

connie dk lane's no place like home

essay by james macdevitt

There's no place like home. There's no place like home.¹

By recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.²

At the end of the cinematic version of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy passionately repeats her now-famous incantation, supplied by the good witch Glinda, in order to magically return to the mundane comforts of her childhood residence, and, by extension, leave the disruptive and dream-like realm of Oz behind her. Connie DK Lane's installation at the Cerritos College Art Gallery, *No Place Like Home*, on the other hand, purposely obscures such a reassuring division between fantasy and reality, here and there, or memory and amnesia. For Lane, following Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological study *The Poetics of Space*, a childhood home is not just a point of origin, a physical site from our distant past to which we might someday return for succor; it is also a line of flight, a place that we carry with us psychically wherever we go, regardless of attempts to flee, framing our experience of the present and constructing our sense of self.

Upon first entry into the north gallery where Lane's installation is staged, the viewer is immediately confronted by a physical reminder of this inevitable mobility of home(lessness), which Okwui Enwezor labels "the terrible nearness of distant places," an especially poignant nearness for an international migrant like Lane.³ The mirrored forms of two biomorphic abstractions of nomadic transients, uncannily resembling slumped and decapitated bodies, lean against a portable wall constructed from a plastic-sealed child-sized mattress. Like Edward and Nancy Kienholtz before her, Lane is known for transforming everyday objects into assemblaged sculptural formations, often existing in a morphological limbo between flora, fauna, and anthropomorphic signifiers, while still latently revealing their previous material existence as recognizable commodities of presumed semiotic significance. It is important to note here, for example, that that this mattress has been screenprinted, by the artist herself, with a photographic image depicting an over-populated facade of a Chinese apartment block from Kowloon City, a notorious urban slum from Lane's childhood in Hong Kong.

Since *No Place Like Home* is the culmination of Lane's recent attempts to move beyond the construction of isolated objects toward truly immersive environments, the space past the slumped forms continues the aesthetic reference to Kowloon and, even more specifically, to the alleyway on which Lane herself grew up. A set of conjoined wood-framed glass enclosures, reminiscent of the kind of balcony windows seen on the screenprinted mattress, sits tucked in the corner, ornamented by a bar of hanging punching bags, ripped and painted such that they exist representationally somewhere between air-dried clothing and curing meats. The latter is a distinct possibility, since the window facade is juxtaposed to a makeshift doorway made from strips of plastic sheeting, the kind one might find guarding the entrance to a walk-in freezer. This reading can be further reinforced by slipping on the hand-made plastic jacket hanging near the doorway and going inside to discover a multitude of suspended biomorphic forms, an abattoir of alien corpses dangling from viscous-looking meat hooks, alternately compelling and repulsive. This butcher shop, spilling out onto Lane's imaginary childhood street as it does, operates here like a less-Eurocentric version of Bachelard's terrifying cellar, which he describes as "the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths."⁴

Thankfully, Lane doesn't take this warning too seriously. Like so-called 'memory palaces,' familiar architectural imagery that serve as convenient mnemonic devices for unrelated information retrieval, the connection to Lane's childhood home is here mostly heuristic, rather than eidetic. The failure to authentically represent, however, should not be seen as a failure in itself. Just the opposite. As Margo Machida has stated, regarding the experience of other immigrant artists, "memory revises itself endlessly, complicating efforts to tell straightforward stories about the past."⁵ Just as the past frames the present, the present reframes the past; a memory imprint on a mobius strip. Much like the Chinese conceptual artist Chen Zhen, who frequently used the phrase, Lane's biography, and her work which, after all, is more influenced by European and American artists such as Jean Arp and Eve Hesse, respectively, than any particular Chinese artist, necessarily dictates a transexperience that moves beyond simplistic notions of nation and otherness. Her transexperience, in the end (or is it rather, in the beginning?), stems not just from her status as an ex-patriot, a migrant with many decades living in the US, but also from her origin in the restless, polygot Chinese port of Hong Kong, with its cosmopolitan sensibilities and its long history of Western influence.

1 *The Wizard of Oz*. DVD. Directed by Victor Fleming. 1939; Burbank, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2004.

2 Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6.

3 Okwui Enwezor. 'The Black Box,' in Documenta XI (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Kantz, 2002), 44.

4 Bachelard, 18.

5 Margo Machida. *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 120.