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**Article DOI****Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/a-polyphonous-ode-to-migration>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Kolleen Ku: 'A polyphonous ode to migration', *Burlington Contemporary* (20th September 2023),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/a-polyphonous-ode-to-migration>

**About the author(s)**

is the winner of the 2023 Burlington Contemporary Art Writing Prize.

# A polyphonous ode to migration

by Kolleen Ku • 20.09.2023

Amid the hissing exhaust of a passing Q17 bus, the humming buzz of hair clippers and the huff of hardscrabble breath, you approach a nondescript mini-mall in Flushing, New York [FIG.1](#); a delicate flash of red hovers above it all, flagging you down. The intricate papercut *Butterfly* [FIG.2](#) by Xiyadie hangs among fading banners and acrylic shop signs at the threshold: two ornately incised wings ready to take flight. Or, perhaps you arrive with eyes earthbound, skimming the layers of handwritten posters that line the building's walls, encountering a refrain taken from an old Mandopop song, '最爱你的人是我' ('The person who loves you most is me') [FIG.3](#). On an opposite window, the same ungainly hand inquires '妈妈,吃饭了吗?' ('Mom, have you eaten yet?'). These tender exhortations by Xueli Wang – knowing shorthand for transcontinental worry and care – vie for space among listings for rooms-for-rent, temporary jobs in massage parlours and restaurant kitchens, and matchmaking services, which are now conducted virtually via WeChat.

It was through this web of informal advertisements that the duo Herb Tam, a curator and painter, and Lu Zhang, an artist, forayed into the bustling display economy of a Flushing mini-mall: \$10 and up for a fortnight's exposure. During the couple's pandemic-era walks around the neighbourhood, this building was one of the few places that remained open for visitors to peruse announcements. Along with the mall's compact yet wide-ranging ecosystem of essential services – a butcher, hair salon, phone service provider, beauty supply store, remittance counter and 99 cent store – the Chinese-language listings serve as a vital lifeline for new arrivals in Flushing, which is home to one of the largest Asian migrant communities in New York.

As they negotiated display space with individual vendors, Tam's and Zhang's initial idea of enlivening the lo-fi, text-based advertisements gave rise to a larger project, and they gathered a group of artists with ties to the neighbourhood to contribute. The result is *Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods in Flushing*, a subtle yet witty exhibition tucked into an unlikely, unglamorous corner of outer-borough commerce, and a keenly felt homage to the creativity and communities nurtured in urban immigrant enclaves. The location of the exhibition is passed to the viewer with a neighbourly familiarity: 'When you reach Flushing Public Library, go up Kissena Blvd till you see the Q17/27 stop. Go past the garage gate, enter the mini-mall on the right where scooters and bikes are parked outside'.

Inspired by the billboard of a nostalgic Nokia mobile phone that once crowned the mini-mall's façade, Zhang's ceramic sculpture *Calling the Dutch* FIG.4 perches in the corner, manifesting as a devotional icon to the long-distance calls and relationships facilitated through the building's stalwart mobile phone shop. The sculptural display is adorned with artificial flowers purchased from the 99 cent shop next door, which are routinely pilfered but replenished with offcuts by the shopkeeper. Tam's gestural, intimately scaled paintings FIG.5 capture fleeting moments of communion in Flushing public life: cigarettes lit and traded on street corners, gossip and strife over the clatter of dinner bowls. Notably, the curators are weathering the hazards of operating in a public commercial space and since the show opened one of Tam's paintings has been lost. Fluttering a few feet behind Xiyadie's *Butterfly* – a fitting emblem for the transformational bloom of migration – *Counting* FIG.6 by Anne Wu captures its quotidian counterpoint: the rudderless, amorphous time of displacement. The skeleton of a ubiquitous Chinese calendar, featuring both Lunar and Gregorian dates, allowing users to traverse between two worlds at once, waves limply with the days, weeks and months excised. Every day in an unfamiliar land feels the same; time is translucent and history is palimpsestic, easily plumbed.

The photographic series *Han in Town* FIG.7 by Janice Chung features lyrical portraits and a trilingual account of the shop owner Jing Lan Quan's journey from the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in China to Queens, revealing the cross-ethnic intimacies and imperial entanglements that permeate across Asian diasporas. *Flushing Polyphonous* FIG.8, an interactive Monopoly send-up designed by the collective Mamahuhu (Yuki He and Qianfan Gu), takes on the rampant real estate speculation that has beset the neighbourhood in recent years. Fortunes in the game are painstakingly gained and lost: \$20 earned from a job at Hong Kong Supermarket or half of one's savings decimated by a cyberscam. The display *Dream City 2.0*, which takes its name from an unrealised development scheme following the 1939–40 New York World's Fair, invites visitors to reminisce about their favourite memories of Flushing. Memorials to 'Wen Bakery in front of the municipal lot, RIP' and odes to 'eating at Spring Shabu Shabu with my homies, it still exists' betray not simply hazy nostalgia for long-lost local establishments, but also an overwhelming sense that Flushing is on the precipice of change.





Fig. 1 Installation view of *Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods* at a mini-mall in Flushing, New York, 2023. (Photograph Zilan Fan).

In the 1970s the repeal of Asiatic exclusion laws and rapid increase of immigration to the United States established Flushing as a working-class Asian enclave. But in recent years, investment from upscale developers and migration from Chinese elites have spurred the construction of luxury condos and flashy new malls. Earlier generations of Asian immigrants are being displaced by beneficiaries of a system that many of them gambled to leave behind, with long-time residents and small businesses pushed out by Chinese conglomerates and the influx of transnational capital. Within the national imaginary, Asian Americans continue to occupy a vexed position, as the paradoxical ‘Yellow Peril’ and the model minority myth have come to a roaring head with rising anti-Asian sentiment, the rollback of affirmative action and a climate of nationalistic xenophobia. Yet, stepping into Flushing reveals that the community is hardly monolithic.

Just as the worlds of Flushing cultivate new, overlapping and polyphonous forms of diaspora, the unorthodox setting of this exhibition may inadvertently cultivate a new mode of viewing. The exhibition demands an intimate knowledge from the visitor, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with job-seekers, the homesick and the lovelorn. *Home-O-stasis* is not merely an ode to a neighbourhood forged through migration, but an act of solidarity with a vernacular Flushing that will always remain, glimmering at the end of the 7 line.



Fig. 2 *Butterfly*, by Xiyadie. 2023. Papercut, 30.4 by 30.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Zilan Fan; exh. Flushing, New York).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods* at a mini-mall in Flushing, New York, 2023. (Photograph Zilan Fan).





**Fig. 4** *Calling the Dutch*, by Lu Zhang. 2023. Ceramic, acrylic paint and artificial flowers, cell phone 35.5 by 29 by 12.7 cm., vases each 11.4 by 24.13 by 12.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Zilan Fan; exh. Flushing, New York).



**Fig. 5** Installation view of *Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods* at a mini-mall in Flushing, New York, 2023, showing *Beech Avenue, Flushing*, by Herb Tam. 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 27.9 by 35.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Zilan Fan).



**Fig. 6** *Counting*, by Anne Wu. 2023. Hand-cut calendar pages, incense sticks, garden wire and nylon, 43.1 by 38 by 34.2 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Zilan Fan; exh. Flushing, New York).



**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods* at a mini-mall in Flushing, New York, 2023, showing works from the series *Han in Town*, by Janice Chung. 2022. Digital pigment print, dimensions variable. (Photograph Zilan Fan).





**Fig. 8** *Flushing Polyphonous*, by Mamahuhu. Inkjet print and game pieces, 40.6 by 55.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Zilan Fan; exh. Flushing, New York).

### **Exhibition details**

**Home-O-stasis: Lives and Livelihoods in  
Flushing**  
Flushing, New York  
27th May–23rd July 2023

THE  
**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ