

# CINDY HUANG

## *Tracing a Gilded Trail*

Sumer  
Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland  
09.08.2023–09.09.2023

by Mikayla Journée

In a darkened gallery space, stunningly illusionistic porcelain lilies and lily litter—stamens, filaments, anthers, buds, bulbs, sepals, petals and leaves—lie on the ground, exquisite and vulnerable and fragile. *Tracing a Gilded Trail*, an installation by Rotorua-born, Tāmaki Makaurau-based artist Cindy Huang, is an emotive response to the devastating experiences of nineteenth-century Chinese migrants who came to Aotearoa to mine gold in Ōtākou Otago and Murihiku Southland, bringing with them and planting lilies that now grow wild near historic water races in the region. These are barely-there and often invisible histories, and the installation is accordingly quiet, one of the quietest object-based installations I've experienced, and yet, there's a real weight, a thickness, to this kind of noiselessness—a story untold, something left unsaid... a silencing?

When preparing the installation for its first showing at Te Atamira in Tāhuna Queenstown, the artist undertook research into these gold mining communities, revealing disturbing histories. This is a story of racial persecution by both authorities and settlers; migrants were dying young

from dangerous work, suffering through extreme weather and terrible living conditions, experiencing segregation from Pākehā. These are the kind of things that should be unforgettable and unforgiveable, but they have been quite brutally forgotten within Aotearoa's national history. Huang's installation could be described as a memorial, the lilies a symbol of these countless losses: dispersed and almost ephemeral remnants of a funerary bouquet, perhaps recalling the unmarked graves where many migrants were buried in the region. Mostly, they evoke the scattered form of wildflowers, living evidence of these histories that remain in the land today—rogue and uncultivated yet self-propagating, much like the migrant story.

In the alcove near the gallery's entrance, a painting is installed as a companion to the lilies—a large canvas, Whakatipu-grey, with river-like meandering lines of a poem that is also the exhibition's extended title. I am a fan of long titles, and this is probably the longest one I've come across. It speaks of the wind, of disappearance, of mountains and sea:

*Following the smell of his faint breath  
southern breeze washed his scent clean  
tracing a gilded trail  
The sound of whispered past  
tethered essence left  
caught in stone, gravel and tale  
Sifting flour gold  
each grain well travelled  
his name unremarkable  
Sea edge resettled  
roads and temple in hand  
akin returned to till*

The best objects hold stories in silent and felt ways and sometimes objects just simply have a way of saying so much more than words can, but the symbolic and ephemeral poem-painting is treated as an essential companion for these objects—it's a vital, haunting hint toward the stories from which these lilies emerged.

Before visiting *Tracing a Gilded Trail* I was aware of Huang's social art practice. In 2022, for a project produced by Satellites, *Twin Cultivation*, she created 240 ceramic food objects: kūmara, bush kūmara, gourd, bok choy, eel and taro, that were given away to participants. Pairs of strangers were invited to enter a space together, dig up a chosen ceramic object from where they were buried and have a conversation. Making gifts of her artworks, Huang was gesturing to the histories of trade and exchange between Māori and Chinese settlers, who would often swap their respective crops. In Southland, this included lily bulbs, which were swapped for other medicinal plants used with in rongoā. Some of *Twin Cultiva-*

*tion's* participants found it a challenging experience, some made new friends, but all were offered a way to think through diasporic experience and cross-cultural entanglements, as well as forms of collective care for painful and difficult histories.

In neat synergy with her social art practice, walking through the installation of lilies generated trepidation, too. Something close to one thousand individual pieces, ranging from small to tiny, some almost invisible on the flaked and stained concrete floor, required an intense degree of self-awareness and care to navigate. I became highly aware of my foot falls, my bag slipping off my shoulder... I dared not step backwards before checking first. I ended up engaged in an awkward dance with the lilies. The artist has made some peace with the potential breakage of the work's elements. She wants the work to have this fragility and danger—not because she wants it to break, but because, in what feels like an appropriate gesture given the subject matter, she is putting its care in the hands of the visitors. How will we treat this story?

Cindy Huang, *Follow the smell of his faint breath [...] akin returned to till*, 2023, glazed porcelain, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Tracing a Gilded Trail*, Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, August 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer