

Limbo Land: Jinny Yu's *Perpetual Guest*

Jinny Yu was born in Korea and, like me, lived in Montreal as a child and young adult, crisscrossing the English–French divide. I have followed her work for the past ten years, wondering about her understanding of a nomadic existence and its recent shift to the role of the guest, and how these states of being are manifested in her practice as a visual artist.



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then there is a host responsible for the invitation.

But who is the perpetual guest?

A brief affirmation: I am the child of Jewish refugee and immigrant parents of European descent. As such, my ancestry is a story of frequent displacement as circumstances have dictated. Grappling with the relationship of guest is central to who I am. In her current project, *Perpetual Guest*, Yu considers what it means for her to live and work on Indigenous land. Is it an indication of her wanting to be an active member of ongoing cultural identity polemics? Rather, I consider her work a timely provocation in which positions of stability and instability are developed.

In the first iteration of *Perpetual Guest*, presented in 2019 at Galerie UQO (Gatineau), the exhibition began outside the gallery. On the floor, in front of the entrance's double doorway, were multiple lines of lower-case letters made of vinyl. Although this was reminiscent of Joi T. Arcand's use of Cree text in its materiality and location on the ground, there were differences: the words were in French and upside down when seen from outside the space. To actively read *jinny yu, perpetual guest on these lands of the unceded algonquin anishnaabe nation* (our translation) was to walk on and over the words, register one's presence through one's feet actively pressing down on vinyl text and concrete ground, and then pass through the doorway's liminal space.

The composition and placement of the text were like a territorial acknowledgment, a declaration that has become very familiar. In its position as an intervention on the floor, it situated viewers in the here and now of what it can mean to be an Indigenous or non-Indigenous participant in the exhibition space. Although she doesn't address the use of French on Quebec land, âpihtawikosisân (pen name for Métis author Chelsea Vowel), in a 2016 blog post called "Beyond Territorial Acknowledgments," expands the implications of the words from an Indigenous perspective: "That's great you acknowledge that perhaps the Indigenous view of that treaty, that the land was not surrendered, is correct. Perhaps you understand the tension of your presence as illegitimate, but don't know how to deal with it beyond naming it. Maybe now it is time to start learning about your obligations as a guest in this territory. What are the Indigenous protocols involved in being a guest, what



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are your responsibilities? What responsibilities do your hosts have towards you, and are you making space for those responsibilities to be exercised? To what extent are your events benefiting your hosts?"

To move into the gallery's brightly lit space is to consider the relationship between the floor text and the gallery's contents. If a guest is to be welcomed into a temporary space, then there is a host responsible for the invitation. But who is the perpetual guest? Is it the viewer? The artist? Both? And who is the host?

Inside are a series of nine dispersed glass panels, lying horizontally, not unlike separate low-lying tables. The glass panels are all the

same size marked by various translucent and transparent bands and squares of oil that range in tone from dark to light sepia, and rest on short, round posts made of reflective aluminum. The work is spread throughout the room, away from the walls, and the effect is of near-weightless matter located close to the floor.

I stoop to touch the single-pane glass, feeling its thinness and polished sharp edges. Getting closer intensifies my sense of the work's physical unsteadiness. The translucent viscous layers of oil are film-like in their even application, and untouched glass sections frame views of the concrete floor beneath the work. The floor's composite material, a speck-

led mixture of cement and small stones, becomes an integral and consistent presence through Yu's installation. Standing upright again highlights my actual distance from the work, not dissimilar to a cloudless view of Earth as seen from an airplane window.

Map-like in their horizontal positioning, the panels' fragile physicality is amplified by the way light passes through the oil and glass, accompanied by the motif of scattered graphic circles made by the vertical posts underneath. The denseness of the concrete floor plays off the translucency and transparency, emphasizing a precarious state made palpable.

As much as I am caught by the rich and delicate visuality of the installation, I look beyond an accomplished evocation of post-minimalist presence and absence. I also resist seeing the glass panels as fluctuating monochromatic flags of unknown territories or nations. Yu's current project is an invocation of instability via its abstract boundaries



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and delineations. Focusing on what is fleetingly palpable and what cannot be grasped, she offers an experience of layered space located on the surface of and below the glass panels, their necessary interdependence, and the persistence of the ground beneath them. As I leave the room, the text is now easily readable, whereas the glass installation resists specificity and identification, a location for the artist's unsettled relationship with a history and place. The two works remain separate entities. The guest and the host do not meet, and âpihtawikosisân's questions about their mutual obligations and responsibilities have not been broached yet.

On February 6, I took the train from Ottawa to Toronto. Midway, the train stopped in a field of white snow—another horizontal expanse. Several hours later the trip resumed, the train passing across a narrow rural road. Seeing parked trucks, people and flags waving, I realized we were on Tyendinaga

Mohawk Territory. The first rail blockade of this winter had just happened.

Perpetual Guest will be exhibited as part of *RELATIONS: The Diaspora and Painting* at Phi Foundation for Contemporary Art (Montreal), from April 23 to September 13, 2020.

● DEBORAH MARGO

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View of Galerie UQO's entrance
Jinny Yu, *Perpetual Guest* (2019)
Photo: Maryn Devine

II-VI
Details of Jinny Yu's exhibit *Perpetual Guest* (2019)
Galerie UQO
Photo: Maryn Devine

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