



Art Practical 3.16 / Nomadic Tendencies

http://www.artpractical.com/review/how_we_leave_and_return_intersections_of_art_and_history/

How We Leave and Return: Intersections of Art and History

Group Show

Apr 28 - Jul 01

Visitor Center, Angel Island

by [Michele Carlson](#)

*What we call places are stable locations with unstable converging forces that cannot be delineated either by fences on the ground or by boundaries in the imagination—or by the perimeter of the map. Something is always coming from elsewhere, whether it's wind, water, immigrants, trade goods, or ideas.*¹

—Rebecca Solnit

How We Leave and Return: Intersections of Art and History is a fitting title for the group exhibition displayed in the Visitor Center on Angel Island. For the exhibition, curated by artist Patrick Gillespie, the [We Players](#) invited eight San Francisco Bay Area artists to create site-specific projects in response to the overlapping cultural, political, and natural histories of Angel Island as part of their residency on the island. Like the histories and social geographies of the site itself, the works in the exhibition seem disparate but collectively reflect what Rebecca Solnit suggests are the many forces that come and go, intermingle and diverge, and offer a geographical site its sense of “place.”²

For the past three thousand years, Angel Island has been the stage for many narratives. It was a hunting and fishing site for the First Nations tribe, the Coastal Miwok Indians, that originally inhabited the region. It has served as a cattle ranch, Civil War United States Army post, World War II POW camp, and a quarantine station. Between 1910 and 1940, almost one million mostly Chinese immigrants were processed, interrogated, and detained in the Angel Island Immigration Station that still crowns the island. More recently, it has been home to a Nike Missile Site, and it is now a state park where visitors can hike, camp, and leisurely engage with the complicated histories that haunt the island.

The exhibition is like a transverse section through the history and historiography of Angel Island itself; the works in the show are installed and integrated into the Visitor Center's permanent preexisting displays. Some exhibiting artists respond to the above-mentioned sociopolitical moments, while others address the island's natural history. Still others engage with the informational display strategies in the Visitor Center and even the consumer commercialization of such sites through the tourist tchotchkes that often come to represent them. Collectively, *How We Leave and Return* is an atlas of a place, and the artists remind viewers that it is impossible to separate the past from the present and the future.

Hanging low from one of the hallway ceilings in the Visitor Center is multimedia artist Torreya

Cummings's *Small Craft for the Anthropocene* (2012), a canoe-like boat that she built and paddled across Raccoon Strait from Sausalito to Angel



Torrey Cummings. Documentation of *Small Craft for the Anthropocene*, 2012; archival inkjet prints; 17 x 22 in. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: H.R. Smith.



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Island. *Small Craft* was fashioned after the Miwok Indians' canoes, which were used for thousands of years to navigate what is now called the San Francisco Bay. In *Small Craft*, Cummings states that she was "reenacting ancient local technologies with contemporary, locally available materials (i.e.: stuff from the hardware store)." ³ Though the Miwok canoes were traditionally built from tule, a species of bulrush that used to grow abundantly in the region, Cummings's contemporary reinterpretation sees polyethylene pipe insulation banded together to construct her vessel. On one wall of the Visitor Center are digital prints of Cummings manning her craft across the bay with a paddle she whittled from a two-by-four. These images face the historical text and graphic display about the Coast Miwoks' hunting practices. *Small Craft* hangs in between—a synthetic specter awkwardly suspended in between two "official" histories of the same place reinterpreted at different times and by different peoples.

Among the permanent historic informational displays and temporary art installations, viewers can stumble upon pieces of Imin Yeh's *Carved Out Loud* (2012) scattered around the Visitor Center.

Woodblock prints of a poem Yeh carved out of a piece of wall hang throughout the exhibition in spots that are often cumbersome to view. Yeh makes direct reference to the messages and poems written on and carved directly into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station by the thousands of Chinese immigrants who languished during detention, at times for years. But the poem that Yeh has translated to wood and redistributed throughout the Visitor Center is in Spanish. It is a collaboration with Jesús Iñiguez, a member of Dreamers Adrift, a collective of undocumented artists who create multimedia work around the undocumented experience. Yeh and Iñiguez make a pointed reference to the controversial politics around current immigration and citizenship policies in the United States. *Carved Out Loud* extracts the filtered history of immigration and xenophobia suffused beneath the many histories of the island and suggests to viewers that, in fact, this is not a lesson on days past; instead, it sternly lays bare that times have not much changed.

On Angel Island, visitors easily move unknowingly through, between, and around unimaginable memories and misremembered histories. These are pasts that can't help but linger on the paved roads that traverse the static California Parks Department's historical placards and on the park benches that adorn scenic views of the bay. There is an incomprehensible presence—one of absence—that exists between the conspicuously vacant, monumental architecture of the Immigration Station that sits atop the island and the eucalyptus-lined hiking paths that lace it; such a presence exists in the ferry ride that feels somewhat like a pilgrimage and in the invisibility of the many other narratives that make up this place. The works in *How We Leave and Return* represent the many maps of Angel Island but signal that the effects of the past—immigration, militarism, xenophobia, colonialism, and power—are not in the past. They are, in all actuality, an atlas to the present and perhaps the key to how we might envision the future.

***How We Leave and Return: Intersections of Art and History* is on view at the [Visitor Center at Angel Island](#), in the San Francisco Bay, through July 1, 2012.**

The show includes works from James Bradley, Torrey Cummings, Lauren Dietrich Chavez, Julia Goodman, Matthew Gordon, Justin Hurty, Brandon Walls Olsen, and Imin Yeh in collaboration with Jesus Iniguez.

NOTES:

1. Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (University of California Press: 2010), vii.
2. Ibid.
3. Email conversation with Torrey Cummings, May 17, 2012.