

# Marlene Yuen's *Cheap! Diligent! Faithful!*

A conversation between Whess Harman and Vanessa Kwan



**WH:** The thing that comes to mind for me first about this show is the sheer amount of content that we had to choose from. I don't mean this only visually; once the panels of the comics are broken down you have hundreds of moments to choose from, but Marlene's also done such meticulous work in researching and narrating both personal and community histories together. It made the questions of how to do this work daunting; what to prioritize, how do we honour that attention

Marlene has given to these histories, how can that history take space in the present, what to scale up, how to design this exhibition so that it's a little more than posting comics on a wall—how to deal with an exhibition in a global pandemic.

**VK:** I was also thinking about this, but maybe from another angle. The other day I was looking at the images of tools in Marlene's Mary Ko Bong book—scraggly nuts and bolts and that beautiful portrait of Mary with the lathe—and I couldn't help but imagine Marlene parsing through archival footage and becoming enamored with these tools, and choosing to draw them into the book. I think about the parallel sensibility of a printmaker—it's also so much about labour and how the body works with machinery, and how that embodied identification becomes a way of making choices. From a mountain of possibilities, the artist chose those things in particular. So I see the practice as a way of scaling down (ie: editing) and then scaling up (ie: making explicit or visible), through the creation of the print works and then the exhibition itself

So much of this work is a translation. I have this *experience* when I walk into the exhibition space and I see it on people's faces when they come in. It's distinct from what I know and read and enjoy in the narratives themselves—it's quite joyful in a way I can't quite describe; it gives a 'texture' to the historical record that is so unique. I'm reminded of an idea first introduced to me in the writing of Gabrielle Moser, in reference to a lecture by Michèle Pearson Clarke. Clarke's analysis is in



reference specifically to analogue photography (so maybe this is a stretch, but I'll keep going and see what happens) and the “affective grit”<sup>1</sup>—i.e.: the granularity of photography: dirt on the lens, the lint in the developer, the fuzziness of the reproduction of events—that allows us to see beyond what is included in the historical record into a fuller (if not clearer) understanding of lived experiences. This is especially true of racialized subjects and diasporic communities, whose stories are not necessarily fully acknowledged in the official record, so looking back we are relegated to reading between the lines, or between the images, so to speak. I think Marlene’s work does something similar. Her labour gives texture and dimension to these stories. They come alive in a very specific way, through, I would say, the use of her own body as a kind of translation device.



**WH:** There’s a note carried through the show of paying respects to unsung labour and there is something about the labour-intensive processes of letterpress and silkscreening that act as the means for perhaps what is a more *accurate* translation of labour. I was reading a book postface that’d been written by a translator, Ken Liu, where he’s talking about the best translations being ones that do not read as though they were originally written in English, that a coherent translation comes when <sup>2</sup>“the English words are arranged in such a way that

the reader sees a glimpse of another culture’s patterns of thinking, hears an echo of another language’s rhythms and cadences, and feels a tremor of another people’s gestures and movements.” Looking at translation as a broader sensibility between cultures, and I don’t mean exclusively Chinese culture versus non-Chinese cultures, but also as a discussion of working class culture to art culture, this choice of embedding labour into the art objects of this exhibition feels especially poignant.

Work about cultural histories can be done in many ways but is often done in standards that are strictly documentary and/or academic. This is perhaps part of why there is such a vibrancy to walking into Marlene’s exhibition; its choice of translation differs from digesting either only images or only words and offers differing bodily experiences through the scaling up or down of the work. There’s a logic to Marlene’s work that travels comfortably between nostalgia and reality; I think many of us with the privileges to either leave or never have had to engage in physically laborious production industries tend to romanticize that work either because we’re drawn to its more tangibly “productive” results or the way that the physicality of labour can feel more embodying. But many of the people depicted in the stories describe only a fatigue, or even outward resentment, towards what in many inescapable situations was a lifetime of singularly minded, monotonous labour. I think including those words and sentiments in work that appears to be quite playful is such a key part of the narrative elements of this show.

<sup>1</sup> As referenced in Gabrielle Moser’s essay “Porous Sounds: frequencies of refusal in diasporic family photographs”, *The Making of an Archive: Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen* (Vancouver: grunt gallery, 2018), 69-

<sup>2</sup> Ken Liu, translator’s postface for the novel, *The Three Body Problem*, Liu Cixin, and Ken Liu. *The Three-Body Problem*. TOR, 2019.



**VK:** Yes yes yes! I love this complication of translation, through the body and through the (unofficial, retold, reimagined) archive. I'm also thinking about how this practice can be a kind of resistance to the 'flattening' (or outright exclusion) of an awareness of labour and the histories of them in more 'official' archives—in some ways an artist's work can achieve something that other kinds of documentation can't: complexity of movement, freedom to express a nuanced and unresolved position, re-inscription from an exclusionary past. Where the state can only accept or deny (here I'm thinking of the control of people across borders, or a general refusal to acknowledge immigrant labour), the artists' labour allows us to see the richness of these stories—that they were here, yes, and that their experience was complex. And then I guess the next question in my mind is, after a resurfacing, what happens then. Does this change the texture of how we remember?

Also: tenderness. Holding a hard thing and allowing it to have (unresolved) beauty and idiosyncrasy. This is but one of the gifts of this work.

I think it's worth noting that Marlene makes a point of including women's stories in her re-tellings, to combat the prevailing impression that Chinese labour histories are focused on bachelor stories from the building of the CPR. These are a critical part of our acknowledgement of Chinese-Canadian history in this country, but it's not everything, and even there we contend with the biases of the historical record—women's work

remains invisible and largely ignored. And so the work shows what I would say is an intersectional ethic—that through creative practice, one can create a set of conditions in which many stories might flourish. And that these conditions side step the restrictions of the state in a deft way; her practice isn't a straight up refusal of exclusion, its job is to work differently, to open up spaces and possibilities where there ere few.



**WH:** I think that distinction between outrightly refusing the practice of exclusionary history, and saying that Marlene's work is more about a way of opening up many paths into history is really important; Marlene is such an excellent researcher in that she's gone through historical documents, but also made the effort where ever possible to get as close to the source as possible rather than relying solely on what can be retrieved from documentation. But despite this dedication, I don't feel as though there's an

authoritative or even conclusive statement made in the work, or an interest in doing that. I tend to recoil at the phrase, “living document” because it has a tendency to become a documentation of reluctance or indecisiveness, but there is a sense in this exhibition that these works can be built upon and expanded; that there is still room for more voices to come in and that these voices can be past, or present and future. Something I keep coming back to when thinking about archives and museums is the emotional load of receiving repatriated work, whether it be through an official handover or simply in gaining access and seeing what empire has written about your history, or I think in this case, in finding the room to put a voice to one’s history and have it heard. State run and funded collections historicize, that is their function; to *make* past. But Marlene’s show feels like a breathing into, an *opening* of past in which you find a state of restlessness. When artists are able to reclaim archival space, it’s also a reclamation of historical space and I really do feel it in Marlene’s practice. The labour of making this show runs parallel and concurrently to the histories it’s drawing from and rather than ascribing to an endless and onwards linearity of time, easily undoes the seeming finality of documentative practices. Though it is a solo exhibition, it feels very collaborative, there’s so much personhood in these stories which is so often remiss or restrained in the documentation of labour. Labour is not a neutral act; it takes time and it can break as much as it produces

***Cheap! Diligent! Faithful!***  
**Marlene Yuen**  
**September 25th – December**  
**12th, 2020**

**Curated by Whess Harman**  
**and Vanessa Kwan**

**All photos by Dennis Ha**

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grunt gallery is located on the unceded and ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliwəta4/selilwitulh (Tsleil- Waututh) Nations, who have lived in kinship with this land, water and air for thousands of years. We recognize and acknowledge their leadership and our own complicity in settler colonialism, its present occupation and its violent legacy. We acknowledge our responsibility to work actively in support of Indigenous sovereignty, and towards a respectful relationship with this place.

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