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Cover image: **Black Quantum Futurism**, *All Time Is Local*, 2019, Digital video, 4:59 min (still)



Imagining De-Gentrified Futures

curated by Betty Yu

November 5 - December 19, 2020

Betty Yu

Robin Holder

Sandra de la Loza

Chinatown Art Brigade

Imani Jacqueline Brown

Black Quantum Futurism

Radical Housing Manifestos:

Thomas Angotti

Alicia Grullon

Hate Free Zone

Lynn Lewis,

The Picture the Homeless Oral History Project

Sunset Park Popular Assembly

Robert Robinson

Pati Rodriguez,

Mi Casa No Es Su Casa

Samuel Stein

Antoinette Martinez,

Protect Sunset Park

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Imani Jacqueline Brown, *The Beginning and The End and The Beginning Again*, 2019-2020, Digital image, Dimensions variable

Imagining De-Gentrified Futures

I want to acknowledge that the first inhabitants of Lower Manhattan (Mannahatta) were the Lenapehoking, the Lenape people. We must pay respect to Lenape peoples, past, present and future and their continuing presence and struggles in the homeland. No conversation about gentrification and displacement can be had without first acknowledging that we stand on occupied Lenape land in New York City.

The concept for *Imagining De-gentrified Futures* comes from my own experience in anti-displacement organizing and recognizing its limitations—it can often feel reactive, defensive and sometimes lacking in long-term vision. As an artist, activist and educator I wanted to create a space for dialogue that dares to imagine socially-just futures for our cities. To that end, I have asked artists, cultural workers, activists, organizers, scholars and urban planners

to envision what a de-gentrified city looks like—particularly one that is rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist values, and recognizes housing as a universal human right. Is it possible to disrupt dominant narratives put forth by real estate developers, extractive industries and the 1%, which depict gentrification as “inevitable” and a “natural” part of urban evolution? How might we trace a new trajectory that allows our neighborhoods to flourish without being priced out of our own communities?

Working class communities, immigrant communities and communities of color across U.S. cities have been greatly impacted by hyper-gentrification over the last fifteen years—the product of vulture capitalism which has extended violent national legacies of oppression. Now more than ever, our creative communities must continue to manifest work that captures the hearts and minds: that agitates, educates, and provokes people to action. Of course creative expressions alone will not save us from gentrification, but they can inspire our collective imagination. They can help us understand the complexity of issues and help envisage a hopeful future while remaining grounded in reality. As the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us,

It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield ‘how life really is out there’ as a kind of text against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured.¹

The creative class is frequently perceived as the vanguard of “artwashing”: the often early stages of gentrification in which an influx of artists, galleries, and cultural institutions end up displacing residents from their homes. In many cases, this is intentionally orchestrated by real estate developers under the guise of “neighborhood revitalization” through discounts in rent for cultural spaces and other incentives, but there are instances when grassroots creative communities form in low-income neighborhoods and unintentionally contribute to artwashing by nature of being visible. Unfortunately artwashing tactics are increasingly employed in “up and coming” neighborhoods across the U.S., however there is a growing movement of socially-conscious artists who reject it.

There are artists engaging in “creative placekeeping” and rejecting “creative placemaking” projects that are promoted by city governments, real estate developers and art institutions. In contrast, “creative placekeeping” has been described as the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric, often by the people who live and work there. It is not just about preserving buildings, but keeping alive the cultural memories associated with a locale, while



Robin Holder, *We Are Here*, 2019, Colored pencil, acrylic paint, archival inkjet print, 54 x 44 in

supporting the ability of local people to maintain their way of life as they choose. This exhibition highlights and celebrates some artists and cultural workers who use this strategy, while others examine complex histories and interests that are at play behind gentrification and land occupation. Forging a way forward is not only about identifying solutions but recognizing these trends within a larger trajectory of exploitation. Drawing inspiration from anti-gentrification resistance across the U.S., decolonization movements, and Afrofuturism,² *Imagining De-gentrified Futures* explores ways in which socially-just futures can exist for city communities.

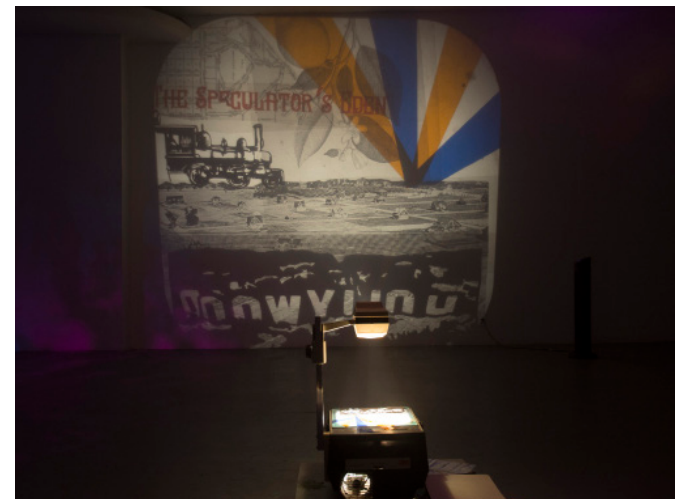
Sandra de la Loza's *To Oblivion: The Speculator's Eden* is based on the artist's research on the disruption of native ecologies that occurred as a result of the development of Hollywood and its transportation infrastructure. The artist explores its impact through a portal that unveils fragmented stories of the land currently known as Los Angeles. Through the use of overhead projectors, the project becomes a performative, pedagogical and interactive site to engage an archive of shadows, dematerialized artifacts, performative poems, spectral ruins, and stereoscopes. In addition, de la Loza's *Video Letter to Eduardo* addresses the historical and ongoing production of space and landscape in Buenos Aires

and Los Angeles. It highlights the destruction of indigenous land and rivers in Los Angeles, initially by Spanish colonizers and then by the manufacturing industry and the military. In 1920, the Devil's Gate Dam was the first of many built in the area, disrupting and contaminating the water that is part of sacred indigenous land and a vital life line for animals and native plants. The video depicts how some of these post-industrial landscapes are now sites of rapid development and massive displacement.

Black Quantum Futurism's (BQF) installations weave quantum physics, Afrofuturism, and Black/Afrodiasporic cultural traditions of consciousness, time, and space. On display are community-created collages, videos and other ephemera that were part of *Community Futurisms: Time & Memory in North Philly 002 - Black Space Agency*, a 2018 event inspired by the legacy of the Fair Housing Act, Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, and the space race in North Philadelphia during the 1960s. Participants were able to apply their imaginations through a series of creative visioning workshops with tenant organizers and youth, and engaging with BQF's art and media installation. BQF's installation *All Time is Local* explores time's intimate relationship to space and locality through text, clocks, objects, and video installation. The work recovers and amplifies historical memory of autonomous Black communal space-times in North Philly. Viewers are invited to meditate on the complex, contested temporal and spatial legacies of historical, liberatory Black futurist projects that have been based there. These two works combine BQF's art and ethnographic research, illuminating the impact of redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement in Philadelphia through the modes of oral histories and alternative temporalities.



Chinatown Art Brigade, *Here to Stay*, 2016, Projection, Dimensions variable



Sandra de la Loza, *The Speculator's Eden*, 2019, Interactive installation, Dimensions variable

Through photography and writing, **Imani Jacqueline Brown's** work *The Beginning and The End and The Beginning Again* contemplates a past, present, and future of the Mississippi River. By the time it flowed from its origins in Minnesota and reached New Orleans (the artist's hometown), the river has become brutalized, toxified, and enraged by extractive corporations like Exxon and Texaco. Brown's marked-up photographs identify the land formation and deformation in Louisiana caused by today's land colonizers. Written text reveals that the land once known as the Birdsfoot Delta of the Mississippi River was born of slave plantations. The oil industry destroyed the upriver plantations and deltaic land bringing about Birdsfoot's demise. Brown's work connects the seemingly-disparate histories of colonization, devastating results of disaster capitalism post Katrina, and land displacement.

Robin Holder's drawings *Falling Figures* and *Home* explore the theme of home and its many implications, including identity, family, race, migration and upheaval. Using the house as a primary motif, both works illuminate the disintegration of the American Dream and its expectant vision of prosperity. While the concept of home is universal, social and economic disparities create devastating polarization; where one person may feel a sense of security in relation to their home, another may feel a profound sense of loss and dispossession. *Falling Figures* depicts the dystopian emotional and material reality many are feeling while *Home* portrays an ideal image of acceptance, unity and equality. The series is about celebrating the legitimacy of all identity narratives.

Chinatown Art Brigade's *Here To Stay* (large-scale street projections of anti-gentrification messages) and *Imagining a Future Chinatown* (brainstorming sketches) were created in collaboration with the Committee Against Asian American Violence's Chinatown Tenants' Union, local residents,

artists, and activists. Chinatown Art Brigade (CAB) is an intergenerational cultural collective driven by the fundamental belief that cultural, material, and aesthetic modes of production can support community-led campaigns around issues of gentrification and displacement.³ Self-determination is a leading principle of CAB's cultural work; to that end it is critical to its process that the local residents have the platforms and agency to tell their own stories of displacement, and celebrate their own resilience and resistance. These projects highlight tenants' stories and bolster support for the Chinatown Working Group Plan, a community-created zoning plan aimed at protecting Chinatown from gentrification.

And for myself (**Betty Yu**), a socially-engaged artist and curator of this exhibition, I present *De-gentrification in Progress*, a mixed media work that uses 360° video, augmented reality, and photography to reimagine a new society where housing is free for all and real estate profiteers are outlawed. It incorporates the voices of my parents, neighbors, and other Latinx and Chinese residents of Brooklyn's hyper-gentrifying neighborhood of Sunset Park, where I grew up. Finally, the show is rounded out by **Radical Housing Manifestos**, a curated display of written materials, essays, drawings, sketches, photographs, audio, and blueprints from community organizers, cultural workers, urban planners, and scholars that offers a creative re-visioning of neighborhood development. The selection of works serves as a resource combining research and vision.

I hope this exhibition creates a generative space for dialogue, engagement, and reflection. The exhibition contributors challenge us to envision a liberated future, while recognizing that it is always inextricably tied to the past. As social activist Grace Lee Boggs once said, "A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind."⁴

Betty Yu
apexart Invited Curator Exhibition
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1. Stuart Hall, "What is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press 2018).
2. Afrofuturism is a powerful cultural aesthetic in that it combines science-fiction, history, and fantasy, while exploring the African-American experience, the black diaspora and self-determination. It challenges us to face the painful past and present in order to inform the future.
3. Chinatown Art Brigade was founded in 2015 by myself, Tomie Arai, and ManSee Kong.
4. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Linda E. Carty, *Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2018).