



1. Krista Belle Stewart, *Potato Gardens Band*, 22 minutes, video, colour, 2014–.
2. 3. 4. Jacqueline Hóang Nguyễn, *Untitled*, from the series *Presence in Absentia*, sand images from found photographs in the collection of Nguyễn Khương (1894-1974), 2018-2019.
5. Morris Lum, PA-1599-114-40 (Piper Family, Calgary Alberta, April 29, 1971. Photographer: Terry Cioni, Calgary Herald), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
6. Morris Lum, PA-1599-114-31 (Stan Wong and Lou Wong wearing Western clothing at barbeque, Calgary Alberta, April 8, 1969, Photographer: Ken Sakamoto, Calgary Herald), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
7. Morris Lum, PA-1599-114-22 (Kathleen Leong celebrating Chinese New Year, Calgary Alberta, Feb 9, 1959. Photographer: Jerry Ormond), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
8. Morris Lum, PA-1599-114-4 (Oriental Cavalcade of Fashions presented by Calgary Chinese Young People, Calgary Alberta, May 11, 1953. Photographer: Calgary Herald), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
9. Morris Lum, Morris Lum, PA-1599-114-16 (Mrs. C.W Templeton and Ruby Lee ready to present "Secrets of Chinese cooking" at Gas company auditorium, Calgary Alberta, Nov 17 1956. Photographer: Calgary Herald), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
10. Morris Lum, Morris Lum, PA-1599-150a-31 (Mary Kwan Wins Miss Sien Lok contest, Calgary Alberta, Feb 19, 1973), 2018. From the series *Subtle Gestures*.
11. Deanna Bowen, *The Promised Land*, 28:23 minutes, 16mm transferred to video, black and white, 2019. Originally from *The Promised Land* from *Heritage*, CBC Broadcasting Corporation, 1962.
12. Hajra Waheed, (vitrines: left to right) *PETRO SUBURB 1/3*, *PETRO SUBURB 2/3*, *PETRO SUBURB 3/3*, 2019. Cut Photograph, Vellum, Acrylic, and Archival Tape, 20 x 24 inches.

# Developing Historical Negatives

Deanna Bowen, Morris Lum, Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn  
 Krista Belle Stewart, Hajra Waheed

Curated by Gabrielle Moser

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*Developing Historical Negatives* examines the strategies artists use to harness the affective dimensions of the colonial photographic archive. Probing histories of migration and assimilation, and stories of resistance, refusal, and fugitivity, the works created by these five artists use photography's imaginative potential to illuminate difficult histories, and to question how images can act as tools of inter-generational knowledge transfer.

Departing from the work of colonial anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, the exhibition reorients attention away from the glossy, state sanctioned photographs of "official" histories to the space of photographic production—the darkroom—where inverted, grainy impressions reveal the tenuous grounds of how histories are formed. For Stoler, the negative is a metaphor for the planned-for, anticipated, but often unrealized events that structure the state archive and that, more importantly, shape colonial knowledge production. The negative suggests not only the "worst case scenario" thinking that characterizes much bureaucratic planning, but also the latent force of these non-events, which are ripe with the potential to be realized in the present.

In a series of newly commissioned works spanning collage, digital manipulation, sound installation, appropriation, and material translation, Deanna Bowen, Morris Lum, Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, Krista Belle Stewart, and Hajra Waheed do just this, interweaving family narratives with state histories to picture transnational experiences of belonging and displacement, sovereignty and un-freedom. Importantly, these artists' works do not seek to insert missing narratives into the historical record, but to expose the presence of racialized subjects who were always and already there, waiting to be "developed" into public sight. Building on photography historian Deborah Willis's call to treat "photography as biography," the artists in the exhibition turn to personal and family archives for their source material. But rather than treating these collections as records of facts or as counter-narratives, they approach the archive speculatively, as a site where what could have been, and what could yet be, might still be materialized. In so doing, they attest to Lily Cho's claim that "the darkroom is... a site of complexity and contestation for racialized and diasporic communities." Following Cho's theoretical innovation of separating the work of the photographer from the work of the darkroom technician, the exhibition imagines the radical, political work that can take place in the space of the darkroom, particularly for the diasporic, Indigenous or Black subject who brings her own histories and techniques to bear on these latent materials. It argues, in other words, that artists perform vital work as developing agents within the colonial archive, and that this work has much to teach researchers, archivists and viewers of historical photographs.

The darkroom is also a potent site for examining the mutually constitutive relationship between photography and race. Despite the centrality of the developing room to the invention of the medium—it was not the invention of the camera that marked the beginning of photography, after all, but the announcement by Louis Daguerre in 1839 of the discovery of the first stable and reliable form of photographic development—processes of development have received scant critical attention in theories of photography. "Not only has the darkroom been largely absent from contemporary cultural criticism on photography," Cho notes, but "it has also been a space of normativized whiteness," where its equipment, chemicals, and paper are calibrated to make white skin legible. The analogue photographic negative, in particular, has long prompted anxieties about racial difference. As photography historian Tanya Sheehan has shown, early portrait photographers drew on traditions of Blackface and minstrelsy to make "jokes" about the ways the negative transformed white skin into black (and vice versa). These jokes, Sheehan argues, covered over an anxiety about racial transformation and passing while also expressing the "close relationship between photography and racial mutability." State photographic archives exaggerate these intimacies and anxieties, employing bibliographic models and subject headings to contain racial difference and to prioritize dominant versions of history, while obscuring the experiences of diasporic subjects and the resistant presence of Indigenous sovereignty.

**Morris Lum**'s series of photographic collages, *Subtle Gestures* (2017-18), for instance, recontextualizes portraits of Chinese residents that appeared in the Calgary Herald newspaper from the 1950s to 1970s, amplifying the quiet acts of refusal that their official captions often worked to silence. Discovered in a folder labeled "Chinese" in the newspaper's archives at the Glenbow Museum, the photographs were intended to provide visual evidence of their subjects' assimilation into white settler culture. One depicts a couple—he in cowboy hat and boots, she in a fringed dress—at an outdoor barbecue, for instance, while another shows two women awkwardly reading from one copy of a homemade book titled "Secrets of Chinese Cooking." Removed from the headlines that originally accompanied their publication, and exactly doubled, superimposed, mirrored or inverted, Lum's digital interventions point to the subtle glances and understated gestures of resistance that have leaked into these otherwise banal photographs. Long interested in the built environment and decorative flourishes that characterize Chinatowns in locations across North America, here Lum turns his attention to the more nefarious architectures of inclusion and exclusion that have shaped the Chinese diasporic experience in the twentieth century.

**Deanna Bowen**'s video installation similarly addresses questions of continuity and resistance through physical gestures, this time through the lens of the family archive. As part of her ongoing genealogical research into her maternal lineage, Bowen re-presents a 1962 CBC documentary, *The Promised Land*: a 16-mm film featuring several family members, as well as the renowned jazz vocalist Eleanor Collins. Recounting memories of a small Black church they helped establish in Edmonton after migrating from Oklahoma at the turn of the century. Integrating first person storytelling with dramatic reenactments and performances of gospel music, the film's tidy narrative obscures the experiences of racial violence that propelled the community across the border in 1910, and conveniently excludes any hint of the segregation and injustice they faced in Canada. Rather than showing the version that would have been broadcast on national television, Bowen has re-appropriated an archival overscan of the film, which includes extra-frame markings, such as sound waves that visualize the score and dialogue, and the edge codes denoting the type of film stock used. Drawing attention to the materiality of the film's facture, but also to its sonic properties, Bowen's reinterpretation of *The Promised Land* alerts viewers to the frequencies of resistance that can be heard amid the CBC's rigid staging of Black bodies as acceptable, or even model, citizens. These kinds of quiet images, as Tina M. Campt describes them, emit a frequency produced by the subject's tense body as it refuses to stay in its "proper place": a frequency that is often felt rather than heard, and that reveals "a quotidian practice of refusal that exceeds the sayability of words." Looped in on itself endlessly, Bowen's installation defers the arrival of safety and belonging promised by the film's title, leaving her family's status in the landscape unsettled and unresolved, and raising questions about how the deeply restrained gestures demanded by assimilation were both internalized, and rejected, by her mother's, and now the artist's, generation.

Legacies of inheritance also animate the work of **Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn**, whose series *Presence in Absentia* (2018-19) transposes photographic materials inherited from her great-grandfather into brightly coloured sand compositions, reminiscent of mandalas, laid out on the gallery floor. Recalling her childhood visits with her grandfather, where she would learn about her family history and about the tenets of Zen Buddhism, the sand sculptures recreate photographs taken and collected by Nguyễn Khương, a mandarin of the third rank for the last emperor of Indochina. Comprising portraits of himself and his family, made over six decades from the mid-1910s to the 1970s, the images were salvaged and carefully annotated by the artist's grandfather when he came to Canada in 1982. Combining studio portraits and snapshot images, these are aspirational images that speak to the uneven access to camera equipment in Vietnam at the time, but that also articulate a desire for mobility that exceeds the subjects' careful self-presentation. While photography historians have often dismissed family photographs because their subjects seem to too easily reinforce the goals of middle class, heteronormative, material comfort, Thy Phu and Elspeth Brown propose reading them otherwise. Attending to aspiration's temporality—its precariousness, as well as its future orientation—they argue that family photography produces a mixed feeling in its subjects and its users, signaling both its bourgeois function "as an instrumental technology in producing normative family integration," but also embodying the "utopian possibilities of a genre remade by those for whom it was never intended." Nguyễn's sand translations are, like the mandalas that inspired them, ephemeral and precarious, and will disintegrate over the course of the exhibition. In this way, *Presence in Absentia* literalizes the shift in vision that the darkroom, as metaphor, makes possible for archival researchers, turning our attention "from direct to refracted light, from 'figure' and 'field'—that which is more often in historic relief—to the inverse, grainy texture of 'surfaces' and their shifting 'grounds.'" Reading them for their aspirational, future-oriented address, Nguyễn's archive helps us to see the unpictured and shifting historical events that shaped her family's movement across the globe.

Photography is deployed metaphorically in the work of **Krista Belle Stewart**, operating as a structuring device for other kinds of material exploration. Playing with the medium's promise of mimetically recording the past, and its

intertwined history with the phonograph, Stewart revisits a wax cylinder recording of her great-grandmother, Terese Kaitmeko, singing in the Syilx language and captured by an ethnographer circa 1905–1918. Here, Stewart documents a performance on her maternally inherited property on Spaxomin (Douglas Lake) in which she played the recording for family members and the territory where the songs were originally produced, and livestreamed this "sonic reunion" to an audience in Vancouver. Across this two channel video, Stewart visualizes the reverberations of intergenerational Indigenous knowledge through space and time, providing the grounds for sovereign listening to occur. Integrating sound, haptics and vision, Stewart's video exercises what Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson has described as resurgent forms of Indigenous perception: "sovereign listening that hears differently the soundscape of the territory we are from; and sovereign touch that is intercorporeal (that is, between human and other-than-human relations) rather than a singular touch made toward a non-acting object."

Known for her intricate narratives constructed from archival traces, **Hajra Waheed**'s series of collages in the gallery vitrines examine the ways Jim Crow models of segregated suburban planning have been exported to locations around the globe. Using company and historical archives as her source material to explore the highly secured company town where she spent her youth, Waheed's layered compositions of surveillance documentation, coupled with aerial maps, reveal the ways these architectures of exclusion worked to protect extraction zones and reinforce racialized divisions of labour. During the 22 years she spent in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia—site of the gated headquarters of Saudi ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company)—civilian photographic and video documentation was prohibited. Yet the importation of suburban tract housing developments similar to those used in mining and oil company towns in North America—complete with cul-de-sacs and street names such as Spruce, Holly, Cherry and Pine—reveals a history of shared company and state interests. Waheed's *PETRO SUBURB 1-3* (2019) creates counter maps of Dhahran, practicing a form of what Simone Browne calls "dark sousveillance," where the tools of social control are "appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged." Through the seemingly banal structures of suburban modular housing and the insidious technologies of surveillance, Waheed's vitrine works thus offer a window into the ways the colonial archive, much like the photographic negative, endlessly reproduces itself.

Treating the archive as blueprints for a yet to be realized future, the artists in *Developing Historical Negatives* approach history in the subjunctive tense, using the colonial archive to explore conditional, imaginary, or anticipatory situations. Their works therefore picture colonialism as unfinished, asking us to attend to its continued impact on the present, and proposing ways to collectively imagine its eventual undoing. But they also articulate a set of desires and aspirations for photographic practice that alert us to its precarious relationship to sovereignty and belonging. As Lily Cho writes, "Racialized and diasporic identities that are constructed out of and despite processes of fragmentation and dispersal are always in process. They are perpetually at risk of becoming unfixated and always in transition. Understanding photography as a process of development demands inhabiting the vulnerabilities of these instabilities." By returning us to the darkroom, and immersing us in their strategies of cropping and enlargement, of developing grainy textures and fixing the embodied frequencies of refusal, these artists' works offer a range of techniques for making the vulnerabilities and instabilities of belonging visible.

-- **Gabrielle Moser**

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