

Cantor Arts Center

Spirit House

September 4, 2024–January 26, 2025

The largest of three AAI exhibitions in 2024, this major survey showcases an intergenerational range of contemporary artists—from emerging to established—to foster a transhistorical and transnational dialogue between a diverse group of makers of Asian descent



(MAY 7, 2024—STANFORD, CA) – The [Cantor Arts Center](#) at Stanford University is pleased to present *Spirit House*, a major group exhibition foregrounding how contemporary artists of the Asian diaspora challenge the boundary between life and death through art. On view from **September 4, 2024–January 26, 2025**, the exhibition comprises nearly 50 works of art by 33 artists, including large-scale paintings, digital media, ceramic sculpture, photography, and significant new acquisitions within the museum’s permanent collection. *Spirit House* is the largest of three major exhibitions in 2024 of the **Asian American Art Initiative (AAI)**—a cross-disciplinary, institutional commitment at Stanford University dedicated to the study of artists and makers of Asian descent—curated by AAI co-founder, Associate Curator **Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander**, and will be accompanied by the AAI’s first publication, an extensive exhibition catalog.

Featured artists include: **Kelly Akashi, Korakrit Arunanondchai, James Clar, Binh Danh, Dominique Fung, Pao Houa Her, Greg Ito, Tommy Kha, Heesoo Kwon, Timothy Lai, An-My Lê, Dinh Q. Lê, Kang Seung Lee, Tidawhitney Lek, Jarod Lew, Reagan Louie, Cathy Lu, Nina Molloy, Tammy**

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Nguyen, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Catalina Ouyang, Maia Cruz Palileo, Namita Paul, Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, Kour Pour, Jiab Prachakul, Stephanie H. Shih, Do Ho Suh, Masami Teraoka, Salman Toor, Lien Truong, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Wanxin Zhang.

“The AAI has been instrumental not only in transforming the Cantor’s collection of Asian American and diasporic art, but in revolutionizing the way an institution can cultivate solidarity and mutual support amongst an arts community both here in the Bay area and beyond. *Spirit House* is evidence of this invaluable work that Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander has been undertaking for over five years,” **says Veronica Roberts, John and Jill Freidenrich Director at the Cantor**, “as it champions contemporary artists, emerging and established alike; provides tangible support to artists during their lifetimes; and creates a sense of belonging for audiences who may have been unaccustomed to seeing art that reflects their own lived experiences in an institutional setting. I could not be more proud of this incredible milestone in the AAI’s development and am confident that *Spirit House* and its accompanying exhibition catalog will help redraw the lines of art history for years to come.”

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, AAI co-director and Robert M. and Ruth L. Halperin Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, comments: “This exhibition comes from an observation gleaned over the last few years: many contemporary artists are choosing to confront some of our most challenging existential questions through art—doing so with compassion, curiosity, and criticality. They deftly interweave family narratives within larger global contexts to show that the stakes of our diasporic lives are cosmic. Motivated by their vulnerability, I framed the project through Thai spirit houses, an omnipresent force during my childhood in Bangkok. I aim to capture and say something about our present moment, and how we might think about art and death to lead a more meaningful life.”

Spirit House asks the question, what does it mean to speak to ghosts, inhabit haunted spaces, be reincarnated, or enter different dimensions? Inspired by spirit houses, small devotional structures found throughout Thailand that provide shelter for the supernatural, this exhibition considers how art can collapse the distance between the past and present, as well as this world and the next. Here, contemporary artists reckon with the spiritual and spectral in our visual culture and question the many forms that ghosts can take. In foregrounding intuitive and inherited forms of knowledge, these artists challenge the primacy of data-driven, scientific methods of understanding the world around us.

The exhibition is organized in five thematic sections—“Spirit Houses,” “Ghosts,” “Hauntings,” “Shrines,” and “Dimensions”—that survey how the featured artists are exploring modes of making that exceed rational understanding. Taken together, the works in *Spirit House* demonstrate how artists have the capacity to act like spirit mediums, materializing prayers and invocations, exorcizing and producing ghosts, and surpassing the limits of linear time through the creative process. These artists bring together family narratives severed by war, migration, and generational trauma, creating new realms and realities. In doing so, they confront the essentially inescapable: life, death, and all that lies in between and beyond.

Spirit Houses

“Spirit Houses” explores how architecture and its constituent components have the capacity to hold affect and memory. This section argues for the power of supposedly inanimate spatial forces by emphasizing the primacy of built environments, as exemplified by the work of artists **Korakrit Arunanondchai, James Clar, Greg Ito, Maia Cruz Palileo, Namita Paul, Kour Pour, and Do Ho Suh**. As the only work of art in the exhibition that directly references (and also transforms) the arrangement of the traditional Thai spirit house, **Arunanondchai’s** *Shore of Security* (2022) is especially significant. Working with the charred

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pieces of a structure originally created by the artist's mother, Arunanondchai, like several artists in the exhibition, adopts a collaborative creative process—one that engages directly with a family member—to expand upon childhood memory, rendering an object once deeply familiar to the artist unfamiliar. This work consequently exemplifies the fundamental connection that exists between spirit houses and artworks: both are objects that have the capacity to transcend the limitations of human existence and serve as bridges between realms, as well as mediators of family memory.

Ghosts

"Ghosts" examines the literal, metaphorical, personal, and collective ghosts that haunt us across time and space. Works in this section chase ghosts—the ancestral lacunae of diasporic life—from the past, present, and future, offering spaces in visual form for intergenerational negotiation and otherwise impossible reunions. **Kelly Akashi, Tommy Kha, Timothy Lai, Jarod Lew, Maia Cruz Palileo, Jiab Prachakul, Lien Truong, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul** explore the diverse representational and psychological possibilities of incorporating ghosts as narrative devices in their respective practices. For example, throughout her childhood, **Truong** recalls the haunting presence of the only surviving photograph of her paternal grandmother on her family's ancestral altar, and reckons with this image and her family's loss in the painting *The Crone* (2022), wherein her grandmother's youthful visage foretells a life cut short during the French occupation of present-day Vietnam.

Hauntings

"Hauntings" investigates how historical specters have the capacity to haunt the present and how artists can offer reparative challenges by addressing these conditions. For the artists represented in *Spirit House*, the historical forces that haunt their works are often directly connected to life circumstances experienced in their ancestral countries of origin, which have contributed to their families' relocation to the United States. Artists like **Binh Danh, Pao Houa Her, An-My Lê, Tidawhitney Lek, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen** assert themselves in the wake of the traumatic events that led to their dislocation and transform their inherited histories through reinterpretation and re-presentation. Born in Long Beach, **Lek**, for example, did not directly experience life under the Khmer Rouge like her family. However, the regime haunts her and manifests in her painting, *Refuge* (2023) by referencing an autobiography written by the her father about surviving this period—suggesting the continued presence of war within the intimacy of a family's space, rather than as a discrete event contained with a specific location and chronology.

Other artists in this section include **Korakrit Arunanondchai, Dinh Q. Lê, Catalina Ouyang, Masami Teraoka, Salman Toor, and Wanxin Zhang**.

Shrines

The section, "Shrines," features artists reimagining the iconography of Asian/Asian diasporic shrines to speak to the complexity of family relationships and diasporic culture. **Dominique Fung, Reagan Louie, Cathy Lu, Nina Molloy, and Stephanie H. Shih** incorporate food items associated with altar offerings in their work to signal that viewers are entering a ritual space, passage, or portal. These works of art summon ancestors, implore the viewer to think past quotidian concerns, and collapse the psychic distance between worlds. In **Molloy's Shrine** (2021–22), for example, oranges appear in front of a portrait of the artist's great-grandfather, next to a glass of water, and behind a vessel punctuated by incense. The combination of these elements alludes to the holistic nature of ritual offerings: incense stimulates the olfactory sense and summons the deceased, food and drink contributions are gestures of nourishment for the afterlife, and portraits conjure those who have since passed on. In contrast, artists like **Shih** and **Lu**

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also address the social and political dimensions of food offerings, which tell stories about love and care, but also trauma and negotiation.

Dimensions

Finally, “Dimensions” shows how human lives and historical events are not isolated but have incarnations in multiple timelines and forms. In this section, artists move within archives and sources to collapse strict chronologies and embody other beings, challenging “the quagmire of the present,” to paraphrase theorist José Esteban Muñoz. **Heesoo Kwon, Pao Houa Her, Catalina Ouyang, Kang Seung Lee, Tammy Nguyen, and Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya** confront the consequences of human activity in our current era and implore viewers to consider a non-Anthropocene recognition of the world. To do so, these artists contend with the loss of historical figures by considering the radical power of reincarnation. For example, **Ouyang**’s love letter to artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha restages Cha’s iconic 1979 self-portrait to imagine an alternative timeline in which she survives beyond her thirty-one years on earth. Cha was brutally murdered by a security guard at the Puck Building in New York City in 1982, the same year her transformational book *Dictée* was published. More than four decades later, Ouyang commissioned Larese King, a freelance photographer and security officer at the Puck Building, to take their photograph as a surrogate version of Cha. The resulting picture, presented alongside the artist’s invoice to King, can be read as an honorific gesture from one Asian American artist to another through a suggested rewriting of a historical inevitability.



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ABOUT THE ASIAN AMERICAN ART INITIATIVE:

Based at the Cantor Arts Center, the Asian American Art Initiative (AAAI) is dedicated to the study of artists and makers of Asian descent. Founded by Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, Robert M. and Ruth L. Halperin Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Marci Kwon, Assistant Professor of Art History at Stanford, and announced in January 2021, the AAAI encompasses a range of activities, including: collecting and exhibiting works of Asian American and Asian diaspora artists; preserving archival materials; fostering undergraduate and graduate education; and cultivating community collaboration and dialogue through public programming.

The AAAI aims to establish Stanford as a leading academic and curatorial center for the study of Asian American and Asian diaspora artists. Rather than a discrete identity category, the AAAI approaches the term “Asian American” as a diverse and relational term that signifies the interplay of social inclusion, exclusion, and racialization, as well as connections among East, Southeast, and South Asia; the Pacific Islands; and the Americas. The AAAI strives to foster innovative, interdisciplinary research into the work by Asian American and Asian diaspora makers.

ABOUT THE CANTOR ARTS CENTER:

Serving the Stanford campus, the Bay Area community, and visitors from around the world, the Cantor Arts Center provides an outstanding cultural experience for visitors of all ages. Founded when the university opened in 1891, the historic museum was expanded and renamed in 1999 for lead donors Iris and B. Gerald Cantor. The Cantor’s collection spans 5,000 years and includes more than 41,000 works of art from around the globe. The Cantor is an established resource for teaching and research on campus. Free admission, tours, lectures, and family activities make the Cantor one of the most visited university art museums in the country.

IMAGES: Image 1: Korakrit Arunanondchai (b. 1986, Bangkok, Thailand; lives and works in Bangkok and Brooklyn, NY), *Shore of Security*, 2022. Repurposed wooden doll house made by the artist’s mother, wood, house paint, polyurethane, fabric sculpture, ceramics, snake skeleton, LED lights. Courtesy of the artist and C L E A R I N G, New York / Brussels / Los Angeles. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Image 2: Stephanie H. Shih, *Offering (Ash Tower)*, 2023. Ceramic and steel. Collection of Kohler Co. Photo: Kohler Co. courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

EXHIBITION CREDITS:

This exhibition is curated by AAAI Co-Director, Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, with Kathryn Cua, curatorial assistant for the AAAI. *Spirit House* will be the first AAAI exhibition accompanied by a substantial publication.

Lead support for Spirit House provided by Pamela and David Hornik, and Aey Phanachet and Roger Evans. Generous support is provided by Tad Freese and Brook Hartzell, and Nelson Chu. Additional support is provided by Lisa Young and Steven Abraham.

VISIT THE MUSEUM:

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<https://museum.stanford.edu/>

Wednesday – Sunday

11:00am – 5:00pm

FREE ADMISSION

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