

labor sustained the lives of their families, and whose dreams augured a better future for the second generation of Chinese Americans. Fabric rippling off the bolt echoes the ladders in *Journey to Gold Mountain* and *Second Step* leading up and out. Sun's recurring book image — containing the pages of history — takes on architectural form, buttressed rooflike by dressforms at each corner. The dressforms are the artist's most direct incarnation of China Mary — nameless, faceless yet formidable, they are literally pillars of strength. If China Mary is the seeing eye of the paintings, then these figures are skeletal monuments, a part of herself she has left behind, like the fabric cutouts, that provide the form and structure for the present, while upholding the past.

While offering an actual overview of the past, *Labyrinth* leads us into the present. It is strewn with images that convey the complexities of existing within a larger social context, and the contemporary hybridity of life as a Chinese American. *Labyrinth* is rendered from a vantage point that rises far above Gold Mountain. Significantly, we glimpse the top of the ladder for the first time, and this seems to signal our arrival at some elevated landing from which we may survey our progress. Once again, familiar images mark historical passages: a mechanized pulley, the junk, the railroad winding in and out of the labyrinth at center. But this time, we spy a rowboat with oars manipulated by unseen hands, and a basketball whirling above the rim of a net. These two images are not weighted with cultural or historical specificity, but rather furnish a broadened contemporary social context for the work. At the same time, they sustain the themes of chance and possibility that run throughout the China Mary Series.

The final bookend for China Mary's remembrances is *Germination*, an affirming vision embodied in a tree of life that sprouts images of past, present and future. Here the fluttering pages of history found in previous paintings, loosened from the bindings of books, find their place on the tree, as tokens of memory. This is a history with vitality, a history that grows and wavers with the winds of change and chance.

The history that is narrated throughout the China Mary Series, finds its appropriate denouement in *Germination*. If the works that precede it are about Chinese American history from a woman's perspective, then *Germination* depicts its representation. This final work is about passing on these stories for others to tell and add to — in order to validate the past, meet the present, and greet the future. Like a nesting box, or a hall of mirrors, they yield inexhaustible images and stories that reflect back on what has come before. When the artist paints a sprouting seedling, tied to its slender stem is a page on which a book is inscribed, whose pages, in turn, contain images of trees, whose branches are tied with sheets of paper with image upon image.

The history imported by China Mary is anything but anonymous or generic. Through the China Mary Series, Carol Sun provides viewers with glimpses into another realm of experience, full of rich and specific images. Her vision of history and life in America is one that, against many odds and daily hardship, is founded on dreams and chance, serendipity and magic, but also on an unmistakably self-determined empowerment. It is a reflection of her own personal perspective as a second generation Chinese American woman, and her relationship to her parents who emigrated from China in 1949. For Asian Americans, and Asian American women in particular, her works fulfill the desire for subjectivity, and reward the search for familiar, affirming and compelling imagery that acknowledges our presence and identity here, where we live.

Kerri Sakamoto, 1993

6

Kerri Sakamoto is a Toronto born writer of fiction and film. Her work deals with the Asian experience in North America. She is a member of Godzilla, the Asian American Art Network.

1. Judy Yung, *Chinese Women of America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), p. 25.

Checklist of Exhibition

Height precedes width.
All works are acrylic on canvas, four sections each 38" x 50", 76" x 100" (overall), unless noted.

All works lent by the artist.

Journey to Gold Mountain/China Mary Series #1, 1991

Second Step/China Mary Series #2, 1991

Herstory/China Mary Series #3, 1991

Labor Force/China Mary Series #4, 1992

Labyrinth/China Mary Series #5, 1992

Germination/China Mary Series #6, 1993

Study for Germination/China Mary Series #6, 1992

Acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches

Study for China Mary Series, 1992

Acrylic on paper, 22 x 30 inches

Selected Biography

Solo Exhibitions 1990 The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York
1989 BACA Downtown, Brooklyn, New York

Group Exhibitions 1993 *We Are The Stories We Tell*, Pace University, New York, N.Y.

At The Heart of Change: Six American Artists, Kennesaw State College, Georgia

1992 *Good Work/Young Alumni 1975-1985*, The Cooper Union, New York, N.Y.

You Must Remember This, Jersey City Museum, N.J.

1989 *Josh Simons, Carol Sun & Steven Wright/Objects and Forces*, Art in General, New York, N.Y.

Beyond Survival: Old Frontiers, New Visions, NYFA/Ceres Gallery, New York, N.Y.

1988 *The All Male Feminist Art Show*, The New Waterfront Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dia de Los Muertos, The Alternative Museum, New York, N.Y.

Yesterday-A Reflection of Childhood, Asian Arts Center, New York, N.Y.

Recent Acquisitions, The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.

1987 *HERESIES-Issues That Won't Go Away*, PPOW Gallery, New York, N.Y.

Selections from the Artists Files, Artists Space, New York, N.Y.

Education 1979 BFA, The Cooper Union School of Art, New York, N.Y.

Grants 1991 New York State Council on the Arts, Individual Artist Sponsored Project

Born 1958 New York, N.Y.

7

Acknowledgements

For the past few years Carol Sun has been involved in the study and exploration of both the history and current reality of Asian American women in this country. Their often anonymous struggles for recognition and personhood, both within the Asian American community and society at large, form the foundation of the China Mary Series. In these paintings, China Mary — a generic name often used to identify all Chinese women in America, becomes the subject and metaphor for that history and struggle for identity. Populated by an iconography at once personal and universal, these canvases serve as a window into the past, but also a record of that past and a springboard for a hopeful future. A future when we will no longer render human beings non-existent by wrongfully romanticizing, through generalization, their very singular humanness.

Artists Space is extremely pleased to be able to present The China Mary Series in its entirety for the first time in New York. I would like to thank Carol Sun for her insightful, thoughtfully encompassing and enriching work, as well as for her cooperation with all aspects of the exhibition. I would also like to express our gratitude to Kerri Sakamoto for her informative and elucidating essay which so aptly describes the richness, both ethnographic and aesthetic, of the paintings and, by inference, of all the China Marys in our not too distant past.

As always, I am indebted to the multiple contributions of Artists Space's dedicated staff and interns and I thank them wholeheartedly. I also would like to express our gratitude to the Museums Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, for their support of this exhibition.

Carlos Gutierrez-Solana

Artistic & Executive Director

The China Mary Series was created with the support of a New York State Council on the Arts, Individual Sponsored Project Grant.

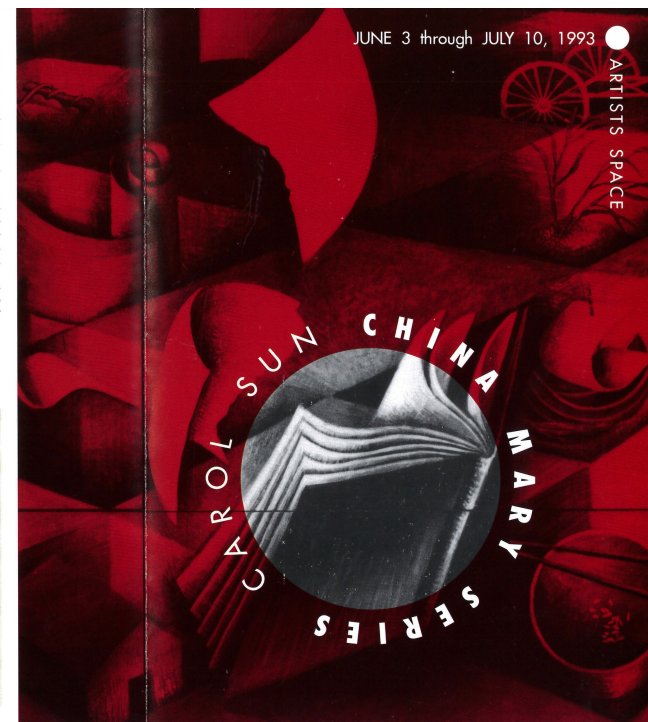
The artist would like to thank the following for their support: Kerri Sakamoto, the staff at Artists Space and her family — especially Jonathan Lewis and Kathleen.

Artists Space programs are made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency), the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and Materials for the Arts (a program of D.C.A. and the N.Y.C. Department of Social Services). Additional assistance is generously provided by artists, individual members and friends and the following Foundations and Corporations: The Milton Avery Foundation, The Sothen Foundation, Chase Manhattan Bank, Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., The Cowles Charitable Trust, The Dover Fund, Inc., The Foundation for Contemporary Performance Art, Inc., The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Greenwell Foundation, The Heartcore Art Foundation, The Jerome Foundation, The J.M. Kaplan Foundation, The Dorofaea L. Leonhardt Foundation, Inc., The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation, Inc., The Menemsha Fund, Merrill Lynch & Co. Foundation, Inc., The Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation, The Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York, Paine Webber, Inc., Philip Morris Companies Inc., Betty Parsons Foundation, The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., and the Teapop Trust; as well as galleries in support of Artists Space. Artists Space is a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO), and the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC) and Media Alliance.

Photographs: Becket Logan / Catalogue Printing: Seko Graphics Inc.

Artists Space

223 West Broadway, New York, New York 10013 (212) 226-3970



JUNE 3 through JULY 10, 1993

ARTISTS SPACE

THE CHINA MARY SERIES: The Chinese American odyssey through her eyes.

...Chinese women were...considered curiosities and given "generic" names like "China Mary," just as their men were generally referred to as "John Chinaman."¹

Carol Sun's monumental paintings suggest a submerged dream world, an alternate reality that the viewer travels through like a moving camera-eye. The six paintings in the exhibition depict episodes in the life of "China Mary," the Chinese immigrant woman assigned this anonymous label upon her arrival in America, by those unwilling to learn her proper name.

The China Mary Series uncovers a rich cultural identity, assembling images of an unchronicled history in this country, and in the process, forges a vital subjectivity for the Asian American woman. For the camera-eye is China Mary's eye through which we witness a whirlwind experience of immigration and journey, and negotiate assimilation into a new cultural and social terrain.

For Asian American viewers, there is a plainness and familiarity of the everyday in Sun's images — the everyday of the Chinese American. Yet each object is infused with color and movement, and enveloped in a magical mimetic space. If these collected images — ladders, boats, irons, sewing needles, spools, bedsheet — feel uncommonly animated, it is because they bristle with the vitality of China Mary herself as she draws us, implicit and unseen, through the space of the painting. This space, though infinite, is never neutral. There are no boundaries which mark its myriad transformations — from sea to earth to air, churning or windblown; from domestic, intimate space, to epic grandness. For the non-Asian viewer, these works invite a loosening of the imagination and a means of insight: of seeing through the eyes of the other to discover China Mary's world of experience. It is significant that the artist sets mundane objects in motion, rife with purpose and function: the spool of thread unwinding, the sheath of paper fluttering, the bedsheet flopping on a laundry line. These are not oriental curiosities to be fetishized by the western gaze, nor are they anthropological artifacts. Rather, they are receptacles for living culture, linked to the people who use them. They suggest a larger historical and social context for the hybrid experience and identity of Chinese Americans.

China Mary's odyssey in America is framed by the discovery of gold in California in 1848, propelled by the industrial revolution and expansion into the west. It is informed by restrictive immigration laws, such as The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that forbid immigration of Chinese laborers, and the Immigration Act of 1924 that kept out Chinese wives of American citizens. Both pieces of legislation were aimed at limiting Chinese immigration and the growth of

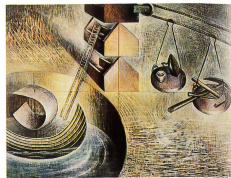


Journey to Gold Mountain/
China Mary Series #1, 1991

2

Chinese families and communities in the U.S. From 1882 until 1943 when the Exclusion Act was finally repealed, an average of only 215 Chinese women each year entered the country.

The starting point of *Journey to Gold Mountain*, the first in the China Mary Series, is the experience of the gam soon hawk, or travellers to the golden mountain — men who, fleeing hardship in China, joined the California Gold Rush. The scale of the painting and its ethereal quality convey the sense of possibility and chance, and the dream that brought fortune-seeking immigrants to the new world. But in this world, objects are poised precariously; accidents seem either about to occur, or to be

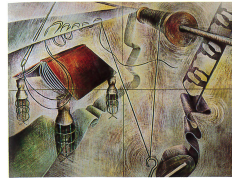


serendipitously inverted. A ladder propped atop a staircase that ascends on one side and descends on the other, leads skyward without support; a cart tumbles along railroad tracks that wind helter-skelter toward the first of three pristine gold cones. These mountains are shimmering, mysterious, almost illusory. Their scale is deceptive: they appear towering and formidable, but at the same time, they resemble tops used in games of chance. *Journey to Gold Mountain* depicts an odyssey consisting of transitions: points at which elements meet — the staircase and the ladder, the railroad and the mountain — mark both landings and embarkation.

While the lure of gold brought men from China — primarily from Guangdong (Kwangtung) province on the southeastern coast — women came as well. First

Two *Second Step/China*
Mary Series #2, 1991.
(above) Herstory/China
Mary Series #3, 1991.

3



as exotic showpieces brought by white entrepreneurs beginning in 1834, then as picture-brides and prostitutes indentured to Gold Mountain men during the 1850s. After the Gold Rush ended, Chinese men began to work in railroad construction, agriculture, light industry and domestic service, moving to new rural areas and urban Chinatowns. Women raised large families of six to thirteen children often while doing assorted jobs for pay, such as washing, cooking, cleaning, sewing, even tending livestock and hauling fish. *Journey to Gold Mountain* captures that point of migratory transition, marked by the cart rearing up on the railroad. The white sheet that flaps behind the cart is a domestic reference, a lynchpin at its wheel to indicate China Mary's spirited presence.

"The pace at which our lives accelerate often leaves us with little time to contemplate associations with our immediate past and with the general histories of our cultures," the artist remarks. This valorization of history is, of course, borne out through the China Mary Series as a whole. But each work functions in an episodic fashion, encompassing its own discrete history, rendering both the backward glance and the envisioned future. This lends the work an epic quality, fertile terrain for a free ranging imagination. *Second Step* exemplifies this vision of history that elaborates as it proceeds, reiterating, then moving forward. In this work, the artist reprises the journey from there to here — in actuality a grueling two-month voyage — through the image of the junk. If the China Mary Series as a whole suggests a submerged dream world recuperating memory, then the boat in *Second Step* floats in a substratum of recall at further remove from the other elements at the painting's center.

In *Second Step*, memory echoes through recurring shapes and motifs that mimic one another and play with scale. As in *Journey to Gold Mountain*, elements are poised, but not precariously. Although the work is characterized by austere lines and stark forms, elements are balanced in relation to one another with growing solidity and surety — as the lives of Chinese Americans are more firmly established in the new world. A ladder leads up out of the boat to a trio of houses — replacing the three gold mountains — but these roofless houses also resemble carpenters' toolboxes. The top one buttresses a pulley with cables from which two scales are suspended. The left scale holds a clothing iron and teacup; the right, a pick, hammer and spike. Here, the artist clearly calls for equal recognition of men and women's roles throughout their history in this country; roles which are complementary yet distinct.

It is a witty irony that the two scales straddle a division in the canvas, subtly drawing attention to the fact that each individual painting in the China Mary Series is comprised of four panels. These can be seen as building blocks, an appropriate metaphor for the ideas expressed in the work. In their entirety, the



(left) Labor Force/China
Mary Series #4, 1992.
(right) Labyrinth/China
Mary Series #5, 1992

4

paintings each measure an unwieldy 76 by 100 inches. For practical reasons, says Sun, she divided the canvases to allow herself a more intimate and manageable relationship to them, both as works-in-progress and as completed entities. In this way, the works attain a monumental quality, attesting to the epic journey and the dream, yet they remain accessible, human-scaled units.

At the very center of this series, is *Herstory*, a landscape of memory that the viewer is invited into to explore in Alice-in-Wonderland fashion. Objects are half-submerged in compartments that serve as receptacles for China Mary's memories: ultimately these memory-boxes cannot contain the elements within, which rustle and burn with life. For China Mary, there is no linear history, no official history, but a collapse of domestic and social space, personal and shared imagery side by side, and a folding of time. So, a junk floats in one box, a bamboo seedling ways in another; an obacous leans propped and ready for use beside an iron, while chopsticks and a bowl with leftover grains of rice nestle in



another compartment. A fire blazes, pages of books flutter, a chain unfurls. These represent the milestones of the journey, the comforts of home, and the tools for survival.

By the 1920s, Chinese women in large urban centers had begun to work in garment and cigar factories, and canneries. In rural areas, they picked, sorted and packed fruits and vegetables. Many women helped their husbands operate laundries, restaurants and stores. From the time of their arrival on these shores, Chinese lived primarily within their own communities, establishing local Chinatowns to insulate themselves from racial prejudice, and to allow the preservation and evolution of cultural traditions and practices.

Labor Force depicts the urban experience of these women workers whose

Germination/China
Mary Series #6, 1993

5