of riot police and by administrative responses to earlier student uprisings, describing a lingering "residue" of institutional response even when no active protest was underway. Lenore Chinn's years at CCSF directly coincided with a moment when students were openly contesting structures of authority and racial exclusion, an atmosphere in which the concurrent development of Chinn's artistic practice would be directly informed by each other. While in college, Chinn developed her black-and-white photography practice and chose to study psychology for its political dimensions, drawing on a background in art and design, given her advertising Associate's degree.⁵

While at CCSF, Chinn's understanding of art history was structured around a Western European canon. Chinn recalled that H. W. Janson's *History of Art* served as a central textbook in classes, with women artists appearing only marginally and artists of color largely absent.⁶ The use of Janson in terms of framing art history would function as an antiquated view on art history given the college's racially diverse student body and the broader climate of self-assertion amongst students across the Bay Area. While students debated imperialism, representation, and institutional power, the art history curriculum continued to reproduce a narrative centered on European modernism. Meanwhile, the presence of Diego Rivera's monumental mural on CCSF sharpened this tension between views on art and student demonstrations. The Diego Rivera mural, installed in the Arts Building in 1961 and repeatedly described in student publications as both "controversial" and a campus treasure, occupies a prominent institutional position.⁷

⁴ "Nation's Colleges Erupt," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), May 13, 1971.

⁵ Lenore Chinn, Interview by Ann Cvetkovich, November 27 and December 11, 2023, transcript, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 5.

⁶ Lenore Chinn, Interview by Ann Cvetkovich, 6.

⁷ "Rivera Mural Now On Display in Theater Lobby," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), March 1, 1961; "Controversial Mural Finds Home at CCSF," *The Guardsman* (City College of San Francisco), 1973-74.

Coverage from the City College of San Francisco student newspaper, *The Guardsman*, acknowledged Rivera's political reputation but framed the mural primarily as a historically significant masterpiece rather than as a site of contemporary political contestation.⁸

Taken together, these conditions outline the context in which Chinn's artistic and political consciousness was developing during her college years, set against the backdrop of her artistic development and the surrounding student unrest. The tension between the radical political dimensions of her college years and the traditional, inherited artistic frameworks she was acquiring laid the foundation for how her subsequent years would challenge her previous conception of art history, ultimately steering her toward a more radical and subversive perspective within art.

SOCIAL CONTEXT: 1980s-2000s

Lenore Chinn's portraiture practice originated directly from her community-centered activism and relationships within San Francisco's queer community, predominantly during the 1980s and 1990s, extending into the early 2000s. By exploring Chinn's wide-ranging social, political, and artistic communities, we can understand her choice of subjects, their position in her life, and the meaningful connections she has with them. This community-focused approach should be viewed alongside the art-historical context before Chinn, including the prevailing painting styles and artistic environment, which she witnessed

To understand Chinn's queer social worlds, Jim Van Buskirk and Susan Stryker explore the diverse queer spaces in the San Francisco Bay Area starting in the 1980s in their book, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Van Buskirk and Stryker write that by the early 1980s, gay male sexual culture in San Francisco was increasingly visible

⁸ "Controversial New Mural Finds Home at CCSF," *The Guardsman*.

and organized around bars, bathhouses, cruising grounds, theaters, and other social spaces. While the AIDS epidemic was on the rise, San Francisco's response to AIDS was shaped by a long history of queer organizing. Stryker and Van Buskirk argue that gay men's and women's communities in San Francisco worked together to an unusual degree during the crisis, and that the city's queer presence in local bureaucracy and community organizing made San Francisco especially prepared to build AIDS services.⁹ The response, however, largely depended on volunteers and private donations, while public funding was often inadequate and unevenly distributed.¹⁰ By the middle of the decade, AIDS had become part of the ordinary conditions of queer life in the city, shaping activism, grief, and emotional processes and public policies.¹¹

The lesbian, visual, and social worlds had their own distinctive geography in the 1980s, with the East Bay and San Francisco full of women's bookstores, bars, cafes, predominantly women's spaces, presses, and sex-positive health institutions. In San Francisco, lesbians and bisexual women helped form the Valencia Street coordinator in the Mission, with spaces such as Old Wives' Tales, the Artemis Cafe, and the famous Women's Building.¹² Queer women of color emerged through collected literary publications such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, published in 1981 and edited by Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua, as well as through the presence of poets Merle Woo and Pat Parker and several activist and artistic groups for queer people of color.¹³

Chinn's personal social environment was marked by involvement in social politics and queer organizing, as well as AIDS activism through diverse social groups, including arts organizations. Chinn would uniquely occupy a community predominantly located in the Castro

⁹ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*, foreword by Armistead Maupin (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), pg. 90-91.

¹⁰ Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, pg. 92-93.

¹¹ Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, pg. 94-95.

¹² Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, pg. 99-101.

¹³ Stryker and Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay*, pg. 104-107.

neighborhood, primarily within the vicinity of gay men as opposed to the lesbian scene in the Mission District and the East Bay. During this time in the Castro, Chinn had recently graduated from college and engaged with the medical community and the arts scenes of San Francisco and the Castro neighborhood. Being active in both spaces, Chinn had a unique perspective on the development of the AIDS epidemic in social and medical contexts.

In her 2023 oral history with Ann Cvetkovich, Chinn states that she first identified as a lesbian around 1980 after relocating to the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco. Concurrently, she became deeply involved in the Harvey Milk Democratic Club. She recalls that the club had very few women and even fewer people of color at the time, and her efforts, together with those associated with the women's caucus, advocated for including lesbians in the club's name. During this period, Chinn was simultaneously engaged in working as a laboratory technician at the Davis Medical Center in the Castro, where she closely observed the same unidentified disease claiming the lives of gay men.¹⁴

Chinn's growing political awareness of lesbian identity and AIDS activism was directly influenced by her witnessing the developing AIDS crisis. These included her involvement in queer political activities within the medical community and observing her friends succumb to the disease. In her 2020 oral history with Ben Gillespie, Chinn recalls that the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis were marked by a lack of understanding, as well as homophobia and misinformation about the transmission of AIDS, with a minimal response. Chinn also remembers heated debates in this context, with some advocating immediate closures and others promoting education and safer-sex practice. According to Chinn, AIDS was not an abstract or distant issue; she experienced it personally through her friends, noting that after a time, she had "lost count" of

¹⁴ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 14.

how many people had died.¹⁵ Lenore Chinn's artistic practice is therefore inextricable from these social circles impacted by AIDS, reflecting a deep sense of loss and highlighting the vital role of lesbians in activism. This is evident in the change of the Harvey Milk Democratic Club's name and her involvement in organizing a Women's Day blood drive, which rallied women and lesbians to support those affected by AIDS.¹⁶

During this period of collective social, political, and sexual upheaval, Chinn recalls primarily painting those around her, mainly friends, and that it was through developing friendships through her work as well as by attending her events that she depicted her community, and it was then her community that supported her practice.¹⁷ Chinn's portrait painting practice would emerge from her activism in spaces such as the Castro and would directly inform the reasons for her portraits and explain who she depicted in her paintings.

LENORE CHINN: PORTRAITURE AS RADICAL PRACTICE

While painting in the 1980s, Chinn would have been aware of multiple retrospectives at major art institutions in San Francisco celebrating the Bay Area figurative art movement, a significant movement that shaped the region's art scene during that era. In her book, *The Bay Area Figurative Movement*—which responded to the exhibition of the same name at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (on view from December 14, 1989, to February 4, 1990)—Caroline Jones notes that the movement was characterized by a return to recognizable subjects after a period of abstraction, as evidenced by the works of artists such as David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, and Joan Brown.¹⁸ These West Coast artists reintroduced

¹⁵ Lenore Chinn, interview with Ben Gillespie, July 30, 2020, transcript, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, pg. 2.

¹⁶ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 14.

¹⁷ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 12.

¹⁸ Caroline A. Jones, *Bay Area Figurative Art: 1950-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pg. Xvii.

the figure into painting, preserving a painterly approach to color, engaging with abstraction, and creating work rooted in the distinctive social landscape of the Bay Area.¹⁹ Chinn mentions several sources of inspiration in her monograph, *Cultural Confluences*, including the prominent Photorealist painter Richard Estes.²⁰ Highlighting Estes as an example, it's clear that Estes's work, such as his 1967 painting *Telephone Booths* (fig. 1), was based on a closely cropped photograph of four metal telephone booths with several people inside. Each person in the scene is turned away, absorbed in phone calls, with every detail carefully and individually depicted. I suggest that Chinn had the freedom and encouragement to engage with the Bay Area social landscape, drawing on photorealist practices of artists such as Richard Estes to portray her surrounding queer community. However, Chinn nearly exclusively focused on painting marginalized subjects, specifically queer people of color, and, in line with this thesis, she turned to her lesbian community as the central theme of her work. Unlike Estes, she emphasized race as a key element for understanding her art.



Figure 1. Richard Estes, *Telephone Booths*, 1967. Acrylic on Masonite, 122 x 175.3 cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, inv. No 539 (1977.93). Source: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

¹⁹ Jones, *Bay Area Figurative Art*, pg. 1-11.

²⁰ Latimer, Roth, and Soe, *Cultural Confluences*, pg. 39.

Chinn explains that her portrait practice, within a world similar to that of Estes and Richard Diebenkorn, was based on photographs. In Valerie Soe's catalog essay in *Cultural Confluences*, Chinn describes herself as working in "oversized acrylics on canvases, [wherein she] explores a genre that is largely invisible in the fine arts."²¹ Chinn then self-describes her practice as "super-realistic, crisply rendered compositions convey a subtle message of visibility for the socially and disenfranchised peoples in my personal social landscape—people of color, women, lesbians, and gay men."²² I argue that while Chinn bases her portraits on photographs, giving her work a photorealist quality, I use Soe's departure from framing Chinn as a photorealist to develop Chinn as not merely an artist working within a strictly photorealist practice. Some highlight that, while Chinn primarily paints from photographic portraits, her "subtle manipulations emphasize the artifice of the images".²³ I utilize Soe's analysis of Chinn's departure from photorealism in my thesis to explore Chinn as a figurative postmodern artist, examining how Chinn destabilizes realism by working with citation and the relegation of portraiture to accommodate Asian lesbians of color within the genre, due to their historical invisibility from it.

POSTMODERNISM AND LENORE CHINN

The 1980s saw both the San Francisco art world and the broader art scene, primarily in New York and Los Angeles, impacted by postmodernism, conceptual art, video, and photography within commercial art spaces and alternative scenes. Postmodernism, in an art-historical context, is defined by Hal Foster as a historical condition in which modernism had lost its original force through institutional abstraction and could no longer sustain its claims to

²¹ Soe, "A Luminous Difference: Lenore Chinn's Art & Activism", pg. 27-29.

²² Soe, "A Luminous Difference: Lenore Chinn's Art & Activism", pg. 27.

²³ Soe, "A Luminous Difference: Lenore Chinn's Art & Activism", pg. 28.

authority and autonomy, and its historical power.²⁴ Postmodernism was then defined by a shift away from medium specificity toward artistic practices concerned with representation and textuality, while also emphasizing a broader cultural and practical realm in which meaning was acquired. Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, and Barbara Kruger worked within photographic and text-based strategies that treated representation as a contested site where women and women of color would intervene within their own representations, using the image in the context of benign paired with text, references in film, and collaged elements. Meanwhile, lesbian photographers at this time dealt with the representation of lesbians, with the representation of lesbians in painting being nearly absent. Catherine Opie and Laura Aguilar, both of whom have produced significant bodies of work in California, produced photographic portraits that portray the lesbian body, treating identity and embodiment as the foreground of their representational practices, as well as addressing race and class belonging as historically constituted and centered in the representation of lesbians of color.

Furthermore, Chinn's work still struggles to fit within the more dominant styles of figuration present in her later 1980s and early 1990s contemporary context, especially when compared to the practices of Hung Liu and Audrey Flack, which seem somewhat disconnected. Liu focused on a strictly photorealistic style, painting figures and portraits of Chinese and Chinese American subjects within politicized historical contexts, while Flack is recognized as a key photorealist artist. Flack is known for her treatment of arrangements of objects directly based on photographs. Chinn remains one of the few queer female artists who were figuratively painting the lesbian portrait during a time when the mainstream art world did not integrate both

²⁴ Hal Foster, ed, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 2002), pg. IX-XVI

her identities within figurative portraiture. She painted Asian American women, such as Hung Liu, with a photorealistic precision similar to Flack's.

Moreover, Chinn's theoretical and radical act of photographically painting the lesbian body would be reinforced by her refusal of the mainstream art market and her insistence on freewheeling and exhibiting within alternative gallery spaces, meaning that she worked with alternative spaces that deliberately separated themselves from large museum institutions. In her oral history with Anne Cvetkovich in 2023, Chinn recalls that she quickly understood her portraits of "gay subjects" would not be readily accepted in mainstream galleries, particularly given her position as a woman and person of color. In response, she became widely known for submitting her work to juried competitions and exhibitions, primarily in nonprofit community spaces and collectives, which she found much more welcoming than major institutions.²⁵ Chinn exhibited in nonprofit and community arts spaces such as SOMArts, formerly the South of Market Cultural Center; Luggage Store Gallery; and exhibitions originating through the San Francisco Arts Commission, with the exception of few commercial art galleries such as Michael Himovitz Gallery in Sacramento and the Lucien Labault Art Gallery in San Francisco.²⁶ San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by these smaller, community arts-based organizations. As Chinn's papers in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art reveal, Chinn was involved with galleries such as Kearny Street Workshop and Southern Exposure, where experimentation and diverse voices were welcomed and often encouraged, fostering a community outside dominant institutions such as SFMoMa.²⁷

²⁵ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 36.

²⁶ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 14-16.

²⁷ "Lists, artwork," 1983-1987, box 1, *Lenore Chinn papers*, 1978-2024, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

BACKGROUND: PORTRAITURE AND COMMUNITY IN THE BAY AREA

Lenore Chinn's community, formed in activist and arts spaces, directly informed her portrait-painting practice, as she painted those around her, predominantly on commission or for her community. In her oral history with Ann Cvetkovich, Chinn relays that she was "mainly[...] painting everybody around me," especially "friends". Later in the oral history, Chinn describes her broader practice in similar terms, explaining that she had "a chance to sort of move through a number of different communities."²⁸ These communities were available to Chinn due to her foray into activism in the early 1980s, after being exposed to black culture and, in turn, to sociology and photography in college in the early 1970s.²⁹ Chinn would move to the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco and participate in organizing, including the Harvey Milk Democratic Club, through which she became active in lesbian and gay political organizing and AIDS education; the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, to which she was briefly appointed president; Lesbians in the Visual Arts (LVA); and the Queer Cultural Center, which she helped establish and served as president for a couple of years. Chinn is part of the Asian American Women Artists' Association in San Francisco, which she joined in the early 1990s after artist Flo Oy Wong encouraged her to get involved.³⁰ AAWAA and LVA were both spaces where Chinn nurtured her community, and while she was able to express herself in both circles, there was no specific organization for Asian queer women, leaving her feeling caught between them, even though she did encounter queer Asian women. Chinn was deeply connected to her surrounding community, and through it, she developed relationships that directly informed her portraits.

THESIS OVERVIEW

²⁸ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 8-9.

²⁹ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 5-10.

³⁰ Chinn, *Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn*, pg. 14-30.

The thesis opens with *Déjà Vu* (1986), challenging conventional self-portraiture by rethinking the use of mirrors to depict how portraiture cannot easily convey Chinn's identity as a butch Asian American lesbian. The subsequent portrait titled *Bing* (2001) honors Bernice Bing, a fellow Asian American lesbian artist and Abstract Expressionist, by reinterpreting her through art-historical references and innovative spatial arrangements that blend Chinese and American gestural abstraction. In this reimagining of normative portraiture, Chinn creates a fragmented pictorial space that explicitly synthesizes Bing's fragmented identity while asserting her as a prominent Abstract Expressionist by rendering her as a Jackson Pollock-like figure. Finally, *Before the Wedding* (2000) examines marital portraiture, positioning it within a broader framework of Asian American lesbian feminist citation. This approach moves the work away from individual narratives, instead creating a scene rooted in community and identity, allowing the lesbian butch-femme couple to challenge portraiture's neutrality and occupy a vibrant, formal space. Collectively, these three case studies argue that Chinn's work subverts traditional portraiture to build an archive of Asian American lesbian imagery, allowing her to imagine an alternative creation of Asian American lesbian representation

CHAPTER ONE: *DEJA VU*: FRACTURED VISIBILITY IN THE ASIAN AMERICAN LESBIAN SELF-PORTRAIT

What does it mean for an Asian American lesbian artist to claim the canvas as both maker and subject when art history offers so few direct precedents? Lenore Chinn's 1986 painting *Déjà Vu* begins with this question. Recent scholarship has often framed the work as a commemorative portrait because of its ties to AIDS-era loss and to Chinn's friendships with gay men during the height of the epidemic. This chapter argues instead that *Déjà Vu* (1986) should be read first and foremost as a self-portrait, one in which Chinn makes herself the central site of the painting's historical and formal tension. By depicting herself as a masculine-presenting Chinese American lesbian artist, Chinn claims authorship of her own image, even as the painting reveals how her image is mediated and, logically, unable to completely inhabit the composition. Through devices such as the inclusion of a white man photographing her and the angled mirror that refuses to fully reflect her, Chinn visualizes the difficulty of Asian American lesbian self-representation. Chinn's self-portrait is therefore defined by the tension that exists between her self-assertion as a lesbian of color, making herself partially legible while simultaneously exposing the limits of the visual traditions available to her as a scantily represented subject.

Chinn studied advertising during her college years at City College of San Francisco. At CCSF, Chinn learned about art, design, and black-and-white photography. She later received her bachelor's degree in sociology in 1972 from San Francisco State University, during a period marked by the Vietnam War and student organizing and political unrest.³¹ Chinn's artistic formation during her college years was shaped by art history from a purely Western perspective. In her 2023 oral history with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Chinn described her art

³¹ Lenore Chinn, "Narrative Chronology."

history curriculum built around Janson's History of Art, in which women and people of color were largely absent.³²

Chinn began painting portraits in San Francisco in the early 1970s, but by the 1980s, her practice had turned more deliberately toward the people around her. Chinn began painting gay men and lesbians, including depictions of friends, fellow artists, queer activists, and members of her surrounding queer and Asian American communities. After moving to the Castro neighborhood in 1982, Chinn quickly became involved in the activities of the Harvey Milk Club and entered a network of queer political organizing just as the AIDS epidemic began devastating the community around her.³³ It was also during this time that she noticed, in both her advocacy and concurrent work as a lab technician at the Ralph K. Davies hospital, that her friends were being affected by the disease, prompting years of activism on her part to support her community.³⁴

Lenore Chinn understood portraiture as a means of making the communities in her vicinity visible. Her painting transformed quickly to record her community as it was actively being affected by the AIDS crisis, and simultaneously was documenting her community of gay men and lesbians when those people were excluded from dominant visual narratives in art and culture. Chinn described her signature portraits as “super realistic, crisply rendered compositions” that conveyed a “subtle message of visibility” for people in her personal social landscape, including “people of color,” women, lesbians, and gay men.³⁵ Chinn's commitment to visibility for her community would emerge directly in line with her effort to establish a

³² Lenore Chinn, interview by Ann Cvetkovich, *Oral History Interview* by Ann Cvetkovich. November 27 and December 11, 2024. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³³ Lenore Chinn, “Narrative Chronology.”

³⁴ Chinn, *Oral History Interview*, 5.

³⁵ Soe, *Cultural Confluences*, 27.

community arts organization and promote blood drives in support of gay men with the Harvey Milk Democratic Club.³⁶

It is therefore a direct result of Chinn's various engagements with community-based organizations that have subsequently resulted in her 1986 painting, *Déjà Vu*, to be understood as a commemorative portrait dedicated to the domestic space in which it is situated. Yet, it must also be read as a self-portrait in which Chinn tests the limits of her own visibility.

Déjà Vu (fig. 2), painted in 1986, is a self-portrait by Lenore Chinn depicting her alongside her friend, G. David Murphy, in a purple domestic interior. The two figures stand in a narrow hallway filled with objects, framed images of dancers, and plants. On the left side of the composition, G. David Murphy leans forward, emerging from a dense line of palm leaves. He is armed with a Minolta film camera with a large flash attachment, which obscures his face. He aims his camera toward Chinn on his own right side. The camera becomes one of the painting's central devices, producing Chinn's image as mediated through his act of looking at her through an implied mirror placed before them, allowing him to click the shutter and register an image of Chinn by standing right by his side. Chinn, meanwhile, appears fully visible in three-quarter view, wearing a burnt-umber fur jacket over a red button-down shirt and black slacks. A white fedora and tinted glasses cast shadows over her eyes. Chinn meets the camera lens with a composed, guarded determination, looking outward and at herself in the mirror. Beside her is a small altar-like arrangement featuring two small candles and a bronze cup upon a decorative cloth. Various portions of the photograph are seen hanging throughout the house. The personal effects in the purple room read the home as a domestic space.

³⁶ Chinn, *Oral History Interview*, 26.



Figure 2. Lenore Chinn, *Déjà Vu*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of Viv Hammill and Linda Sandman.

The mirror positioned behind Chinn enhances the mediation of her image. Behind Chinn, there is a wooden oval mirror that initially appears to align with the other images of dancers hung on the wall. However, the mirror's angle prevents it from showing her face directly; instead, it is tilted away from Chinn, thereby obscuring recognition of her presence. The mirror subsequently reflects a solid wall with a shelf lined with objects and the faint glimpse of another mirror, thereby preventing confirmation of the mirror in front of Chinn and Murphy. This creates a paradox in Murphy's process of capturing Chinn's image, as it withholds the mirror's reflection that facilitated Murphy's image-making. Unlike Murphy, Chinn is most clearly visible and prominent within the room, shaping the interpretation of the painting as a self-portrait. Nonetheless, the mirror, functioning as a mechanism, fails to outwardly reflect her image, thereby offering only an incomplete and displaced representation of her within the purple home. This point constitutes the central focus of my analysis, whereby Chinn comments on the problematic role of her image as a self-portrait in this context.

The deeply personal nature of Chinn's rendering of the purple apartment, reflecting the inclusion of images of dancers and other intimately rendered personal items, stems from a similar engagement with the queer community she demonstrated upon arriving in San Francisco. This purple home, featuring images of dancers and a small altar, is the Hollywood home of the couple Tommy Bridges and Robert Armand Abitbol.³⁷ This context has, in recent scholarship, resulted in the positioning of the painting and the purple apartment as a site marked by the loss of her friends to AIDS, which is why it has not been read as a self-portrait, but rather as a commemorative painting.

Déjà Vu was painted by Chinn just after she moved to the Castro, but was made as a result of her earlier visits to Los Angeles in the early 1970s to spend time with friends involved in theater. During this period, Chinn had developed a close friendship with dancer Robert Armand, a survivor of the young gay men lost to the AIDS epidemic.³⁸ Chinn explains that her friendships with a circle of gay men in college led to the formation of a gay Latino social circle, through which she met their partners over several years. She notes that many of these friends died of AIDS or related complications between 1984 and 1990.³⁹ This relationship with Abitbol led to a series of portraits of Robert from the late 1970s and early 1980s, in which Chinn repeatedly depicted Armand inside the same purple apartment. These works culminate in her 1986 painting, *Déjà Vu*, set in the same space. In this final piece, Armand is notably absent but remembered, which explains the inclusion of the altar, framed images of dancers, and a small

³⁷ Lenore Chinn, Facebook post, March 6, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1539660756132387&id=175559565875853&set=a.261176437314165>.

³⁸ Roth, *Cultural Confluences*, 13.

³⁹ Brent Calderwood, "True to Life: Artist Lenore Chinn Portrays the Depth and Diversity of Our Relationships," n.d., pg 4, in "Professional Activities Binder," 1984-2024, box 1, *Lenore Chinn papers*, 1978-2024, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

photograph of Abitbol behind Chinn. Recent scholarship has framed this painting as a tribute to Abitbol's partner, Tommy Bridges, who died of AIDS and shared the apartment with Abitbol.

The 2019 exhibition *Art after Stonewall* was the first recent group exhibition to situate *Déjà Vu* within the context of AIDS and loss. *Art after Stonewall, 1969-1989* was an exhibition that originated at the Columbus Museum of Art and was on view from April 24 to July 20, 2019. The exhibition is recognized as the first major exhibition exploring the influence of the LGBTQ liberation movement, which began fifty years ago with the Stonewall Uprising, on visual culture.⁴⁰ The exhibition featured Chinn's *Déjà Vu* within the catalog, yet it does not mention Chinn directly in any of the featured essays. However, her work is featured alongside a catalog essay by Drew Sawyer titled "Imagining Queer Communities," in which Sawyer emphasizes that "the question of community became essential in the wake of the Stonewall riots as individuals were expected not only to 'come out' but also to form, join, and make visible their community."⁴¹ In this context, it can be understood that *Déjà Vu* was included in the exhibition due to its association with Abitbol and Bridges, who possess the residence where *Déjà Vu* is situated, as well as their relationship with Chinn and the kinship in light of Bridges's passing. Similarly, the next exhibition, featuring *Déjà Vu*, *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art Since 1968*, adopts a more assertive stance than *Art After Stonewall* by placing greater explicit emphasis on *Déjà Vu* as a commemorative portrait of Abitbol and Bridges.

Ordinary People, which was on view from November 23, 2024, to May 4, 2025 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) is described as an "examin[ation] [of] the representational politics of photorealist painting in the context of the recent rise of

⁴⁰ Grey Art Museum, New York University, "Art After Stonewall, 1969-1989," exhibition page, accessed April 27, 2026.

⁴¹ Drew Sawyer, "Imagining Queer Communities," in *Art After Stonewall, 1969-1989*, ed. Jonathan Weinberg, Tyler Cann, Anastasia Kinigopoulou, and Drew Sawyer (New York: Rizzoli Electra, 2019), pg. 276-277.

figurative portraiture, considering its key place in the ongoing remedial project to repopulate the museum with pictures of people and places historically excluded or disfigured”.⁴² Curator Anna Katz writes in her catalog essay “What’s So Real About Photorealism” that *Déjà Vu* is “a tribute to Tommy Bridges, a close friend who lost his life to AIDS in 1984. Set in Bridges's apartment, and featuring her friend G. David Murphy behind the camera and Chinn herself decked out in a fur coat, felt hat, and shades, the painting is equally about the kinship that forms in mourning, about the chosen families that come together, again, to clear out the apartment of yet another young person lost to AIDS.”⁴³ Katz continues to comment on the grief associated with the portrait, interpreting the flash of Murphy’s camera as documenting the “water stains and grime on the mirror that the camera is pointed at, as two candles burn at the right edge of the composition. Without necessarily intending it, Chinn's world of the 1980s and 1990s wound up documenting the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic on her community, and in fact, shortly after this painting was made, Murphy also died of the disease.”⁴⁴ Katz, similar to the curatorial framing of *Déjà Vu* in *Art After Stonewall*, presents *Déjà Vu* solely as a commentary on Chinn’s relationships with Abitbol and Bridges. Katz largely downplays Chinn’s own inclusion in the work, framing the piece as primarily about the kinship between the two gay men, Murphy and Bridges. *Ordinary People*, therefore, positions Chinn's presence in the painting as overshadowed by the focus on the grief linked to the apartment.

I seek to intervene within these two recent curatorial framings of *Déjà Vu* as a commemorative portrait of the couple Tommy Bridges and Robert Armand. I argue that while *Déjà Vu* is indebted to its significance as a demonstration of queer kinship in light of AIDS, the

⁴² “Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968,” *The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles*, accessed May 4, 2026.

⁴³ Anna Katz, “What’s So Real About Photorealism?,” in *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, ed. Anna Katz (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: DelMonico Books, 2024) pg. 24-25.

⁴⁴ Anna Katz, “What’s So Real About Photorealism?,” pg. 24-25.

work ultimately gains its strength as a rare instance in which a Chinese American lesbian has taken up the act of self-portraiture to depict herself while simultaneously defining the constant to the representation of her image. I seek to understand *Déjà Vu* as a self-portrait, marking the work as one of the rare early historical instances in which an artist like Chinn has appeared on the canvas, rendered overtly as a butch lesbian artist of color.

Chinn's self-depiction as a butch lesbian in *Déjà Vu* is largely due to her personal associations between this stylization of herself and the lesbian artist Romaine Brooks. In a digital collage created years after *Déjà Vu*, Chinn produces a work titled *Lineage* (1998) (Fig. 3). Within *Lineage*, Chinn places Brooks' 1923 *Self-Portrait* alongside her self-portrait in *Déjà Vu*, linking their androgynous lesbian appearances. Understanding this comparison helps explain why Chinn feels as if she is able to render herself as a masculine-presenting lesbian artist within the parameters of lesbian art history.



Figure 3. *Lineage*, digital collage, dimensions variable, 1998.

Romaine Brooks was an American expatriate lesbian painter working in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. She is best known for her lesbianism and for her portraits of lesbian women in her Parisian artistic circle. In *Self-Portrait* (1923) (fig. 4), Brooks stands against a silhouetted cityscape rendered within a muted palette of cool gray tones. She wears a long, dark, fitted coat, a white collar turned up above the lapel, and gray gloves, with her hands resting on a dark cane. Beneath a black top hat, shadows obscure her eyes as she fixes her gaze outward.

In *Lineage*, Brooks's *Self-Portrait* is featured below a cropped photograph of Chinn in *Déjà Vu*, amidst various images of Chinn's family and her artistic practice. The work itself is a collage layered over an excerpt from a calendar featuring the month of June, Chinn's birth month. Chinn places her self-portrait in *Déjà Vu* alongside Brooks's *Self-Portrait*, drawing a visual connection between the two works. However, the only similarity the women share is the effect of the hats that shade their eyes. Both hats are dissimilar from each other, and they wear completely different clothing, yet both are stylized to look masculine. What makes the connection between Chinn and Brooks hard to define is that, despite their different visual appearances, both are positioned within radically different historical settings and environments in their respective portraits. Not only this, but Brooks is notably a white lesbian, and Chinn is Chinese, therefore making the effects of their lesbian self-styling different as well. Despite the numerous differences in both women's depictions side-by-side, reading the comparison along with the family photos in *Lineage* suggests that Chinn is attempting to highlight Brooks as a visual ancestor of her lesbianism within the larger context of her Chinese identity, which is prominently included in the calendar along with various blocks of Chinese text.



Figure 4. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, 1923, 46 1/4 x 26 7/8 in, Oil on Canvas.

I demonstrate this uneven inheritance of Chinn's referencing Brooks's *Self-Portrait* by understanding the difference in ethnicity between the two women as creating tension in Chinn's citation of Brooks. JeeYuen Lee writes in *Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities* that Asian American lesbians' inheritance of white butch lesbian masculinity is uneven due to the difference of race. Lee argues that Asian and Asian American lesbian and bisexual women's gender presentations are "decidedly not neutral" because they are shaped by racial and cultural histories that determine how their genders are perceived.⁴⁵ Asian women are read through Orientalist stereotypes that construct them as passive, hyperfeminine, and heterosexual women available to male desire, while lesbian visibility itself is often organized around the "prevailing image" of the

⁴⁵JeeYuen Lee, "Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 117.

lesbian as white and butch.⁴⁶ Lee describes how Asian women are seen as feminine and disposable to men, yet white lesbianism is built around this idea of “butchess” and masculinity. Because Asian women are perceived as hyper-feminine, they are seemingly unable to inhabit lesbianism easily, since white lesbianism is predicated upon masculinity and Asian women are assumed to be feminine.

Using this framework as an explanation for why it is difficult for Asian women to inhabit white lesbianism, explains why Chinn’s reference to Romaine Brooks’s *Self-Portrait* does not make complete sense as simply an act of establishing lesbian art historical lineage. When Chinn takes up lesbianism through the overt language of masculinity, she is reacting against the internalized gendered whiteness that predates lesbianism within the language of androgyny that Brooks exhibits. Chinn seeks to subvert that idea of lesbianism by nevertheless persisting in presenting her legitimacy as an Asian American masculine lesbian, visible as masculine despite orientalist readings of her gender. Chinn’s portrayal of lesbianism then works within a completely different framework than Brooks’s and marks a more radical redefinition of who constitutes a butch lesbian subject.

Hal Foster’s “(Post)Modern Polemics” clarifies Chinn’s subversive embodiment of portraiture by taking up lesbian gender and sexuality in *Déjà Vu*, thereby enabling this chapter to portray her painting as a postmodern resurgence of figure representation, inheriting a longstanding tradition of figuration from canonical white European artists, such as her relationality with Brooks. Foster distinguishes between two forms of postmodernism: neoconservative and poststructuralist. Neoconservative modernism challenges postmodernism through a stylistic return to representation, including the figure, whereas poststructuralist postmodernism does not reject representation, but subjects it to critique. Representation is not

⁴⁶ Lee, “Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian,” 121.

regarded as a reflection of reality and history; it is removed from narratives of stability and viewed as constructed through competing forms of representation. Chinn demonstrates the competing forms of representation between herself and Brooks as delineated by their different ethnic backgrounds. Rather than assuming that images transparently refer to reality, poststructuralist modernism questions how representation constructs meaning while embedding subjectivity within complex historical narratives.⁴⁷ *Déjà Vu* employs figuration without restoring the stable artist-subject, thereby positioning Chinn within a postmodern framework that expands upon poststructuralist critique through her intervention in portraiture.

Linda Nochlin's critical account of realism in "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law" clarifies the historical significance of Chinn's portrait practice, as she treats Realism by painting herself as a self-portrait. Nochlin argues that Realism is about reordering the pictorial hierarchy by including ordinary subjects and social life, which were previously underrepresented in portraiture.⁴⁸ Chinn's self-portraits can then be thought of as integral to the canon of queer figuration. I understand this as my scholarship on Lenore Chinn and, to some extent, my analysis of Chinn's self-portrait as a form of reparative art history, giving voice to the expansive community of underrepresented Asian lesbians such as Chinn from the 1980s.

However, as Helen Molesworth writes, the 1980s were generally defined by the absence of female artists and feminist practice as a sort of awkward period, especially within the broader history of feminist art. Molesworth points to major feminist art exhibitions, such as *WACK!* ending around 1980, as well as *Global Feminisms* beginning in the 1990s, are emblematic of this absence in women's art. Feminist art of the 1980s remains difficult to historicize because of its

⁴⁷ Hal Foster, "(Post)Modern Polemics," in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985).

⁴⁸ Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America*, published 1973, republished on ARTnews, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/the-realist-criminal-and-the-abstract-law-63236/>.

engagement with ever-changing conflicts surrounding backlash on theory, sexuality, and race.⁴⁹

Compounding this was the phenomenon of lesbian life slipping beneath the cracks, the rise of the AIDS crisis, and efforts directed primarily toward men suffering from AIDS. *Déjà Vu*, therefore, gains insurgency as a self portrait of a lesbian of color historically situated within an already fraught period in art history in which women's art occupied a decisive place in the art world.

Furthermore, Margo Machida can be utilized to contribute to Molesworth's social and art-historical positioning of women's art in the 1980s by invoking Chinn's Asian identity.

Machida argues that Asian American art cannot be adequately understood as the simple addition of new subjects to an otherwise stable art-historical field, because Asian American artists work within representational systems that have already unevenly distributed visibility, authority, and cultural intelligibility.⁵⁰ Machida's more incisive reflection on Asian American art and the inclusion of Chinn within a broader canon is then important for understanding how Chinn's self-portrait can be understood as a form of reparative art history. Machida helps to understand Chinn's insertion of herself as an art historical subject as a subversive inclusion of her likeness into artists' depictions of themselves in portraiture.

Similarly, in "'Calling on All Dragon Ladies,' 'China Dolls,' and 'Lotus Blossoms': The Need for Asian American Feminism," Rachel Leng explains why Asian American women are "largely underrepresented and significantly misrepresented," caught between "erotic sexual objectification" and "quiet invisibility and facelessness".⁵¹ In understanding the importance of *Déjà Vu*, Leng's reading of Asian women's marginal positionality can be read in relation to the wooden oval mirror, now understood as a visual metaphor that engages with the fraught history

⁴⁹ Helen Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pg. 15-16.

⁵⁰ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pg 1-5, 9-12.

⁵¹ Rachel Leng, "Calling all 'Dragon Ladies,' 'China Dolls,' and 'Lotus Blossoms': The Need for Asian American Feminism," *Unzipped: Duke's Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): pg 16.

of the representation of Asian American women. Without anyone to look back on, the mirror cannot reflect back upon Chinn and instead reveals a solid wall. Similarly, the inclusion of Murphy taking Chinn's photograph as a white gay man defines a similar stance in his framing of her image. Murphy represents the dominant trend of white men able to control visual representation, yet his anonymity also mitigates his presence. His act of taking Chinn's photograph, unlike Chinn herself—who appears as the only subject in her painting—demonstrates her agency as an artist in depicting herself, reflecting her racial identity and her Asian heritage. The oval mirror reflects this tension by turning away from Chinn's body.

The act of the mirror turning away from Chinn, I argue, is Chinn's acknowledgment of her lack of visual ancestors she can draw on to establish her presence. Chinn uses Murphy as a vehicle to elevate her position amid the racial and cultural constraints that someone like Murphy symbolizes. Therefore, the oval mirror serves as a reminder that, despite her agency in portraying herself, there is still work to be done in terms of developing Asian American queer representation. By delving into two case studies in which Chinn precisely turns towards this community will aid in arguing that Chinn's subsequent depictions of Asian American lesbians in portraiture are a radical act of addressing this initial metaphorical mirror in *Déjà Vu*.

CHAPTER 2: *BING*: REPARATIVE CITATION AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN LESBIAN IMAGINARY

By opening this thesis with *Déjà Vu*, I establish the broader stakes of Lenore Chinn's art through a second painting. In *Bing*, I continue to examine how an Asian American lesbian artist can occupy traditional genres of painting that have historically made little space for such a subject. Lenore Chinn's portrait of Bernice Bing develops the problem posed in *Déjà Vu* by focusing on the fraught terms of Asian American self-representation. If *Déjà Vu* stages the mirror as a site of self-fashioning, *Bing* extends that logic by positioning Chinn as taking up the canvas itself as a reflective surface through which Bernice Bing can be reconstructed and commemorated. I argue that Chinn functions as a kind of mirror, enabling Bing to appear as a Chinese American lesbian artist through portraiture while also addressing the fragmentation of her sexuality, ethnicity, and artistic identity. I read *Bing* as Chinn's act of situating Bernice Bing as its subject within a Chinese-inflected abstract expressionist field and as invoking the likeness of Jackson Pollock through the method of citation. Through these radical acts of citation, Chinn not only pieces together Bing's Chinese, lesbian, and artistic identity but also presents a revisionist image of Bing within the language of Abstract Expressionism, thereby elevating her position as an abstractionist.

Bernice Bing was a San Francisco-born artist whose career spanned abstraction, community arts work, and, later, an abstraction that engaged more explicitly with her Chinese heritage. She first studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts with Richard Diebenkorn, Saburo Hasegawa, and Nathan Oliveira, where she developed within a distinctly Bay Area visual language that moved between figuration and abstraction. Among these influences, Hasegawa's synthesis of abstraction and traditional Japanese art appears to have been especially significant

for Bing.⁵² She later transferred to the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied with Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell and completed her MFA in 1961. Alongside her studio practice, Bing also played an important role in Bay Area community arts work, helping to establish the South of Market Cultural Center and working in neighborhood arts and CETA programs for fifteen years. After traveling to Korea, Japan, and China in 1984–85, during which she studied Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting, her work turned more decisively toward a fusion of Eastern and Western visual languages, a shift her obituary identifies as central to her practice in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁵³

Chinn's relationship with Bing emerged through the intersecting worlds of Asian American arts activism and lesbian cultural organizing. In *The Worlds of Bernice Bing*, Chinn recalls meeting Bing during the last eight to ten years of her life through the Asian American Women Artists Association, of which Bing was an early founding member; she also remembers hearing Bing speak for the Lesbian Visual Artists Association. This shared institutional and community context is significant because it situates their relationship within overlapping networks of Asian American and lesbian artistic production.⁵⁴ Chinn further notes, regarding Bing's sexuality, that Bing lived a "fragmented life," with "lesbian friends in one circle, artists in another," and that she "kept aspects of her life private."⁵⁵ *Bing*, therefore, becomes Chinn's act of bringing together all aspects of Bing's identity in the wake of her death in 1998 through her 2001 portrait of Bing.

Chinn writes about her ideas regarding *Bing* in her application for the 2001 Individual Artists' Commissions program cycle, offered by the San Francisco Arts Commission as one of its

⁵² Lisa N. Peters, "Biography," in *Bernice Bing: Bingo* (New York: Berry Campbell, 2024), 5.

⁵³ "Obituary (Bing, Bernice)," *Artweek* 29, no. 10 (October 1998), pg 3.

⁵⁴ Chinn, Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn, pg 31.

⁵⁵ *The Worlds of Bernice Bing*, 6:21, 9:30, 10:45.

cultural equity grants. Writing on her reasons to depict Bernice Bing in a large-scale portrait, Chinn writes that the new project seeks to “provide a compelling vision of Bernice Bing and will make reference to her calligraphy style, her history in San Francisco artist community, her Asian American community activism, as well as her relationship to the Beats of the fifties and sixties.”⁵⁶ Chinn’s portrait of Bernice Bing then includes representations of all of these aforementioned aspects of Bing’s life, bringing her complete identity together within the form of the commemorative portrait.

Bing (fig. 5) is a large vertical acrylic painting depicting the artist Bernice Bing in a full-body stance. Bing stands slightly off-center with her hands clasped in front of her and feet crossed at the ankles. The artist stands just off-center in the third panel, wearing a long-sleeved black sweater and loose khaki trousers. Her eyes are relaxed, and her mouth opens into a soft smile as she faces the viewer. The background behind her consists of a flat, four-paneled yellow screen, over which broad black inky gestures occupy the canvas assembled in five groupings of varying sizes. The top left of the canvas features an inky grid character, while the rest of the composition is dominated by large inky gestures. Bing stands in front of a scene resembling a sunset over a broad horizon, with circular form moving across the canvas over a broad stroke across two panels. Surrounding Bing within the bordering panels are groups of spindly, gestural forms that anchor the scene in their verticality. The screen itself serves as a flat backdrop that Bing stands within, with the panel's footing serving as the image's implied base. However, it is not entirely clear whether this wider red band functions as the floor of a room or as the base of the screen itself, as the panel takes up the entirety of the image.

⁵⁶ Lenore Chinn, “Individual Artists Commissions, 2001 Program Cycle,” application, in “Exhibition, San Francisco Individual Artist Commission Application for SOMArts EXH,” Box 1, *Lenore Chinn Papers, 1987*



Figure 5. Lenore Chinn, *Bing*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 64 inches, image courtesy of the artist.

Small images are scattered across the yellow multi-paneled surface. To the left of Bing is a photograph of San Francisco's Coit Tower, scribbled within a circular shape marked by a broad zig-zag. In the left panel is a photograph of the facade of the San Francisco Art Institute. Near the lower edge of the paneled screen, to Bing's left, lies a red-and-green ornamental Chinese design with an ink drawing of a rat layered above the image. Another ink drawing of a small pig appears, nestled within the abstraction, in the far-right panel.

The yellow multi-paneled screen, the inset San Francisco views, and the collage-like density of the field are all taken up by Chinn as means of reconstructing Bing through Chinn's research into Bing's archive. Chinn was one of the main individuals who helped establish Bing's archive and found her will, as well as Bing's written description of her lesbian identity. In her oral history with the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, Chinn recalls going through Bing's basement after her death and finding a holographic will, then contacting Flo Oy Wong and others to locate members of Bing's most private circle. In that same interview, Chinn describes this network as Bing's "bracketed community" and notes that those who knew Bing was a lesbian

did not publicize it because Bing "chose to be very private about that part of her life."⁵⁷ This privacy matters because it clarifies that Bing did not enter portraiture as an already fully public lesbian subject. By 2001, shortly after Bing's death in 1998, her legacy was still being assembled, especially through the efforts of individuals such as Chinn working through Bing's estate and archive. In that sense, the fragmented field in *Bing* mirrors the archival labor Chinn and Bing's close circle were undertaking at the time, piecing together her life after death. The painting's refusal of logical, stable space is therefore not arbitrary. It reflects the portrait's recovered and transformative character.

The background becomes the medium through which *Bing* is gathered and reassembled. Because the panel is entirely flat, rather than set within a believable space, it begins to function as an environment in its own right, one through which Chinn's portrait of Bing can connect to the disparate aspects of her background that she may not have been able to bring together during her lifetime. That process gives further force to Chinn's inclusion of Chinese joss paper, or ghost paper, at the lower edge of the composition, since the painting treats commemoration as the condition of Bing's appearance within the field.

Drawing from Tirza Latimer's initial regard of Chinn's rewriting of Bing as Jackson Pollock, Latimer writes that Chinn is "self-consciously re-stag[ing] a famous Life Magazine spread presenting Jackson Pollock posing with one of his 'action-painting.'"⁵⁸ Latimer then continues to point towards how Chinn's implied comparison between Jackson Pollock and Bernie Bing challenges a familiar origin myth of abstract expressionism, yet refuses to deconstruct Chinn's uneven translation from Pollock to Bing. However, by drawing a comparison between Bing and Pollock, Latimer demonstrates that Chinn is specifically drawing

⁵⁷ Chinn, Oral History Interview with Lenore Chinn, pg 32.

⁵⁸ Latimer, *Cultural Confluences*, 24.

upon Pollock's likeness in her presentation of Bing to elevate Bing as an abstract expressionist to a similar regard as Pollock's fame. Yet similarly to how Chinn performed a similar operation in her citation of Romaine Brooks in her self-portrait, *Déjà Vu*, Chinn similarly does not make a straightforward citation of Jackson Pollock when he envisions her as similar to Bing.

The citation of Pollock that Chinn is using is drawing upon Pollock's famous 1949 *Life* Magazine spread. Pollock appears in the 1949 *Life* article titled "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?", standing in front of his abstract drip painting *Number Nine* (fig. 6). Martha Holmes photographs Pollock in full-body view, leaning against his painting, which stretches across the length of the image. His legs are crossed, his head tilts slightly, and he gazes sternly outward with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The article addresses Pollock's physically demanding process of standing over the canvas as it rests on the floor so that he can "scramble around the canvas, attacking it from the top, the bottom, or the side," and in this way "literally be in the painting."⁵⁹ This authority is reflected in Holmes's photograph above the article, where Pollock's cold gaze, crossed stance, and direct confrontation with the camera transform the image into a performance of masculine dominance.

⁵⁹ Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" *Life* Magazine, August 8, 1949.

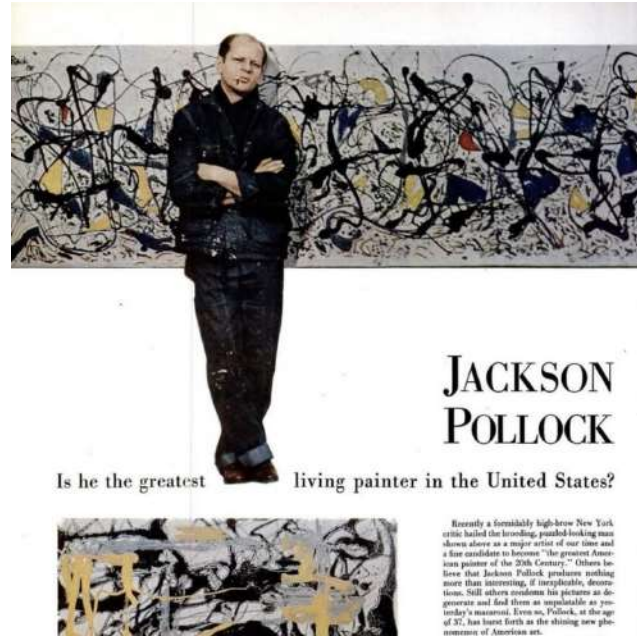


Figure 6. Detail of Jackson Pollock in "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?," *Life*, August 8, 1949. Photograph by Martha Holmes.

However, when examining how Chinn depicts Bing, the visual similarities between them are limited. Bing wears a black sweater, referencing the beatnik fashion associated with the Abstract Expressionists' visual appearance; she does not appear to be the workman that Pollock embodies with his paint-splattered jeans. With her upright pose, Bing occupies a similar position relative to the painting behind her, standing slightly off-center to display the abstraction behind her, as Pollock does. Like Pollock, Bing is positioned standing upright, exhibiting a strong sense of verticality, but she is without Jackson Pollock's sternness. As aforementioned, Bing does not appear hostile; she is depicted smiling, with her hands placed on her hips. This placement removes the hostility conveyed by Pollock, whose arms are tightly bound across his chest, making him appear removed. Bing, by contrast, appears friendly and welcoming toward the viewer's gaze, referencing her community involvement in arts advocacy spaces such as SOMArts. Bing was a friendly person who built much of her life and artistic practice around

helping others. She is therefore portrayed without the staunch sense of self-involved individualism that Pollock conveys through his upright posture.

Chinn's portrayal of Bing as a figure akin to Jackson Pollock is significant because Pollock has long stood as emblematic of the canonical abstract expressionist artist: white, male, heterosexual, and aggressive. Craig Owens clarifies how Chinn manipulates Bing from within portraiture because his account of allegory explains how a work can produce meaning by seizing images that already signify and forcing them into new relations. In "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," Owens writes that in allegory "one text is read through another" and that "the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest," a form in which earlier inscriptions remain visible beneath later ones. He also insists that "allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery" and that the allegorist "does not invent images but confiscates them."⁶⁰

By citing Pollock in Bing's stance, Chinn uses the abstraction that occupies the panels behind Bing as a similar intervention into the white heterosexual normativity that has defined Abstract Expressionism. Chinn translates Bing's fusion of Abstract Expressionism and calligraphy by surrounding her with broad, gestural black strokes that bear a clear referential relation to Chinese characters. Chinn is not deliberately repainting an example of Bing's work; rather, she is emulating the kind of abstraction Bing developed after her return from China. After traveling to Korea, Japan, and China in 1984–85, where she studied Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting, Bing's later work moved more explicitly toward a fusion of Eastern and Western visual languages, a shift that the obituary describes as central to her practice in the late 1980s and 1990s.

⁶⁰ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980) pg 69,71.

Bing's fusion of Chinese calligraphic imagery reworks the gestural language of Pollock's physical gestural abstraction by overtly naming Chinese identity and rejecting abstraction as neutral. Looking at Bing's *Lotus Circle/Lotus Goddess* (fig. 7) helps us understand how Bing departed from Pollock's method of abstraction by invoking her Chinese heritage. *Lotus Circle* is a small watercolor square and mixed-media piece, painted by Bernice Bing from 1986 to 1988. In the small watercolor, a large dark circle forms the left portion of the Lotus Circle, while a lighter, almost white circle shape hovers above it. Between and around these forms, black inky strokes loop, hook, and travel outward, alluding to Chinese calligraphy rather than the completely non-referential physical gestural abstraction that defines Pollock's neutral drip paintings.

As the Asian Art Museum notes in an object label for *Lotus Circle/Lotus Goddess*, Bing studied for six weeks at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou in 1984 with the abstract calligrapher Wang Donglong, and this resulting piece represents Bing's engagement with the Lotus Sutra and her Nichiren Buddhist practice.⁶¹ Bing, following her trip to China and subsequent engagement with Chinese abstract calligraphy, brings forth this fusion of form and gesture as demonstrated in *Lotus Circle*. *Lotus Circle* thus emerges as a useful comparison for explaining the screen's formal and compositional qualities that Chinn paints in the background behind Bing. Chinn is not copying *Lotus Circle*; rather, she is creating her own version. Bing's background features a similar mustard color, while its gestural, inky forms likewise reference Chinese calligraphy, much like the central black inky form in Bing's original abstraction. This comparison is therefore useful in clarifying why the screen appears as it does. Chinn and Bing knew one another during the 1980s, when both women were in San Francisco and attended

⁶¹ Asian Art Museum, "*Lotus Circle/Lotus Goddess*," object label, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://searchcollection.asianart.org/objects/23625/lotus-circlelotus-goddess>

meetings of the Asian American Women Artists Association. While Chinn was painting portraits of her gay and lesbian community, Bing was engaged in her Chinese-inspired abstract expressionist practice.



Figure 7. Bernice Bing, *Lotus Circle/Lotus Goddess*, 1986-88. Watercolor and mixed media on board, 88.3 x 87.9 cm. Gift of the Estate of Bernice Bing, object no. 2024.68. Image courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

Both women shared a commitment to Asian American artistic practice. *In The Worlds of Bernice Bing*, Chinn recalls a panel at Mills College, moderated by Moira Roth, where she and Bing listened to a young Vietnamese lesbian mixed-media artist present her work. Chinn remembers that some of the younger students seemed uncertain about the presentation's lesbian themes, while she and Bing laughed quietly because they immediately understood.⁶² It is through

⁶² *The Worlds of Bernice Bing*, directed by Madeline Lim (San Francisco: Kearny Street Workshop, 2013), 8:39.

this shared understanding of Asian American lesbian art and Chinn's regard for Bing as a mentor that Chinn is able to draw on Bing's painting as the setting for her portrait. Through that mutual understanding, Chinn situates Bing within a Chinese field of abstraction that disidentifies from the supposedly pure, nonreferential abstraction associated with Abstract Expressionism.

The relationship between Bing and Chinn—both Asian American artists who draw on Chinese visual traditions in their work— whether in Bing's *Lotus Circle* or Chinn's digital 1998 collage titled *Lineage* demonstrates that although they worked within dominant genres, with Chinn in portraiture and Bing in abstract expressionism, both turned to Asian American and Chinese visual culture to produce their own interventions into art history. Chinn's inclusion of naming in the Chinese character connoting field is emblematic of how both artists dis-identify within the white neutrality that has historically structured the canonical genres in which they both worked within.

Chinn's invocation of Bing's unique fusion of Chinese calligraphy and abstractionism in the background against which Bing is situated is especially charged because the gestures are infused with physical movement, as numerous marks stretch across several panels of the screen. In reacting against critics such as Clement Greenberg, Chinn names the abstracted field as overtly Chinese. In the upper left of the canvas, the Chinese character “田” (tián) appears in a circle. The character "field" explicitly situates the painting's pictorial ground within a Chinese pictorial field. When Chinn's Pollock quotation might otherwise universalize the language of abstract expressionism, the fusion of Asian calligraphy and art, combined with the broad physical gestures of Abstract Expressionism, directly strips the gestures of neutrality and names them as Chinese. Chinn refuses neutrality and instead redirects abstraction through a citation and an invented emulation of Bing's late practice. In naming abstraction as Chinese, Chinn and Bing

push back against dominant narratives that cast abstraction as culturally neutral and instead understand it as a space whose gestures can carry specific cultural meaning rather than merely registering bodily action.

In order to understand how the direct naming of the multi-paneled surface being *Bing* as a specifically Chinese abstracted field, we can turn towards Abstract Expressionist critic Harold Rosenberg. In "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg writes that abstract expressionism is an "area in which to act" and that the painting is not a "picture but an event."⁶³ Within Rosenberg's formulation of Abstract Expressionism, the canvas registers bodily action rather than readable signification in the gestures of painting. Chinn adopts the visual language of abstraction as a physical gesture in the thick lines that dart across the canvas and in the vertical cluster of strokes that climbs toward the upper right, but Chinn does not leave those marks at the level of pure gesture, ascribing them to cultural significance. The marks' resemblance to Chinese calligraphy, and especially the inclusion of the character for "field," roots them in a visual system that resists abstraction's claim to universality as merely registrars of physical activity.

Similarly, Abstract Expressionist critic Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" furthers understanding of abstraction to be neutral and not containing cultural reference points. Greenberg argues that content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself", and elsewhere describes the force of advanced painting as lying in its "pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surface, shapes, colors, etc."⁶⁴ Chinn does assume the formal language of abstraction in *Bing*, just as *Bing* herself did in the late 1980s and 1990s, as calligraphic reference interrupts the reduction of meaning. Similarly, the two small photographic

⁶³ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959), pg. 581.

⁶⁴ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 7.

vignettes anchor the field in San Francisco: Coit Tower rises above the trees on the left side of the canvas, and a second image depicts the San Francisco Art Institute, where Bing received her MFA in 1960 in the school's first master's class.⁶⁵ Both structures belong to North Beach, the neighborhood in which Bing lived and worked, and Chinn reinforces that geography by quoting Bing's own recollection of her student years above the Spaghetti Factory while participating in the Beat art scene there.⁶⁶ These images prevent the field from settling into either pure abstraction or traditional illusionism. Instead, Chinn constructs a segmented surface where gestural abstraction, Chinese calligraphy, and the notable placehood of San Francisco remain in tension. What results is a field that diverges from Pollock even as it relies on him. Chinn adopts the bodily stance through which abstract expressionism demonstrated artistic mastery, yet she refuses the unified all-over field that would uphold Pollock's pictorial authority on its own terms. She reimagines the space behind Bing using a visual vocabulary that is segmented, referential, and culturally marked by drawing on Bing's archive, her painterly language, her Chinese heritage, and her connection to San Francisco. In doing so, Chinn separates Pollock's bodily authority from his pictorial language and uses that division to redefine abstract expressionist authority itself. The abstraction and assemblage of images behind Bing contextualize *Bing* historically and locally, making it respond to a Chinese American lesbian artist whom canonical modernism would not have envisioned at its center, using cultural references to depart from the supposed neutrality of abstraction.

By reacting against Greenberg and Rosenberg, Chinn could be understood as operating within Jose Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, which clarifies how Chinn does not treat portraiture as a neutral form capable of accommodating any subject without alteration. She

⁶⁵ Lisa N. Peters, "Biography," in *Bernice Bing* (New York: Berry Campbell Gallery, 2024), pg. 72. [/https://lnpeters.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Bing_cat_LP_essay.pdf](https://lnpeters.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Bing_cat_LP_essay.pdf).

⁶⁶ Lisa N. Peters, "Biography," pg 73., which

approaches it instead as a genre that distributes coherence, authority, and visibility unevenly. Muñoz defines identity as something produced where "entrenched dispositions meet fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions," and he insists that those definitions do not become equally available to all bodies.⁶⁷ Marginalized subjects therefore work "on, with, and against" dominant forms rather than either fully inhabiting or wholly rejecting them.⁶⁸ That formulation matters here because portraiture conventionally secures the subject through the alignment of likeness, setting, and personhood, thereby making identity appear stable, public, and self-evident. Bing does not enter the field of portraiture on those terms. As a Chinese American lesbian artist whose life moved across partially private, partially separate artistic and lesbian communities, she cannot be made fully legible through the genre's usual promise of unified visibility without distortion. Chinn responds to that problem by preserving Bing's likeness while refusing the stable setting that would normally confirm it. She works on, with, and against portraiture by keeping the figure intact and shifting the labor of legibility into the constructed field around her.

Bing therefore disidentifies with portraiture not because it abandons the genre, but because it exposes the inadequacy of the genre's normal terms and remakes them around a subject those terms would otherwise reduce. The split between Bing's sharply rendered body and the invented field surrounding her becomes the formal mechanism of that disidentification. Chinn uses that split to show that Bing cannot be secured through the ordinary coherence portraiture demands, and that any attempt to make her fit those terms would erase the privacy, fragmentation, and minoritarian conditions that shaped her life. As a commemorative and reparative portrait, *Bing* insists that portraiture reorganize itself around her, thereby enabling the

⁶⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pg 5-6.

⁶⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, pg 11.

genre to demonstrate a form of historical presence and artistic authority that it was not initially designed to uphold.

The lesbian force of this field requires an argument stronger than the claim that it arises from relationality in some broad or sentimental sense, because what is at issue here is not simply closeness but a specifically lesbian structure of recognition, memory, and world-making. Chinn does not present lesbianism as a visual essence that could be read off the body through clothing, haircut, or gesture, and the painting does not depend on a fixed lesbian iconography in order to establish Bing's sexuality. Instead, the portrait becomes lesbian through the conditions under which Bing is made to appear. One lesbian artist constructs the field through which another lesbian artist becomes legible. One Chinese American lesbian painter builds a pictorial world for another Chinese American lesbian painter whose life moved across privacy, fragmentation, and overlapping yet not fully public communities. That matters because lesbian existence, as this chapter has shown through Bing's own partially bracketed life, does not always enter public form through the open, continuous, and institutionally ratified legibility that portraiture historically presumes. Chinn's field does not solve that problem by exposing Bing completely or by forcing her into a falsely unified image of selfhood. It preserves the conditions that made her life difficult to stabilize privacy, fragmentation, dispersion, posthumous reconstruction-while giving those conditions pictorial form rather than treating them as failures to be corrected. The field is therefore lesbian not because it encodes an inherent lesbian visual language, but because it stages a lesbian mode of appearance in which intimacy does not collapse into disclosure, relation does not require transparency, and care does not depend on mastery. Chinn turns portraiture toward a lesbian mode of world-building by making the field hold what ordinary portrait space would either flatten or exclude, and in doing so, she compels the genre to reorganize itself around a

subject whose visibility cannot be separated from the minoritarian conditions through which it is produced.

The "lesbian imaginary" in this painting should therefore be understood not as an inherent lesbian visual code but as a mode of world-making. The field reads as lesbian because one lesbian artist builds it for another through friendship, memorial care, shared networks, and Chinn's larger portrait practice devoted to queer women's lives. Its lesbian quality does not rest in stable visual signs that could make lesbianism instantly readable on the body. It rests in the conditions of relation that structure Bing's appearance. That point matters because a Chinese lesbian artist like Bing does not fit easily within the conventions of normative portraiture, a genre that has long depended on stable public legibility and has more often secured the authority of white, often male, subjects. Bing's life moved through privacy, fracture, and overlapping but not fully public communities. Conventional portrait space would flatten those conditions in order to make her coherent. The invented field gathers the disparate parts of Bing's background into a single pictorial world without pretending they were ever seamlessly unified. In that sense, the field does not compensate for a failure of portraiture from the outside. It shows exactly where portraiture would fail Bing, and then remakes the genre from within so that she can appear as an artist, a lesbian, a Chinese American subject, a friend, and a memory at once. What Chinn builds in *Bing* is not simply an imaginative background. She builds a world spacious enough to hold the forms of relation, privacy, and historical fracture that ordinary portraiture cannot, and she does so in order to give Bernice Bing a place to remain after death.

CHAPTER THREE: *BEFORE THE WEDDING*, INSCRUTABILITY AND THE MARITAL PORTRAIT

As the third and final case study in this thesis on Lenore Chinn's lesbian portraiture, *Before the Wedding* culminates my analysis of Chinn's lesbian world-making, integrating the practices of citation and lesbian relationality discussed in the previous chapters. In *Déjà Vu*, Chinn depicts herself as an artist in the 1980s, a heightened postmodern period influenced by gay male dominance in painting, set within the Hollywood home of Robert Bridges and Tommy Arbitol. The self-portrait also reflects the complexities of Asian-American lesbian identity. *Bing* (2001) expands beyond the historical and cultural tensions in the self-portrait, imagining the Chinese-American lesbian as a representative figure linking ethnicity and sexuality. *Before the Wedding* continues this conversation, using citation to explore the Asian-American lesbian's place in the marital portrait, which diverges from traditional studio portraits by emphasizing community over individual artistry. Instead of focusing solely on the couple's union, the piece highlights the Asian-American lesbian community from which the couple and artist emerge, portraying a shared cultural identity within the context of marriage.

Before the Wedding depicts artist Kim Anno and her longtime partner, Ellen Meyers. Anno identifies as mixed ethnicity, with her identity comprising parts Asian, Native American, and Polish. She works as an interdisciplinary artist, creating paintings, photographs, and films. Anno was born in Los Angeles and is currently based in Berkeley, California. She has been a professor at the California College of the Arts from 1996 until 2027, marking the school's 2026 closure, Anno's work responds to ecology and politics, often addressing the changing relationship between the human body and the environment, particularly exploring how water, climate change, and vulnerable landscapes are affected by the changing climate and climate

legislation. Ellen Meyers is Jewish, from Massachusetts, born into a middle-class family. She took up photography while also working as a grant writer for Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. Meyers has a background in nonprofit work and has been active in the lesbian/gay community as a cultural activist.⁶⁹

Anno and Meyers met Lenore Chinn at the Asian American Women Artists Association. Anno and Chinn grew closer while Anno was also establishing a friendship with the artist Bernice Bing, whom she saw as a friend of Chinn's. Anno regarded Chinn as "a pure heart, so sweet, so concerned about everybody, and everything, and has been such a long-time activist."⁷⁰ Similarly, Meyers met Chinn through her partner at various dinner parties. As a photographer herself, Meyers recalled that when she had a gallery exhibition in Oakland, she did not want to invite anyone, but she did invite Lenore, who showed up with flowers and was incredibly generous in her support.

Lenore Chinn originally conceived of the painting *Before the Wedding* in 2000, prior to the legalization of gay marriage in the U.S. in 2015, through the Supreme Court ruling "Obergefell v. Hodges," which mandated that states issue marriage licenses and recognize same-sex marriages under the Fourteenth Amendment. The work depicts the union of Anno and Meyers, employing the style of a marital portrait to explore their relationship. It shows Meyers and Anno as a butch/femme couple. Portraying them 'before' the wedding emphasizes that, in 2000, marriage was still legally unavailable to them. Chinn reinterpreted the genre to accurately reflect their identities, serving as a critical gesture bridging the three women's shared lesbian identities within intersecting communities. Chinn recalls her intention was to integrate their

⁶⁹ Molly Robertson and Moira Roth, "An Interview," *Lenore Chinn*, accessed May 4, 2026, <http://www.lenorechinn.com/Pages/Chinn/ChinIntervw.html>

⁷⁰ Molly Robertson and Moira Roth, "An Interview."

diverse backgrounds and interests into a cohesive portrait, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, intentionally blending various elements of each sitter to create a unified image.⁷¹

Before the Wedding (fig. 8) is a formal portrait of a lesbian couple in a light-filled domestic space, reflecting the broader effort to depict lesbian relationships before the legalization of marriage. Kim Anno sits at the center of the composition, her hands resting in her lap and her gaze drifting toward the upper-left corner despite the frontal address of her body. She wears a Chinese red-and-blue silk jacket lined with gold over a long black dress. Her longtime partner, Ellen Meyers, stands directly behind her, wearing a dark suit, resting her hands on Anno's shoulders, and meeting the viewer's gaze with a confident, composed expression. The two women occupy a spacious white room animated by sweeping ochre-yellow light that moves across the walls and gives way to a rich pink-purple shadow behind Anno. Three watercolor works by Anno on paper hang on the walls; the most prominent, positioned behind Meyers, is a deep ochre composition marked by swirling black gestures that gather into small, river-like forms.⁷² To Anno's left, a low, dark-violet screen, patterned with small pink cherry blossoms, stands beneath two long orange candles, each featuring a bronze angel holding a trumpet toward the couple. Alongside the candles sits a small red tomato and a pale white sheet wound into itself, tumbling from a paint-splattered wooden stool onto the floor. In the foreground, another low stool draped in rippling red velvet holds a bronze Buddha statue and a small blue candlestick in a holder with a bent leg clad in black fishnet stockings, recalling the leg lamp from the film "A Christmas Story."

⁷¹ Latimer, Roth, and Soe, *Cultural Confluences*, 22-23.

⁷² Molly Robertson and Moira Roth, "An Interview."



Figure 8. Lenore Chinn, *Before the Wedding*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 44 inches, image courtesy of the artist.

The objects surrounding Anno and Meyers further disrupt the supposed neutrality of the studio portrait as the strongest gesture towards Chinn's efforts to destabilize and disorient the couple from formality. Chinn places the couple within an active room featuring objects drawn from Anno and Meyers's lives, Chinn's staging process, and the Asian American women's artist community around the three women. These objects alter the terms of the portrait itself, shifting it away from the isolated depiction of a couple and toward a more layered image, imagining lesbian relationships within the broader context of the Asian American women artist community. In Chinn and Roth's 1999 correspondence regarding the creation of *Before the Wedding*, Chinn details the origins of several of these objects and how they entered the composition. As mentioned previously, Chinn wrote that she asked Anno and Meyers to consider which objects

they wanted to include in the image to regain their relationship, making the objects fundamental to describing the couple's cultural, familial, and artistic identities. Furthermore, the objects throughout the room name the various artists of the couple's community. Anno's Japanese screen names her Japanese heritage, Meyer's heirloom Buddha, Flo Oy Wong's tomato, and Anno's works on paper behind the couple establish several citations to the couple's background and that of their community. Chinn's staging process, therefore, purposefully invokes the community of Asian American women and lesbian artists surrounding her and the couple.⁷³ Notably, this collaborative process complicates the single-author model of portraiture, as the image is produced not only through Chinn's vision but also through the materials and relationships gathered around the sitters. In this way, *Before the Wedding* presents lesbian couplehood as something sustained by a wider network of Asian American women and lesbian artists.

Similarly, Anno's Chinese robe connects Anno, the subject, to Chinn's own Chinese identity and to the broader Asian visual language Chinn had been developing for the portrait. Similar to Chinn's portrait of Bernice Bing, *Before the Wedding* features a similar emulation of another artist's work, with repainted Anno works on paper behind the couple. Anno describes this gesture as "really touching" and a "real bonding experience for Lenore to do that, the sweetest of gestures," saying it was "very emotional" to have her paintings repainted by someone she cared about, and "painted so differently than how I would paint them."⁷⁴ This act of repainting is significant because Chinn does not cite Anno ironically or as a detached appropriation, but rather as an intimate artistic tribute, thereby integrating Anno's practice into the very structure of the portrait. Similarly, Chinn's act of emulating Bing's late East Asian abstract expressionist Chinese-infused painting is even within Anno's own practice, where she

⁷³ Anno and Meyers, interview by Robertson and Roth.

⁷⁴ Anno and Meyers, interview by Robertson and Roth.

cites Bing's body of work, emphasizing Bing as an important friend from the Asian American Women Artists Association community and cherishing their conversation on Buddhism and mark-making. These objects and artistic references turn the portrait toward Anno, Meyers, Bernice Bing, Flo Oy Wong's tomato, and the broader community of Asian American women and lesbian artists around them, assembled as props. The image, therefore, does not secure lesbian couplehood solely through the frontal pose, gendered hierarchy, and social respectability characteristic of marriage portraiture. Instead, it constructs lesbian couplehood through relations, citations, and communities. *Before the Wedding* encourages reflection on whose objects, artworks, histories, and intimacies are allowed to influence how a couple is depicted. It also examines the nature of the portrait that becomes possible when these elements are permitted to enter the space. What significance does it hold for lesbian identity and for Asian American female knowledge and presence to be introduced into this space? *Before the Wedding* presents Chinn's most explicit depiction of an Asian American lesbian imaginary within the formal framework of portraiture, a visual realm where lesbian relationality is intertwined with Asian identity, and where shared and interacting artistic practices and community memory reinforce one another.

Vivian Huang's essay "Whither Asian American Lesbian Feminist Thought?" gives language for understanding the objects in *Before the Wedding* as more than symbolic props. Huang argues that Asian American lesbian feminist thought is often difficult to see through conventional forms of authorship, archive, and citation, and instead appears through minoritarian archives, relational knowledge, and collective affiliation. Huang writes, "In some ways, lesbianism may be thought of as a feminist mode of citation, as in, who are your most intimate thinking partners? To whose knowledge do you turn? [...] citation might be thought of as toward

whom you turn."⁷⁵ Through Huang, the objects gathered around Anno and Meyers emerge as a form of citation, because they point toward the women, artists, friendships, and histories that make the couple's image possible. Chinn constructs this Asian American lesbian relationality through the Buddha, which appears in the foreground of the painting and had appeared at Bernice Bing's SFAI service, originally coming from Meyers's family heirloom from Thailand.⁷⁶ The Buddha does not belong to one person or one meaning; it carries Meyers's family history, Bing's memorial presence, and the shared spiritual and artistic world around the couple as a single object.

Before conceiving the idea and prior to asking Anno and Meyers to pose for her, Chinn first examined images of the Empress Dowager as models for staged formal portraits. What initially drew Chinn's interest wasn't just the "Asian" appearance of the Dowager, but also how the image conveyed the authority of a Chinese imperial leader through a carefully constructed setting that shaped the sitter's identity on the emperor's behalf.⁷⁷ This setup creates a portrait that employs calculated poses, costumes, furniture, and symbolic objects to establish royal authority. Chinn intended to adapt this approach and reinterpret this form for Anno and Meyers, especially emphasizing the lineage of Asian monarchical authority, positioning Anno at the center of the composition as a mixed-race Asian artist.

In a 2001 roundtable interview with the couple Molly Robertson and Moira Roth, Anno reflects on the "transgressive" nature of the portrait, remarking that she and Meyers are "two women, not a married couple. Well, we're married, but not like a heterosexual married couple." Meyers later adds that the portrait's transgressive force also comes from the fact that "we are a

⁷⁵ Vivian L. Huang, "Whither Asian American Lesbian Feminist Thought?," *Diacritics* 48, no. 3 (2020): pg 42.

⁷⁶ Anno and Meyers, interview by Robertson and Roth.

⁷⁷ Lenore Chinn, "Before the Wedding," series of emails to Moira Roth, 1999, accessed April 28, 2026, <http://www.lenorechinn.com/Pages/Chinn/ChinBefore.html>

butch/femme couple, and as Kim says, we are from different cultures."⁷⁸ These comments clarify that the portrait's intervention does not rest only on the depiction of a lesbian couple, but on the couple's entrance into a form historically structured by heterosexual gender roles and social legitimacy. Chinn paints Anno and Meyers within the visual language of the formal marital portrait, but their presence destabilizes that language. The portrait cannot be read merely as a lesbian equivalent of a conventional marital image; the couple, due to their intersectional racial and gendered identities, occupies the genre under pressure, as Chinn revises formal portraiture around lesbian couplehood and specifically under the guise of butch/femme relationality considered in tandem to racial and cultural difference. Anno's resulting shock at the painting's formality makes this pressure between formality and interracial butch femme identity especially pertinent. Looking back a year later, Anno says, "When I look at the painting now, I am struck by what a formal painting it is. I am almost shocked by that, because I have always associated formal portraits with aristocracy—and who am I to be sitting for a formal aristocratic portrait?"⁷⁹ Anno's shock reveals the social history encoded in portraiture, especially its associations with aristocracy and power. What is radical, then, is not only that Anno and Meyers are lesbians, but that Chinn places them within a tradition that has historically conferred authority on subjects very unlike them.

In a 1999 email to art historian Moira Roth, one year before finishing the painting, Chinn describes exploring the idea of staging a formal portrait; she looked at images of the Empress Dowager, noting that court photographer Yu arranged "all sorts of elaborate sets" to document her activities. Looking towards Wu Hung's constitution of what makes an Asian portrait, Hung writes that Chinese portraits were all taken in uniform poses and arrangements featuring the

⁷⁸ Kim Anno and Ellen Meyers, interview by Molly Robertson and Moira Roth, March 17, 2001, "Lenore Chinn: Interview," accessed April 28, 2026, <http://www.lenorechinn.com/Pages/Chinn/ChinIntervw.html>.

⁷⁹ Anno and Meyers, interview by Robertson and Roth.

same composition of the chair and table posed side by side. The background consistently featured plain cloth adorned with artificial flowers. Hung ultimately argues that Chinese portraits, in their emulation of Western studio portraiture, connote a certain rigidity and unchanging visual composition, in which a romantic atmosphere, if present, feels unfeeling. Chinn seeks, I discern, to reference Asian portraiture as a method to implicate her ethnicity in the portrait. However, in viewing her relationship with historical portraiture, it becomes apparent that it can be understood as yet another form of canonical portraiture that she reworks to underwrite its lesbian themes through invocation of her community.⁸⁰

An example is Hubert Vos's 1905 painting of Empress Dowager Cixi at approximately age 70 (fig. 9). In this portrait, she is seated in a chair, facing outward, holding a circular fan, dressed in formal Chinese attire with a traditional hairstyle, within a composition of dark green and yellow tones. Chinn's engagement with Hubert Vos's portrait of the Empress Dowager Cixi should not be treated as a straightforward example of an ancient or purely "Asian" portrait tradition, but rather as a composition within its own expression of hybridity. Vos's portrait of Cixi combines the formal authority of the empress with her ceremonial costume and symbolic objects, all contained within a rigid, symmetrical composition structure associated with Chinese imperial portraiture, mediated by the medium and technique of Western academic oil painting. As Virginia Anderson argues, Vos's Cixi portrait defies any simple division between East and West, realism and idealism, or artists and sitters. In fact, Cixi herself helps determine the portrait's setting, pose, and her idealized rendering, making the portrait a staged performance of staged portraiture.⁸¹ Commonly, within staged imperial portraits, the depiction of the royal has

⁸⁰ Wu Hung, "Introduction," *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 80.

⁸¹ Virginia Anderson, "'A Semi-Chinese Picture': Hubert Vos and the Empress Dowager of China," in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long Tumultuous Relationship*, ed. Cynthia Mills, Lee Glazer, and Amelia A. Goerlitz (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2012), pg 104.

never been natural and has always been used as a device to tightly control the likeness of a monarch, and that is clear through Cixi's orchestration of the image and the use of oil painting and Vos's European identity, infusing the painting with a Western conception of power in the portrait.



Figure 9. Herbert Vos, *Portrait of Cixi, Empress Dowager of China*, 1905-06. Oil on canvas. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Chinn may have been inspired by specific images of the Empress Dowager; though she cites these references, we do not have access to the exact visual materials she points toward. Vos's portrait invokes Chinn's naming of a so-called timeless "Asian aesthetic," when it is actually a careful balancing of Eastern and Western imagery and elements of portraiture. The portrait of the Dowager in which Asian royal identity is constructed through the meticulous negotiation of Asian costume, furniture, and symbolic items through the lens of Western oil painting and compositional framing of Cixi, appearing cropped and occupying the lower portion

of the portrait, with an immense negative space looming above her. Similarly, Xunling's photographs of Empress Dowager Cixi from 1835-1908 (fig. 10) situate her in a low chair in a carefully arranged Chinese setting, featuring a scroll above her that reads "Long Live the current Holy Mother Empress Dowager of the Great Qing Empire—ten thousand years, ten thousand years, ten thousand years," a formal imperial praise and blessing for the Empress, signaling Cixi's control over her image and projecting her longevity, as symbolized in objects such as oranges, which serve as indicator objects rooted in Chinese expressions of culture, reverence, and good luck. David Hogge confirms that Cixi actively directed the content and composition of these photographs, using commissioned props, religious symbolism, and a courtly display to communicate her immortal spiritual and political authority.⁸²



Figure 10. Xunling, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, ca. 1903-5. Photograph. From *Cixi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908, Photographs* (FSA.A.14). National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸² David Hogge, "Piety and Power: The Theatrical images of Empress Dowager Cixi," *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2011), accessed April 28, 2026, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0002.108/--piety-and-power-the-theatrical-images-of-empress-dowager?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

Therefore, when Chinn writes, “I’m sort of employing some of these concepts to document Kim and Ellen, from a lesbian cultural perspective,”⁸³ Chinn is complying with her own description of a “somewhat ancient Asian aesthetic.” The “somewhat” matters because the resources Chinn draws from are not pure survivals of a strictly Asian and ancient aesthetic; they are modern images already mediated across cross-cultural references and in contexts in which the sitters control the narrative of the image through its composition. In *Before the Wedding*, Chinn reappropriates this language of sages to communicate authority, depicting the lesbian couple of Kim Anno and Ellen Meyers, and to picture the interracial butch-femme couple within a context that accepted same-sex marriage within the couple’s pre-marital status.⁸⁴ By drawing upon the subtlety of the Empress Dowager Cixi to mediate and control her image to demonstrate her power. Chinn, in her invocation of the Dowager, shifts this visual control onto Anno and Meyers as a couple, radically endowing them with the power of the mediation of their image, reserved for monarchical subjects in portraiture, to ultimately construct an image that subsumes a lesbian image of authority in the union of the sapphic couple. The formal posing of the couple, as well as the dense objects throughout the scene and the ceremonial interior, including Asian objects, create a space in which the interior couple can extend to the history of portraiture, exemplified in the example of the Empress Dowager Cixi in painting and photography within a namely lesbian context, and in simulations of an Asian lesbian context that connects Chinn and Anno as both Asian and lesbian artists.

However, what is interesting about *Before the Wedding* is that, unlike other examples of portraits of long-time lesbian couples, it can appear via comparison as more descriptive of Anno and Meyer’s relationship. In Opie’s 1998 portrait, *Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma* (fig.11),

⁸³ Lenore Chinn, “Before the Wedding,”

⁸⁴ Lenore Chinn, “Before the Wedding,”

Opie depicts a long-term butch-femme couple, Kristopher and Clara, in relaxed poses that emphasize their union, as in Anno and Meyers's *Before the Wedding*, but with a more casual tone. Opie photographs her subjects in everyday attire with Kristopher in a floral button-down and jeans, Clara in a day dress. These images of long-term lesbian couples operate within the context of a time before same-sex marriage, which grants legal and social recognition, but they also imagine recognition through different degrees of seriousness. Opie's photograph grounds the couple in everyday domestic life, showing them seated side by side outdoors, beneath a tree, with a house and suburban markers such as a grill, a metal fence, and a satellite dish apparent in the background. The composition is informal and horizontal, in contrast to Chinn's image of Anno and Meyers, where Opie is embedded within the scene rather than elevated to honor the subjects. *Before the Wedding*, a painted portrait was created two years after Kristopher and Clara began advocating for the depiction of lesbians as a private, united couple, shown through hand-holding and Opie's shared identity as a lesbian. thereby solidifying their union through painted portraiture. While both portraits differ in their claims, one emphasizing everyday intimacy as sufficient to affirm the lesbian union, the other urging a more radical depiction of lesbians claiming their right to marital portraiture, both artists explore how lesbian couples can be represented, balancing formality, presence, and different visions of recognition.



Figure 11. Catherine Opie, *Kristopher & Clara, Tulsa, Oklahoma*, from the series *Domestic*, 1998, Inkjet print, 40 x 50 in. Collection SFMOMA.

Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* allows for the room to be read as a queer environment shaped by lesbian relationality. Her writing on queer support systems and queer objects helps explain why the objects in *Before the Wedding* feel so charged, why they do not sit politely around the couple as props. Ahmed writes that "so much feminist and queer invention comes from the necessity of creating our own support systems."⁸⁵ Chinn's painting gives that support system a body and a room. Meyers's hands on Anno's shoulders are presented as the most literal form of lesbian support, but the rest of the painting keeps extending that gesture outward. The Buddha supports the couple by bringing Meyers's family history and Bernice Bing's memorial presence into the foreground of the image, thereby bringing that intertwined reality to light by specifically naming it through the inclusion of the robe. Anno's robe supports the image by allowing Asian identity to move through dress, and Chinn's shared Chinese and Asian visual language, bringing both Anno and Chinn together as artists and within the context of community. The repainted works on paper support Anno as an artist, not only as a sitter or

⁸⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pg 189.

partner, and allow for Anno to be read as an artist in conversation with Chinn's respective practice. With the inclusion of Flo Oy Wong's tomato, which, while rather tiny and almost absurd, brings the ordinary, funny, domestic texture of a friend's object into this otherwise highly staged portrait. The candles, which Chinn and the sitters understood as standing for the relationship, make the couple's bond visible without making it official in the way a wedding certificate or aristocratic lineage would. The angels sing towards the couple, heralding and welcoming their union prior to the legalization of gay marriage, which would be legalized fifteen years after *Before the Wedding*.

Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology* advances the idea of lesbian relationality by describing queer and diasporic homes as spaces filled with "mixed and oblique objects," things that carry different histories and point toward different worlds.⁸⁶ *Before the Wedding* operated within an encoded formal language, but the room departs from formal neutrality, instead presenting several open, stepped meanings that implicate the couple's community and their identities. As a lesbian, interracial butch-femme couple, Anno and Meyers lack social and sexual legitimacy; the ambiguous objects prior to the wedding make the complex, multifaceted background of the couple explicit. Anno's averted gaze most visibly disrupts the portrait's formal structure. In the same interview, Meyers observes that she likes how Anno is "looking off. It's so unexpected, and throws everything off kilter from what one expects of a standard formal portrait."⁸⁷ That sense of imbalance makes the painting's disruption especially legible. Despite the formal setting, Meyers's upright posture in a suit, and Anno's seated position at the center of the composition, the painting is energized by Anno's drifting gaze. She does not conform to the expected frontal address of formal portraiture, nor does she fully return the viewer's look. Her

⁸⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pg 176.

⁸⁷ Anno and Meyers, interview by Robertson and Roth.

gaze pulls the portrait slightly away from the stability and self-possession the genre usually promises. Anno therefore refuses to become wholly legible as a sitter within the formal portrait, introducing a subtle visual deviation that gestures toward the broader social and representational deviation that she and Meyers embody within the image.

Similarly, Anno's gaze is normally made oblique and non-normative, a concept that Ahmed defines as the queer slant, which for lesbians is "a matter of everyday negotiation. This is not about the romance of being off-line or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, with the 'straightening devices' and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms."⁸⁸ Anno's gaze is a versatile tool employed to alleviate the rigidity of the portrait. However, Anno consistently looks beyond the studio where the couple is situated, extending her vision to encompass a broader world of Asian American artists and their possibilities. This perspective highlights her innate potential to fully engage with the act of creating the narrative portrait with Chinn. Her sidelong glance, expressed tangentially and subtly, distinguishes her from conventional direct perspectives used in typical postcard imagery, thereby reaffirming her subjecthood within the portrait.

Ahmed also writes that it is within the objects surrounding Anno and Myers that they come alive through a "loss of place," and that feels right here because these objects have been moved out of their ordinary contexts and pressed into service within a formal marital portrait.⁸⁹ The Buddha is not only a religious object or family heirloom. The tomato is not only a tomato. The robe is not merely a garment. Anno's paintings transcend mere decorative backgrounds. Once incorporated into the portrait, these objects begin to exhibit altered behaviors and serve as

⁸⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, pg 107.

⁸⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, pg 107.

evidence of the ongoing American women and lesbian communities within their cultural context, rooted in fundamental purposes that extend to the broader Asian American women and lesbian communities. As Chinn has suggested, what Asian American lesbians need in portraiture is not just a portrait, but a fuller and more meaningful form of representation, one that matters not only to Chinn, but also to Anno and Meyers and to their place within Chinn's broader archive of lesbian painting.

Margo Machida's *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* helps clarify why *Before the Wedding* matters as a work of Asian American art, not only as a lesbian portrait or as a revision of formal marital portraiture. Machida argues that Asian American artists use "strategic acts of visual representation" to make a claim to place in a society where their images are not the norm.⁹⁰ This feels central to Chinn's portrait, but Chinn's claim to place does not happen through a single figure, a single ethnic sign, or a clean assertion of Asian American visibility. It happens through accumulation. It happens through the couple's compressed bodies, through the historical Asian portrait sources Chinn gathers, through the robe, the Buddha, the screen, the candles, the tomato, Anno's repainted works on paper, and the dense room built around the couple. Machida's idea of art as giving form to "structures of feeling" is useful because *Before the Wedding* gathers the feelings and negotiations around identity that are not easily stabilized into one image or category. Chinn is not saying Asian American lesbian presence is already there, complete, and waiting to be represented. She makes it appear by assembling the visual and social conditions that can hold it.

The painting becomes Asian American not because of a single symbol of Asianness, and lesbian not only because the sitters are lesbians, but because the whole portrait is organized

⁹⁰ Machida, *Unsettled Visions, Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*. (Durham: NC: Duke University Press), 2009. pg 1-10.

through relations, affiliations, objects, and shared memory. Machida's method also helps justify why the emails, interviews, and recollections matter so much here. Her dialogue-based approach to Asian American art treats transcribed conversations as a way of understanding how artworks connect artists "to the world and to other people."⁹¹ That is exactly how *Before the Wedding* has to be read. The painting comes from emails, dinner parties, studio visits, jokes about weddings, props carried from home, and later reflections from Anno and Meyers about how strange, formal, touching, and collaborative the whole process of creating the portrait felt.

⁹¹ Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, 6.

CONCLUSION

I first began exploring the idea of establishing a world of the Asian American lesbian imaginary across the portraiture of Lenore Chinn by focusing on three paintings of Asian American lesbian artists within Chinn's oeuvre. These paintings include: *Déjà Vu* (1986), *Bing* (2001), and *Before the Wedding* (2000). I was inspired to assemble these paintings into an imaginary construction of a lesbian world after reading *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian Americans* by Elaine H. Kim and Margo Machida. In the book's preface, Machida presents her project as an effort to map the emergence of Asian American art through amassing a collection of twenty-four contemporary Asian American visual artists whose work confronts geographic displacement, the sexualization of Asian bodies, colonization, miscegenation, the hybrid formations of immigrant culture, and the enduring wounds of loss, war, history, and memory. I found it most interesting that Machida avoids placing a single label on what binds these twenty-four artists together, instead offering the term "communities of imagination" as a flexible term meant to encompass the "flexible and porous conception of community in which the sense of sharing something with others, whether based in common lived experiences, belief systems, or membership in a culture of polity, is made tangible through the visual arts."⁹²

This term, "communities of imagination," really struck me as a rejection of an all-encompassing term to describe Asian American art, as it resists reproducing stereotypes or relying on stable, uniform cultural practices that unite all Asian American artists. Instead, creating a community of imagination offers a way through which to consider how each artist, within their distinct practice, collectively builds up this idea of an Asian and Asian American community of imagination.

⁹² Elaine H. Kim and Margo Machida, eds. *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xv.

Building on this idea, I expanded the concept by examining Lenore Chinn's paintings of lesbians, which I first saw at the Bay Area Lesbian Archives. While browsing the book, I saw Chinn's unique approach to shaping an alternative visual realm. I had initially noticed that, within these portraits of Asian American lesbians, primarily drawn from Chinn's community from the Asian American Women Artists Association, all the women occupied normative genres of portraiture in ways that destabilized the genre, as Machida puts it. The result is a re-imaging of Asian American representation. I wanted to base my scholarship on a similar idea to Machida's communities of imagination, not wanting to put direct pressure on the three paintings to conform to some stable definition of lesbianism that would coalesce into a fitting place within this Asian American lesbian imaginary. I wanted instead to examine the relationality between the subjects and the artist Lenore Chinn as the construction of an Asian American lesbian imaginary.

During the initial stages of my reflection on *Déjà Vu*, I realized that although the image is clearly based on a photograph—specifically via Murphy raising his camera—Chinn does not function simply as a photorealist, as exhibitions such as *Ordinary People* have since framed her. Further discussions with my advisor, Professor Anthony Lee, led us to the conclusion that Chinn, rather than operating solely as a photorealist, employs photorealism as a departure point, thereby functioning as a form of postmodernist expression. Chinn demonstrates this in *Déjà Vu* by angling the mirror away from her body—a purposeful formal choice that underscores the challenges of self-representation by failing to confirm her reflection. I was immediately curious to see if this phenomenon played out against the other portraits Chinn had made of Asian American lesbians.

Initially, it was challenging to understand how *Bing* and *Before the Wedding* would fit within this thesis, given that both paintings were created in the 2000s, whereas *Déjà Vu* was

produced significantly earlier. I once again refer to Margo Machida, particularly her work in *Unsettled Visions*. Although the book does not cover the 2000s, it examines the nature of Asian American art in the late 1990s. Machida notes that by the late 1990s, younger Asian American artists, critics, and scholars were already articulating new positions that distinguished them from the identity-politics frameworks often associated with Asian American art of the 1970s and 1980s. In this rapidly evolving context, artists continued to explore questions of identity, difference, and representation, albeit through more subtle and less confrontational strategies. Consequently, any contemporary study must contend with a different set of artistic and critical concerns.⁹³ I employed this retrospective framing of artists responding to conditions of the 1970s and 1980s, similar to their approach in the 1990s, to justify the inclusion of two portraits from the 2000s alongside a much more historic portrait from the 1980s.

By including *Bing* as my second case study, I primarily aimed to highlight the remarkable fact that Chinn had at least one figure in her community who identified similarly. I initially considered incorporating Chinn's portrayal of Bing because I was impressed by the similarities between their identities, as both artists resonated with me. Drawing from my initial discovery of Lenore Chinn's art, the moment in which I first encountered *Cultural Confluences*, I felt a similar connection to Bing similar to my reaction upon feeling my similarities to Chinn in terms of our shared background. I was quickly pleased to find that Lenore Chinn, like me, a Chinese American lesbian artist working in the Bay Area, had formed a community with someone like Bing.

Bing was an abstract expressionist artist who identified as a Chinese American lesbian and was primarily immersed in the Beat movement in the city during the 1950s and 1960s. My interest then turned to how *Bing*, as a painting, was much more destabilized than *Déjà Vu*.

⁹³ Machida, *Unsettled Visions*, "10-11.

Departing from Chinn's self-portrait, her much later reimagining of Bing does not even attempt to situate Bing within a normative, legible space like *Déjà Vu*, which is clearly positioned within a purple apartment. In *Bing*, various objects are floating in some sort of strange world defined by this singular silk screen, in which beans seem to be defined by flatness. There is no dimensionality to the background in which she is situated. Upon learning that Bing associated herself with Romaine Brooks, I wanted to understand how Chinn's invocation of Pollock for her picturing of Bing served as an extension of that citational practice. By looking at how Lenore Chinn wanted to reimagine Bing's being as a figure similar to Jackson Pollock, quoting the same vertical stance and pose, exemplifying an act that portrays the work behind the artist.

I was also intrigued by how Bing, similarly to her in terms of race and sexuality, appears to prioritize her arts advocacy over her own art. Both women are involved in the Asian American Women Artists Association and played key roles in founding the South of Market Cultural Center, with Bing being a long-time exhibitor and supporter. I observed that Bing's work, such as her project 'being,' reflects a similar commitment to advocacy, shifting focus from creating self-portraits to exploring her past through Bing's archive after her passing. This project aims to reimagine Bernice Bing's history, expressing her lesbian identity through her chin's gestures and the composition, while her Chinese identity is embedded in the visual elements. I found it notable that Chinn sought to create a memorial portrait that unites Bing's fragmented identity to ensure her legacy is properly honored.

Moreover, it was around the time I began writing about Chinn's 2000 painting *Before the Wedding*, which I planned to present at the Five College Pan Asian conference with the student organization I am part of, Asian American Students in Action, here on the Mount Holyoke College campus. I was paired with a now good friend of mine, Maia Penuel-Cheng, of Smith

College, to create a joint presentation synthesizing our shared interest in Asian American lesbian arts, primarily through the structure of my thesis on Lenore Chinn. It was through talking with Maia that I learned about Vivian L. Huang's essay titled "Whether Asian American Feminist Lesbian Thought." This discovery of Huang, with the context of Maia's introduction of the essay to our presentation, was in a similar context to initially discovering my shared relationality with Chinn. But instead of being in a space defined by lesbianism, Maia and I shared the moment of discovering our connection in our shared Chinese lesbian identity, notably that we also both grew up within a 3-minute walk of each other in the Outer Sunset neighborhood of San Francisco. It was through this strong degree of relationality and felt presence that I felt I could embrace this Huang essay.

To once again put forth Huang's formation, Huang writes that turning toward the knowledge and experiences of Asian American lesbian and bisexual women challenges mainstream representations of Asian American women and seeks to highlight the unique contributions of Asian American lesbian feminist discourse. This, in turn, creates a citational process rooted in recognizing and valuing intimate relationships among women and the ways in which they collaborate and support one another in literature and theory. I was incredibly struck by this formation of Asian American lesbian relations, which was not only responding to the friendship I had newly formed with Maia, but also to the themes I was noticing in the third painting of my case study *Before the Wedding*.

Before the Wedding, in a similar vein, as it is another portrait of a member of the Asian American woman artist community, is a portrait of the AAWAA member and artist Kim Anno and her longtime partner, Ellen Myers. The double portrait is a painting Chinn wanted to present to interrogate her personal Chinese artistic roots and to examine traditional portraiture while

exemplifying her kinship with the couple. Chinn, notably, also wanted to establish a connection among the artist, Kim Anno, and Ellen Myers through the assemblage of objects throughout the scene, with all three women implicated in the selection that created the composition of the marital portrait assembled through the three women's shared community. I was interested in the inscrutability of Chinn's implication of herself in the work, and how she related to Anno and Meyers through various subtle lines of connection. I wanted to understand the context of these objects that abstractly represent the formation of a broader Asian-American female community.

Drawing on Huang once again, I was intrigued by how the concept of inscrutability reflects the challenges and ambiguities related to the visibility and recognition of Asian American lesbian feminists within dominant narratives, here exemplified by the marital portrait. Huang's work on both inscrutability and citation can be utilized to interpret the unnoticed or misunderstood ways in which the lack of obvious visibility is constructing what is arguably her most detailed depiction of the Asian American lesbian imaginary. This includes implicating both Anno and Meyers as her somewhat indebted as co-authors, for they assisted in organizing the composition. All of this occurs within the context of Chinn exploring traditional Chinese studio photography, examining traditional portraits, and attempting to extract their Asian essence for this interracial couple. The scene does not entirely read as a typical representation of Asian American identity in the way that the preceding two paintings do. By selecting *Before the Wedding* as my final case study, I aim primarily to challenge the notion that Chinn regards portraiture as a neutral form of representation. *Before the Wedding*, created prior to the legalization of gay marriage, envisions an alternative method of depicting a lesbian union within an alternative setting, especially one that eschews the neutral studio backdrop. Instead, it presents

another iteration of Chinn staging a formal portrait of a fellow Asian American lesbian artist and her partner..

By presenting my undergraduate thesis on Lenore Chinn, I aim to respond to contemporary queer Asian American artists who engage with the figure currently. I intend to position Chinn as a historical predecessor to the work of Asian and Asian American women painting now, a precursor to their practices that explicitly stems from my analysis of *Déjà Vu* as a self-portrait, which now allows Chinn to be understood as a visual ancestor of queer Asian American female identity in art. I propose Chinn as a predecessor because, as I have stated numerous times in *Déjà Vu*, Chinn was unable to actively reflect her own predecessors; she could only partially claim Romaine Brooks, a white lesbian, as her lesbian ancestor. However, by advancing sustained scholarship on Lenore Chinn, I hope that current and future Asian American queer women and Asian American lesbian artists will regard Chinn as a prominent artist operating within a transitional reworking of portraiture from within. This new positioning of Chinn not only emphasizes the importance of continuing to rework figuration across a community of Asian American artists but also underscores the goal of expanding the canon of Asian American queer artists beyond the twenty-four artists featured in Machida's *Fresh Talk*, establishing a broader, more inclusive artistic canon.

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