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F
loating on Detritus

~

A Karung Guni Story

Yam Chew Oh

For

Dad, Mom, Pam,

&

Mandeep.

You found me.

The karung guni man (rag-and-bone)
(detail)

Found metal, used cardboard and
plastic packaging

23 7/8 x 10 2/8 x 7 inches

2018





P

reface

I believe artists don't really get to "choose" what they make.

On the 2017 anniversary of my late father's death, I started making sculptures using objects found on my commute in Baltimore. I can't explain why. It just happened. It's as if the art chose me.

My late father, my mother, and my late sister-in-law inspired this body of work. Dad was barely 60 when he passed in May 2010 after his third stroke. Mom, 75, continues to honor him after all these years. Pam was just 29 when she was taken from us in October 2018.

2018 was a year of immense challenges and deep introspection. I survived appendicitis surgery, related complications, and six bereavements. Throughout that potent period, family, relationships, mortality, and the fragility of life and time were constantly on my mind.

The sculptures in this catalog reflect the frames of mind and states of being I was in when I made them. Composed of humble and mundane materials, they are intimate and emotional manifestations of personal stories, life-changing moments, and precious memories that I'm afraid to lose. They are abstract meditations on life and time, mysteries intrinsically at odds with each other.

When these enigmas collide, the impact is often intense, baffling, and sad. But, if we see beyond the brunt, the residuum can be beautiful, even transformative.



A different kind of love

This body of work is about love of a different kind. It's about my love for materials that others don't love. It's also about my love for two exceptional parents and a sister-in-law who I cherish like my own sisters.

I have particular affection for things that are unwanted and discarded. I relish coming upon them and being so uncontrollably drawn to them I have to take them home.

I especially love materials that are modest, delicate, fragile, ephemeral, or flawed. I love that they're imperfect, impermanent, and yield to time, like life.

I see beauty and possibilities in the quotidian, the easily-overlooked, and in what might be regarded as deficiencies. By using them, I privilege what people don't usually pay attention to or care to reconsider. I believe these unassuming and unsung materials can be extraordinary, even monumental, if accorded the right attention and ministrations.

This interest in materials stemmed from being the son of a Singapore karung guni man.^[1] In 19th century Europe, my late father would have been a rag-and-bone man. In developing countries, they would call him a waste picker, and in America, a junk man. Dad salvaged things that people didn't want or threw out, then painstakingly sorted them to resell for profit. He knew where to find value. In his hands, discarded items have second lives. I grew up helping Dad with his karung guni business, surrounded by a smorgasbord of stuff: used wiring and dynamos; scrap metal and hardware; bakau wood from scaffolding; old newspaper, books, magazines and clothing; and miscellaneous items that he reclaimed and recycled.

[1] Karung guni is a Malay phrase for the gunny (burlap) sack, which was used in the past by Singapore rag-and-bone men to hold the used newspaper they collected.



WOOD
KID H.T.
[Stamp]

WOOD
KID H.T.
[Stamp]

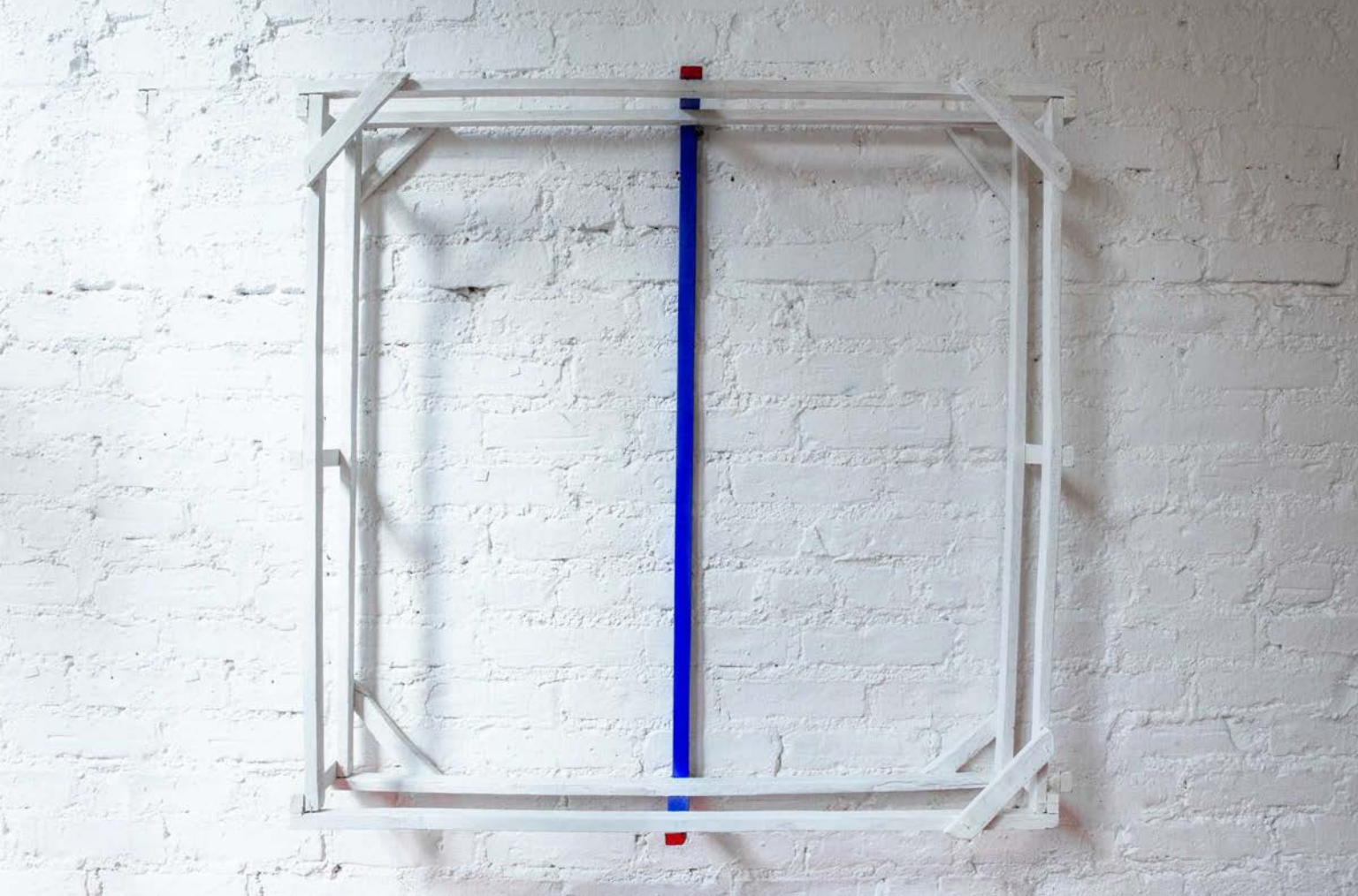


After moving to New York in August 2017, I found myself frequently attracted to its detritus, be it what I generated as a consumer or the items people threw out onto the city's sidewalks. I've collected all manner of things - shards of glass, pieces of plastic, screws and washers, belt buckles, hair elastic bands, wooden pellets, and numerous kinds of affective objects that I am often helplessly taken with. They exude an enigmatic intensity not only due to their abjectness, but also their potential for renewal.[2]

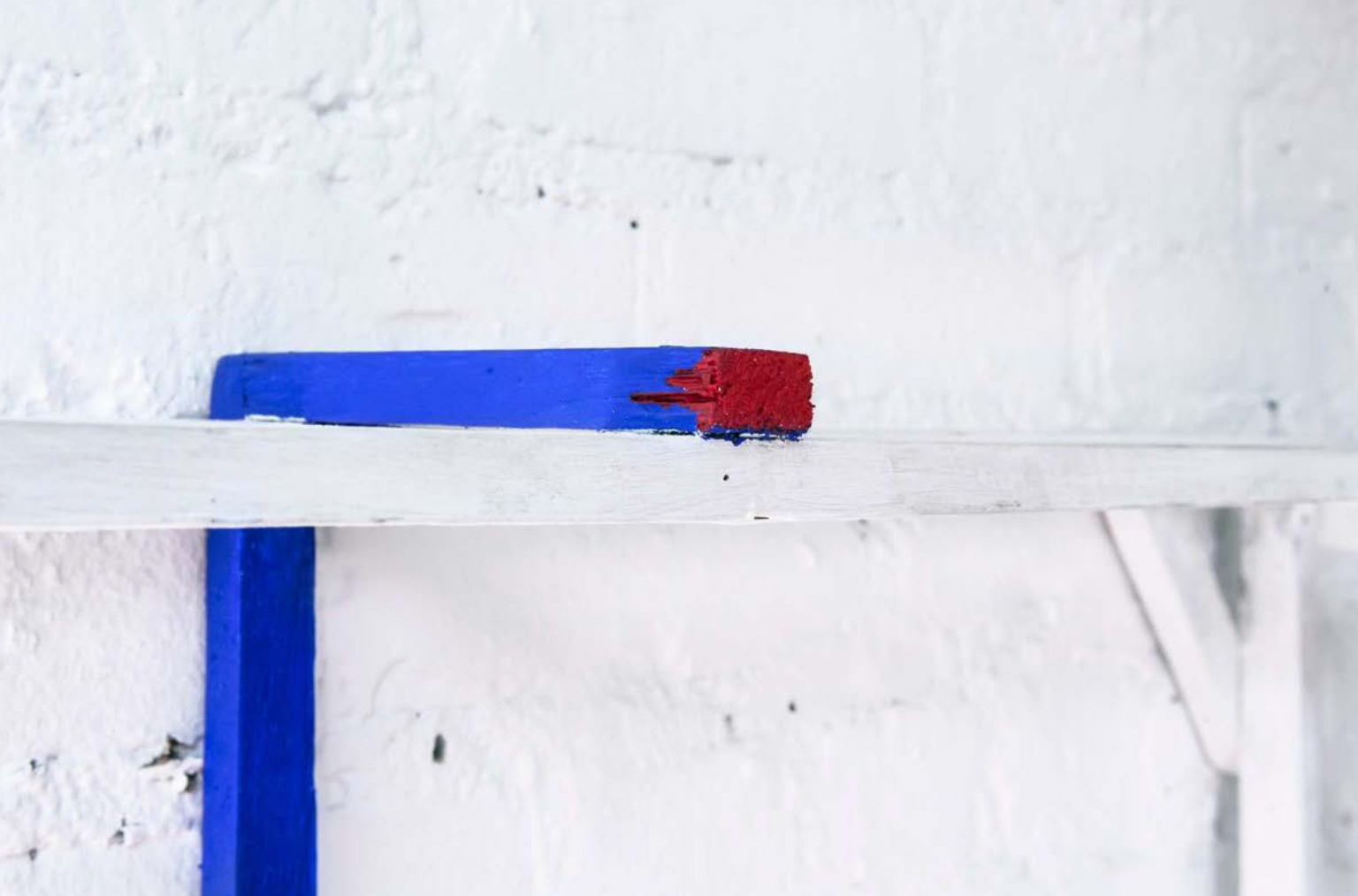
~I love you, warts and all~ (2017) was originally a brown tatty wooden frame. The near-square skeletal structure, approximately 36 x 36 x 6 inches, was abandoned on West 22nd street. Of unknown provenance and purpose, it was worn and partially broken. One of its eight corner braces had come apart. A vertical bar shaped like a square bracket ([]) held the construction together, its ends splintered to reveal its inner fiber. I gave the wretched frame a gentle clean and sanding, and a light wash of paint. Rather than hiding its "wounds," I highlighted some and left some as they are. I also applied a melancholic blue to its spine as a way of "wrapping" my arms around it. I wanted it to know that I love it unashamedly.

~I love you, warts and all~ would influence and shape the way I think about and approach the materials for this body of work.

[2] I regard "abject" in its original sense - the state of being cast off or existing in a low state/condition.



I love you, warts and all
Acrylic paint on found wooden frame
35 3/8 x 36 5/8 x 6 2/8 inches
2017



I love you, warts and all
(detail)
Acrylic paint on found wooden frame
35 3/8 x 36 5/8 x 6 2/8 inches
2017



I love you, warts and all
(detail)

Acrylic paint on found wooden frame

35 3/8 x 36 5/8 x 6 2/8 inches

2017

Many of my materials are commonplace or have an everyday character. They are so ordinary we stop noticing them after their utility or value has expired.

~Floating on detritus~ (2018) is a used light green plastic bag pulled from its closed end through the half-inch opening of a cylindrical power tool socket one inch in height. Hung from transparent fishing line, about two-thirds of the delicate material bunch together under the weight of the metal hardware and gravity to form a top body akin to a folded umbrella. The bottom part of the soft sculpture unfurls like a flower. Its translucent "petals" often catches the slightest whiff of air to set off an inverted pirouette.

This eponymous piece epitomizes the spirit of what I do - to see beauty and potential in the most humble of things.

Floating on detritus
Used plastic bag and found metal
hardware
Approx. 21 5/8 x 7 x 6 1/2 inches
2018



T he story of things

Beyond their physical properties, I love that things are thick with history, laden with meaning, and prone to association. I love that they can evoke thoughts, feelings, memories, and elicit emotional responses. And every person's experience with the same thing could be so different depending on his/her context. These are important considerations when I create.

I am particularly interested in the metaphorical power of materials. For example, packaging - paper, plastic or foam - appears frequently in my pieces. The ubiquitous material, lightweight yet strong, is indispensable to modern living. It keeps goods safe from the ravages of time and environment, preventing damage and loss. For me, it signifies protection, preservation, and security.

I regard some packaging materials as container for the past and armor against the passage of time. Like most other materials I use, its poorness and susceptibility to temporal erosion speak to the ephemerality that permeates my work.

In creating this group of work, I kept in mind the ethos of the karung guni man through the lens of my father's life. Without a stable income, karung guni men are typically poor. Many, like my Dad, live a life of precarity. Despite the absence of long-term security, they often exhibit a humble dignity, enjoying small triumphs. This precariousness and humility are reflected not only in the materials I use, but also in the way some of them are treated, composed, or held together - usually very loose, with little aid to fasten or secure elements. For example, in ~The Burden~ (2018), a found metal cap is simply placed on the frame's top-right corner as a modest attempt to fortify the rickety structure. The pink bubble wrap in ~Skin and bone~ (2018) is like loose bandage that can unravel with a simple tug.

My father was a man's man, traditional and conservative. When I grew my hair out and pierced my ear in college, he told me I was a disgrace. Ironically, that respect for tradition and old-school



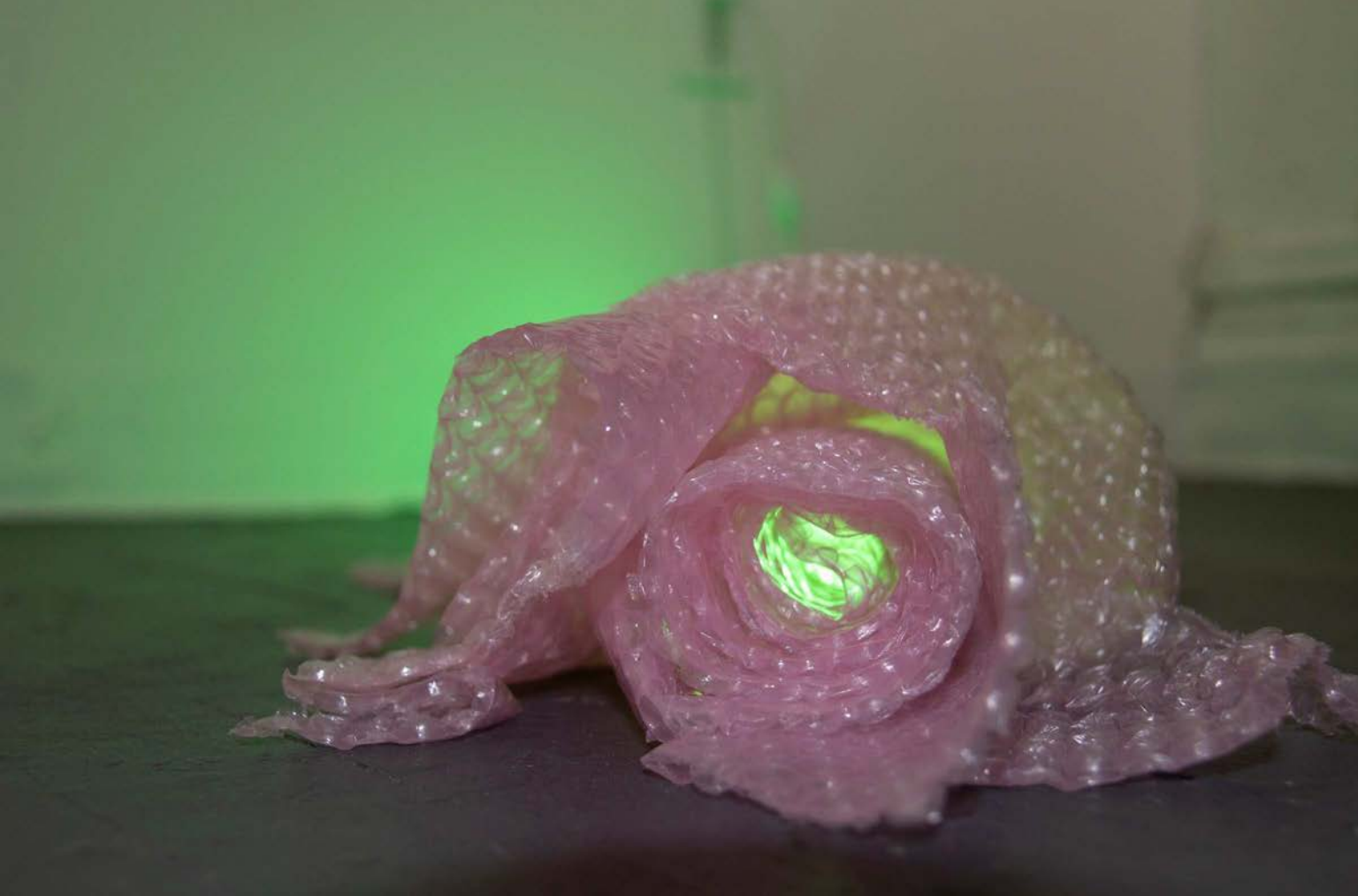
The burden
(detail)

Found wooden frame and metal cap,
used canvas tie and air bubble
cushion, and T-pin

Approx. 39 x 13 x 10 inches

2018

values has rubbed off on me. So, for this body of work, I apply a formal rigor - adhering to time-honored principles of point, line, shape, form, color, space, scale, etc. - not only for visual impact, but also to contrast the informal, unorganized nature of the karung guni trade and its found materials. I wanted to emphasize the vagaries of life and time.



Skin and bone
(detail)
Used bubble wrap, LED light strip
Approx. 62 x 12 x 5 inches
2018

N

o ordinary love

About half of this body of work tells a story about my parents, their love for each other and their children, and our relationship with them.

~The karung guni man (rag-and-bone)~ (2018), which looks like the letter P with a square head, is a portrait of my late father.

Dad was the patriarch and breadwinner of a family of nine. But, after he had his first stroke, he couldn't be that anymore.

The sculpture's anthropomorphic head was formerly a 7 x 7-inch square delivery box for a vase of flowers, which I turned upside down. Two of its four flaps, originally held together by staples to protect the vase, have been left loose as a reminder of how Dad lost muscle control of one side of his face and body after his stroke.

I wanted to show how Dad, as the head of the family, was stoic in the face of illness. But, my materials didn't let me. They seemed to know that Dad had given up on living after his first stroke. So, the sculptural head warps against the length of aluminum trying to prop it up. I used light to cast shadows on one side of the work to emphasize the impact of the three strokes on Dad.

I also wanted to capture Dad's essence beyond his illness. I remember as a child admiring and wanting hair like his. I loved how he always finished combing it with a downward motion to create a wave-like fringe. Mom really didn't like the green pomade he used because it smelled and stained his pillow.

The karung guni man (rag-and-bone)

Found metal, used cardboard and plastic packaging

23 7/8 x 10 2/8 x 7 inches

2018





The karung guni man (rag-and-bone)

(detail)

Found metal, used cardboard and
plastic packaging

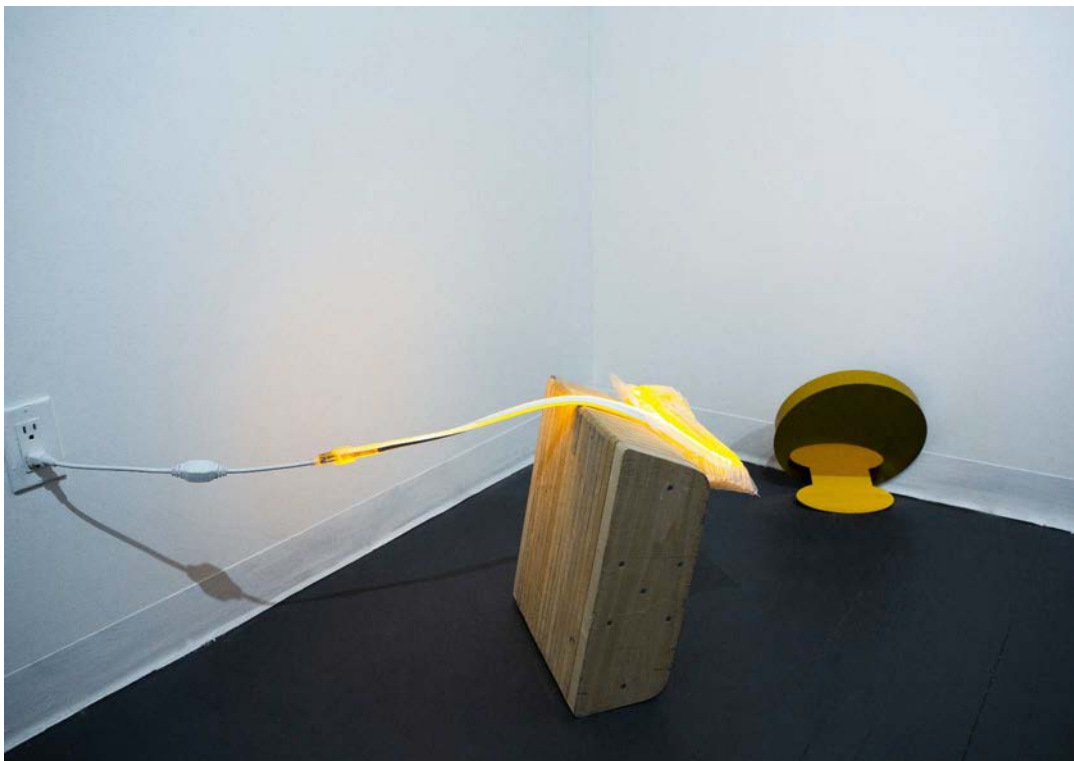
23 7/8 x 10 2/8 x 7 inches

2018

~The karung guni man (rag-and-bone)~ says a lot about how I work, which is more intuitive than planned. I spend considerable time holding my materials, contemplating their interactivity and how I might compose them to convey a story or message. It's called an embodied sense of understanding content - essentially what happens when I put my hands on something and instinctively think about how to react to it. My materials, many of which are readymades, often tell me where they want to go. I have learnt to listen to and work with them. I respect and try not to alter them too much.

Speaking of respect, Dad was a disciplinarian. He brought us up on civility. But, he often demanded unquestioning obedience. He was strict, always ready to use the cane on us (corporal punishment was normal then). Even if you were not the one being caned, there was no escaping his rage. He would finish caning one of his children, then turn to the others looking on nearby and say, "You've also been naughty lately!" before proceeding to cane everyone. If one tried to run, he would give chase.

In ~You've also been naughty lately!~ (2018), Dad appears as a brawny upright wooden trapezoid approximately 15 7/8 inches tall and 12 6/8 inches wide. The hefty block leans forward and pulls over its top curved edge a one-meter LED light strip straining to disengage from a nearby electrical outlet. I wanted to leverage the tilt of the found wooden block to show Dad bearing down on us. In this installation, he "discharges" his anger through the light strip that ends in a lasso, reprimanding and uncontrollable. A circular disc representing one of his children cowers nearby in fear, head bowed and resigned.

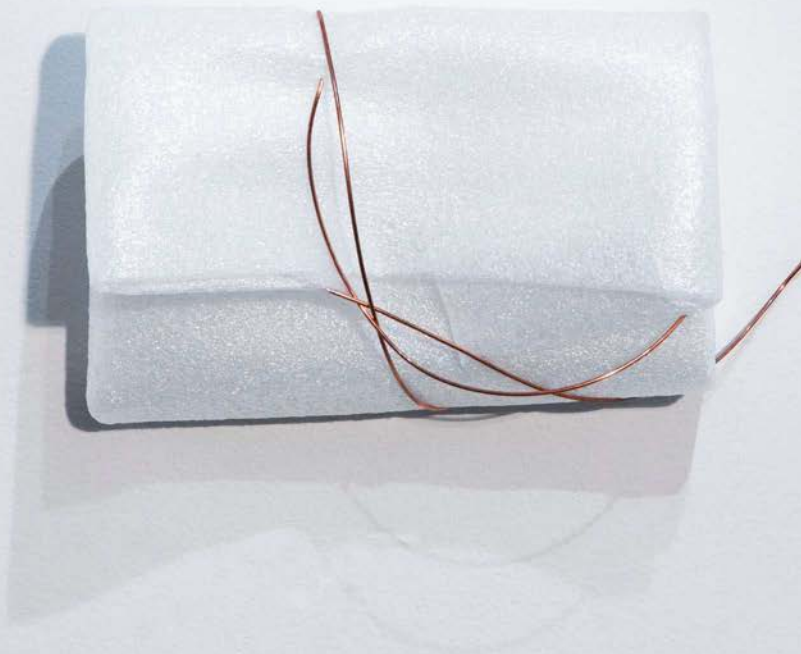


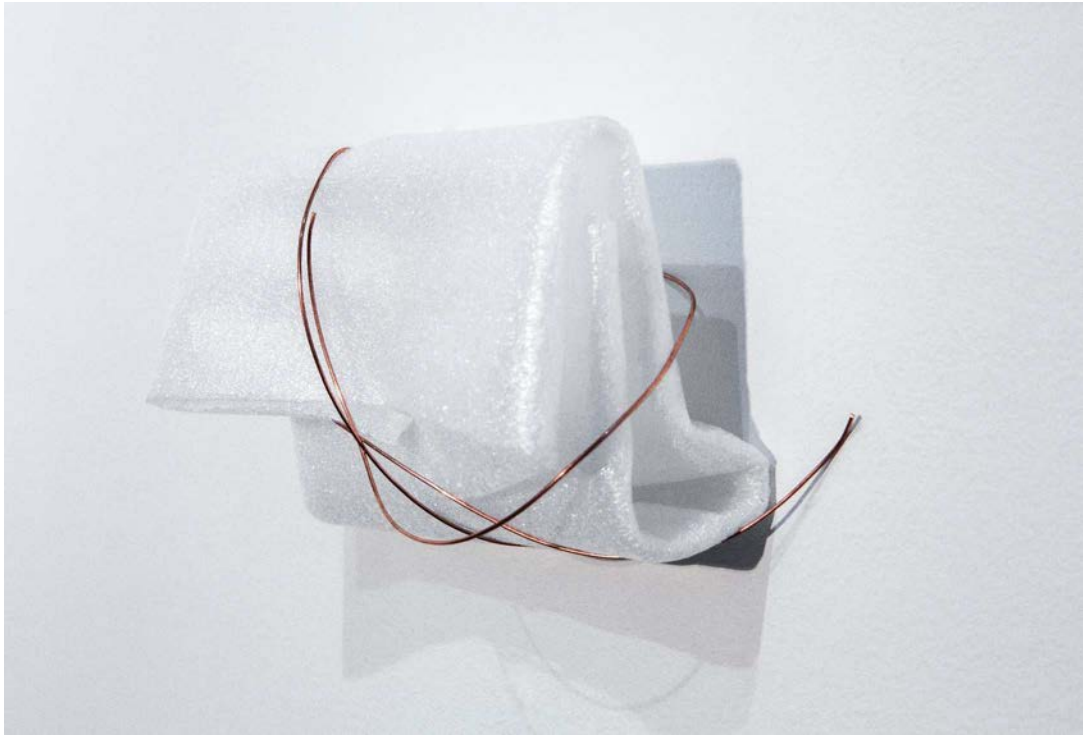
You've also been naughty lately!
Found wooden block and sculpture, LED
light strip, used air bubble bag and
plastic bag, and screw
Left: Approx. 38 x 12 6/8 x 15 7/8 inches
Right: Approx. 12 x 12 x 1 6/8 inches
2018





Dad wasn't a scary tyrant. Like Mom, he was just a stereotypical Chinese/Asian parent. He expressed his love differently - it was non-verbal and non-tactile. I don't remember him ever telling me or my six siblings that he loved us. He stopped hugging us after we passed a certain age. Dad showed that he cared by simply providing for us. He would buy us things, which became surrogates for words and touch. My fondest memory was the supper he frequently brought home, something we always looked forward to. They were usually packets of fried Chinese radish and oyster omelette wrapped in waxed brown paper, or stir-fry noodles in white cardboard boxes, fastened with rubber bands, like ribbons for presents. They were Dad's way of showing that he thought of us.



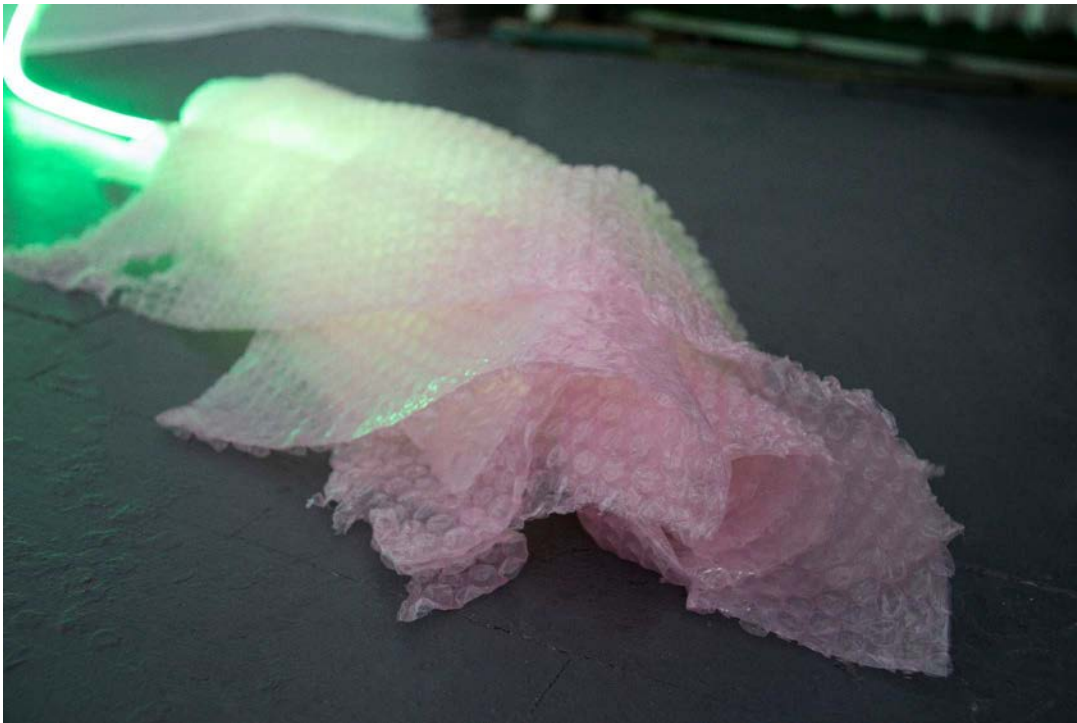


~A different kind of love~ (2018) is my attempt to recreate those supper packages and protect this beautiful memory of Dad. At 8 x 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches, the foam and copper wire package is small and precious. It threatens to unravel if not handled carefully. I'm afraid of losing more memories of my Dad over time, like how the copper will surrender to the elements, tarnish and turn green, eventually.

A different kind of love
Used foam packaging, and copper wire
8 x 4 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches
2018

By the time Dad had his third stroke, he was a shadow of his former self. In *~Skin and bone~* (2018), a 62-inch LED tube is swathed loosely with pink bubble wrap, and an eerie green light emanates from within what looks like a dead fish with peeling scales.

I wanted to convey ailment and decay. The ghostly sculpture rests on the floor, like someone defeated and enervated by the trials and tribulations of life.



Skin and bone
Used bubble wrap, and LED light tube
Approx. 62 x 12 x 5 inches
2018



~The Vow~ (2018) is about my mother and her unwavering commitment to her late husband. It features at the top a white paint-stained metal mesh with two short upturned ends, like hands. They carry, Pieta-like, rolled-up paper packaging net that was once the protective sleeve for fruits. Like a bundle of grain stalks tied together, it speaks of labor, the backbreaking duties that Mom endured throughout her life, including working in the fields, pig rearing, household chores, looking after seven children, and helping Dad with karung guni matters. The sheaf is yet another metaphor for Dad's body, which Mom always feared she wouldn't be able to lift should he fall. A 26-inch wooden stick stands in for Dad's walking cane, dangling limply from the metal mesh's left hand, while a 66-inch silver ribbon hangs assuredly at its mid-point from the right, symbolizing Mom's training as a seamstress and her feminine strength. The overall composition tilts leftward, alluding to Mom being trapped under the weight of tradition, loyalty, and honor (she never remarried), as well as the demands of being Dad's caregiver for years.



The Vow
(detail)

Acrylic paint on Post-it, anniversary
bouquet ribbon, used grocery packaging,
found wooden stick and metal mesh, and pin
Approx. 40 x 13 x 2 1/2 inches
2018



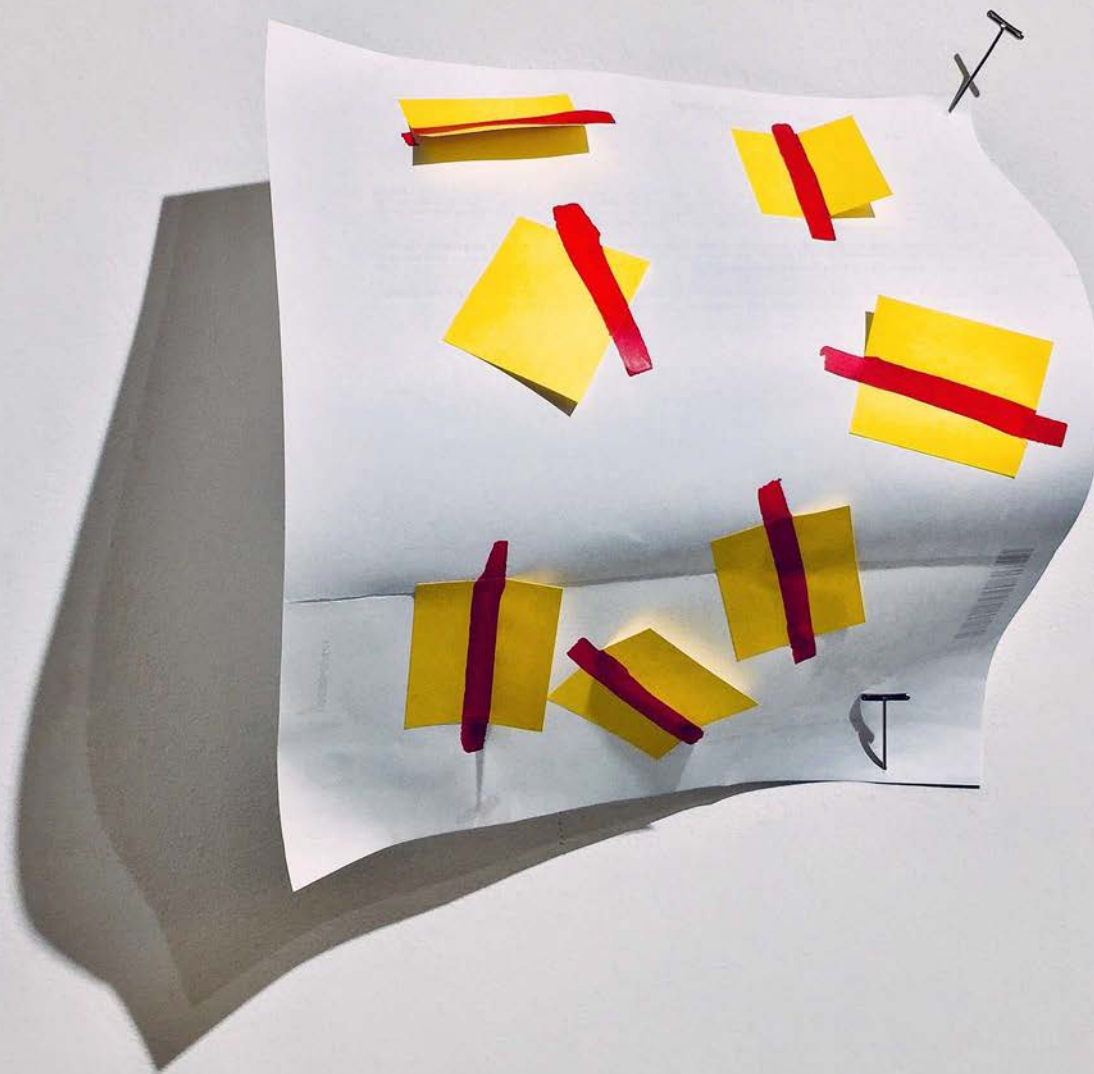


Several pieces in this body of work exhibit a leftwardness, which I favor. Most of us are used to looking from left to right, like when reading. I emphasize the left and try to draw the viewer's eyes from right to left. The atypical directionality lends tension to the works.

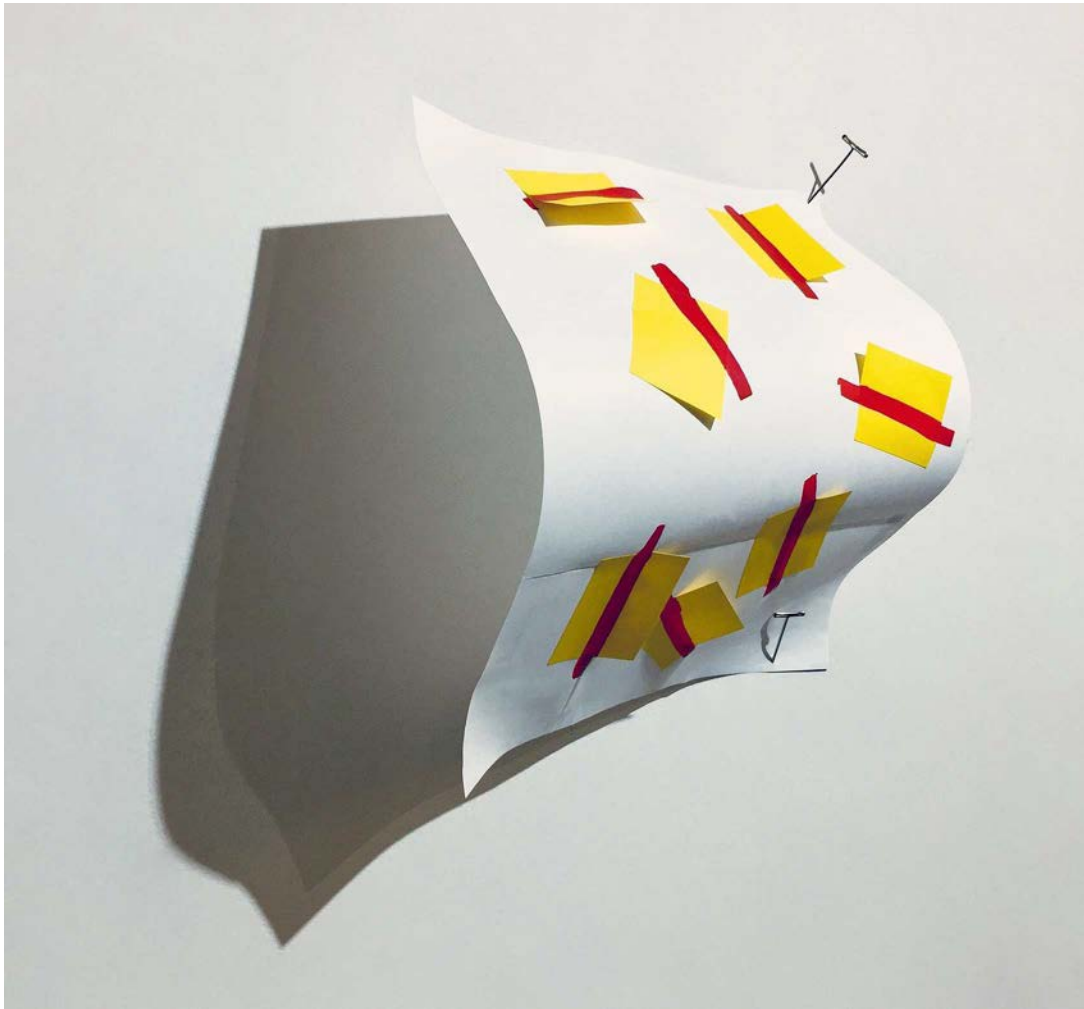
~The Vow~ also includes a bright yellow Post-it with a red acrylic paint stripe across it. It represents the paper talisman that my parents used to obtain from Taoist temples when we were ill. The ultra-thin bookmark-size yellow "blessing" that Taoist priests hand out to believers is typically covered in bright red scrawls of unintelligible script. To be set on fire and its ashes let fall into a glass of water, it was supposed to heal and protect those who consume the "holy" drink.



The talisman in ~The Vow~ appears seven times in ~The insurance policy~ (2018). Dad used to say that he had seven of us to hedge against old age. He believed that one of us would look after him eventually, an expectation prevalent among Asian parents. In this work, my six siblings and I are Dad's talismans. We are supposed to be his



The insurance policy
Acrylic paint, Post-it, post-
hospitalization patient survey
letter, and T-pin
Approx. 10 1/2 x 9 x 5 inches
2018



protection from the vagaries of his hard life. Sadly, his plan was not to be. It was as precarious as the way ~The insurance policy~ is pinned to the wall, tentative and looking like it will buckle anytime from the two T-pins perilously holding down its four corners.

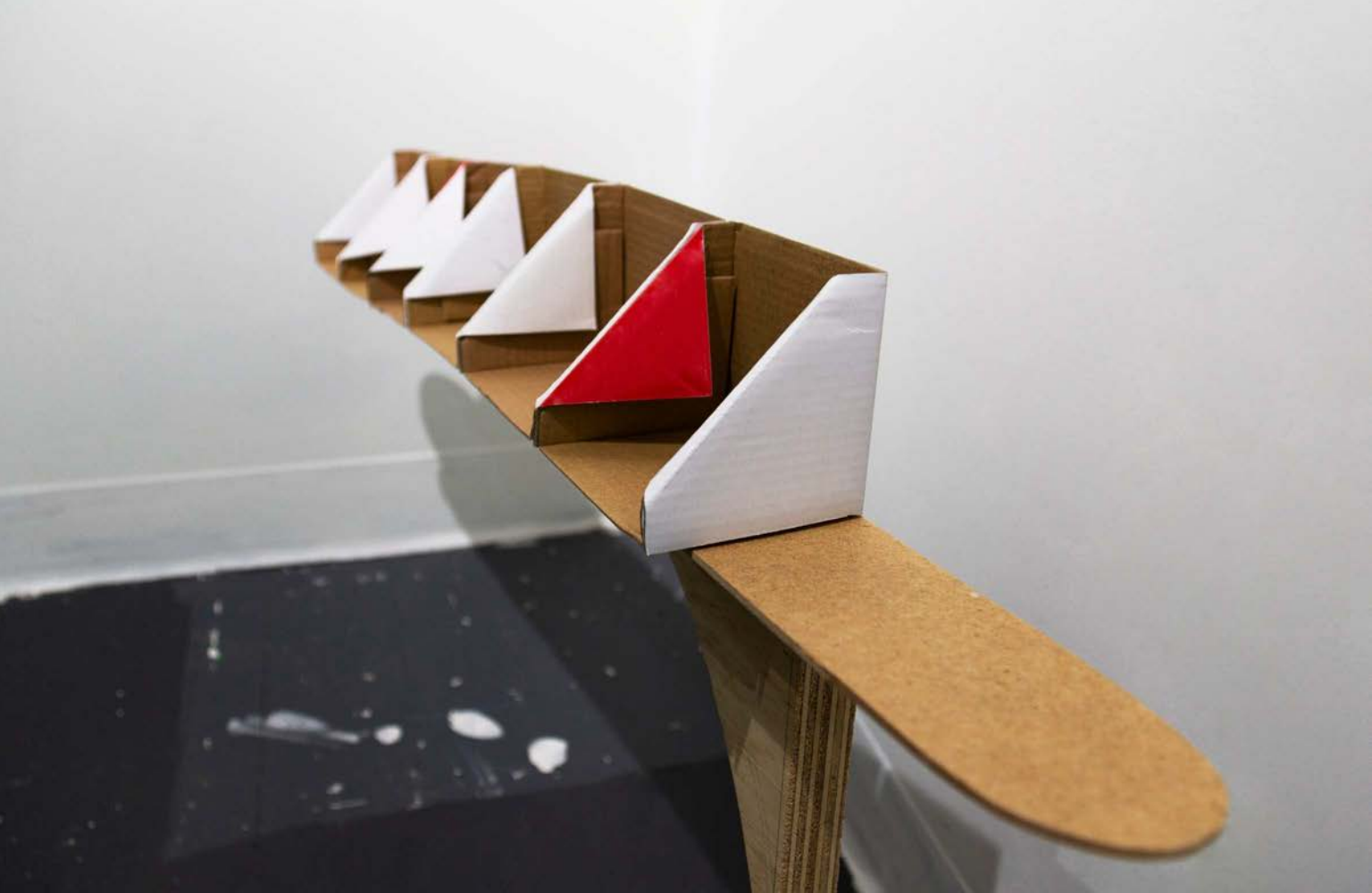
Superstition permeates my mother's life and weighs her down. On top of the mental affliction, Mom cannot help worrying incessantly about every bit of her seven children's lives, including those of their five partners. In ~The widow's lot~ (2018), six cardboard photo frame corner protectors representing the 12 of us sit side-by-side atop a 32-inch thin plank. The row of repeated squares and triangles bears down on a humble piece of scrap wood shaped like a reversed letter C

and shaved very thin at its midpoint. Even though Mom is amazingly resilient for her age and slight build, I fear for her when I think about how much more she could tolerate in her arduous life.

The widow's lot

Used cardboard photo frame corners,
found mirror backing and scrap wood
32 1/8 x 21 2/8 x 3 1/8 inches
2018





The widow's lot
(detail)

Used cardboard photo frame corners,
found mirror backing and scrap wood
32 1/8 x 21 2/8 x 3 1/8 inches
2018



No-one expected Pam, my sister-in-law, to die so young. A dedicated neonatal ICU nurse, she was bright, bubbly, and generous, and was looking forward to an exciting new job with Médecins Sans Frontières. She succumbed to a blood disorder before I could get to her at the hospital in Kuala Lumpur. I loved Pam like she was my own sister; her sudden passing destabilized me. If the universe was trying to make a point about the fragility of life, it hit home.

Some of the works featured here came out of that dark period after Pam's death, exacerbated a month later by the demise of Mom's last surviving sister from a family of 13.

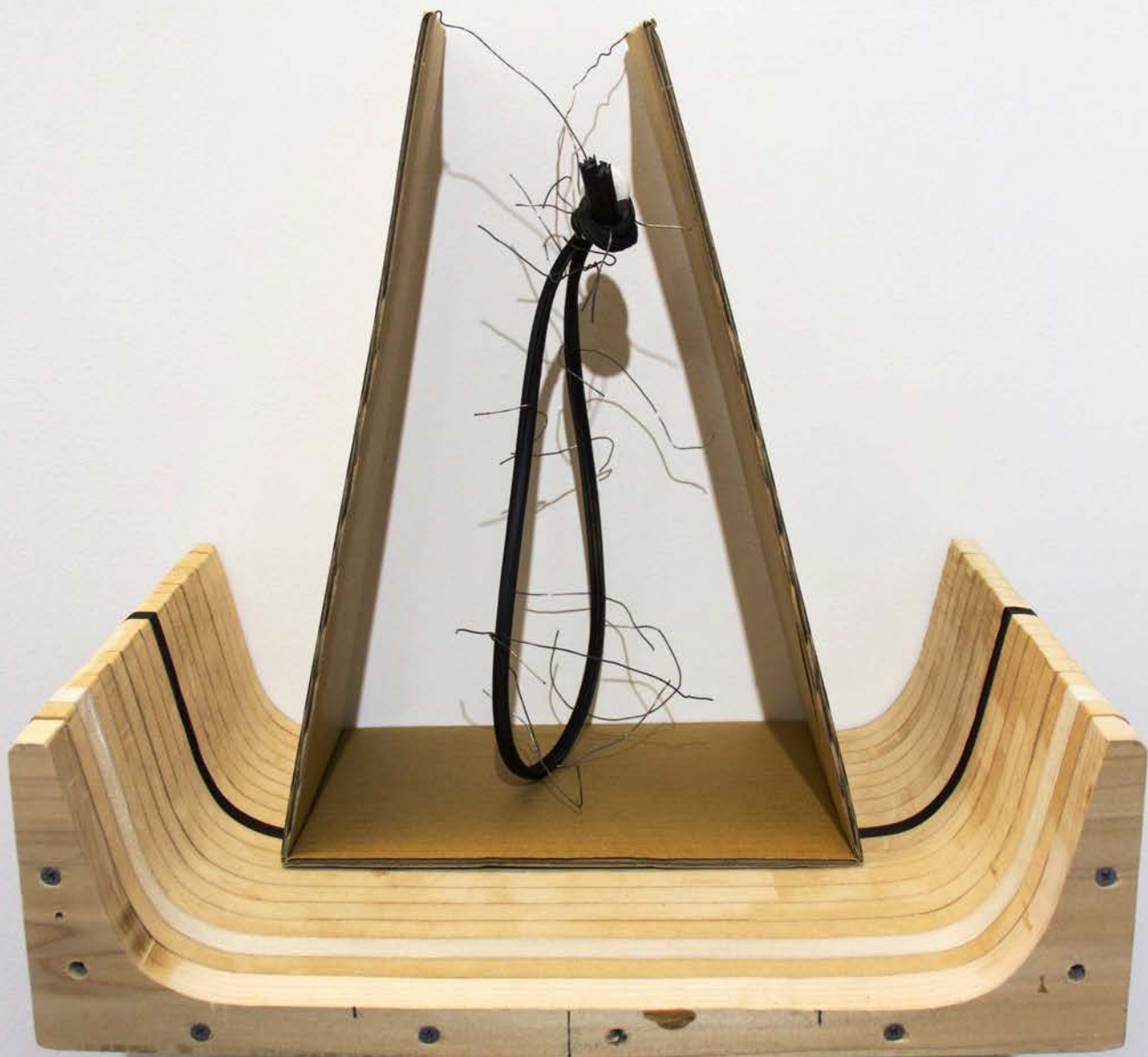
~The cradle~ (2019) is based on the Chinese saying “白发人送黑发人,” which translates as “The white-haired person sending the black-haired person off.” The phrase encapsulates the nightmare of seeing one's child die before oneself.

At the center of the sculpture, numerous short crooked pieces of wire, which were used to secure the marquee at Pam's wake, pierce through a 24-inch black rubber tubing I picked up near her childhood home. The ends of the prickly strip are knotted to form the shape of a teardrop. Looking also like a noose, it hangs precariously from the top edges of a triangular cardboard structure that was once protective packaging. The pyramidal bricolage sits on a broad U-shape trough that resembles a baby's cot, or cradle. The word also refers to the act of holding gently and protectively. I was grieving and thinking a lot about pain and loss, as well as the trinity of the father, mother, and child.

The cradle

Used wire from funeral tent and cardboard packaging; found wooden structure, rubber tubing, plastic knob; and acrylic paint

Approx. 17 6/8 x 12 6/8 x 16 1/2 inches
2019

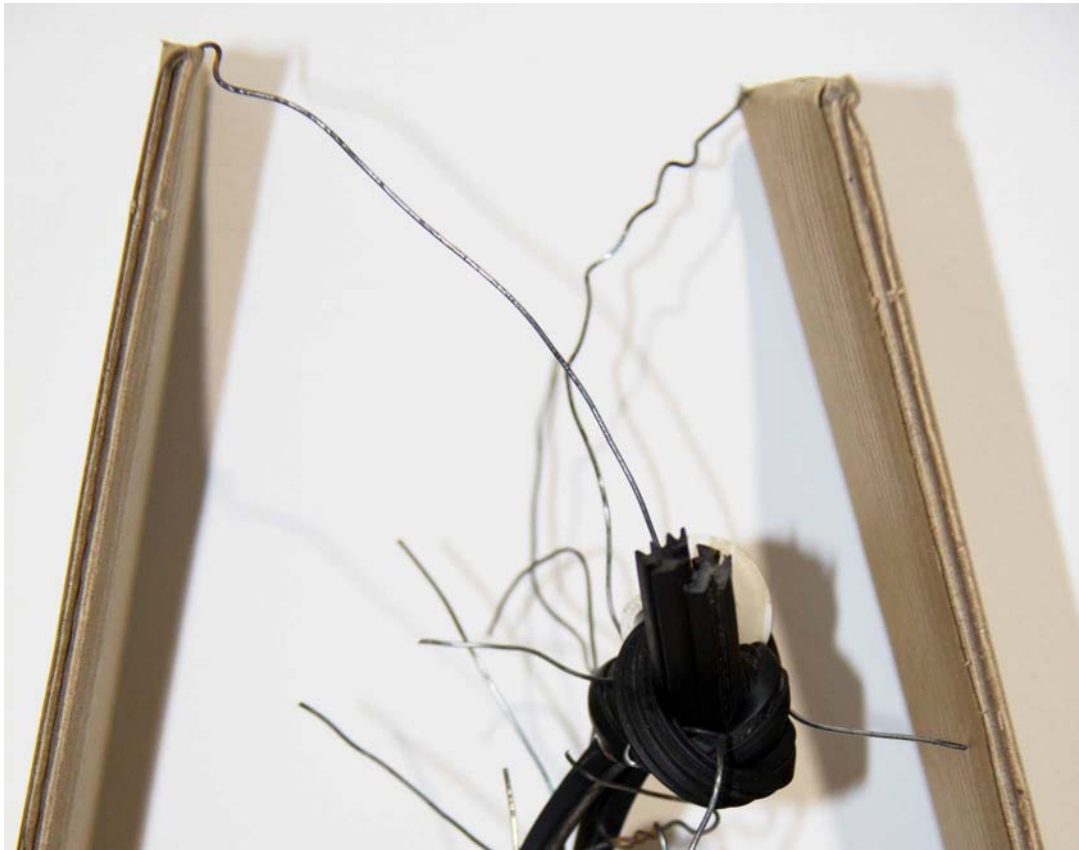




The cradle
(detail)

Used wire from funeral tent and
cardboard packaging; found wooden
structure, rubber tubing, plastic knob;
and acrylic paint

Approx. 17 6/8 x 12 6/8 x 16 1/2 inches
2019





A possible way forward
Found wood, plastic and pedestal,
and glue
Approx. 35 2/8 x 1 1/2 x 16 inches
2018

Coming away from two funerals in two consecutive months, I was in a dark place. ~A possible way forward~ (2018) is my search for a way out of it. It features a scrap wood ring about eight inches in diameter and a splinter of it 21 inches away, both sitting gingerly on a 35-inch strip of soft Plexiglass no more than half-an-inch wide. Balanced on the tip of a found wooden trapezoid, the lightness of the materials causes the upper-half of the sculpture to often topple from the slightest bit of air movement around it.

Viewers are invited to try their hands at reconstituting the sculpture on the barely two-millimeter fulcrum. Most very quickly discover a precarious exercise to find the sculpture's equilibrium.

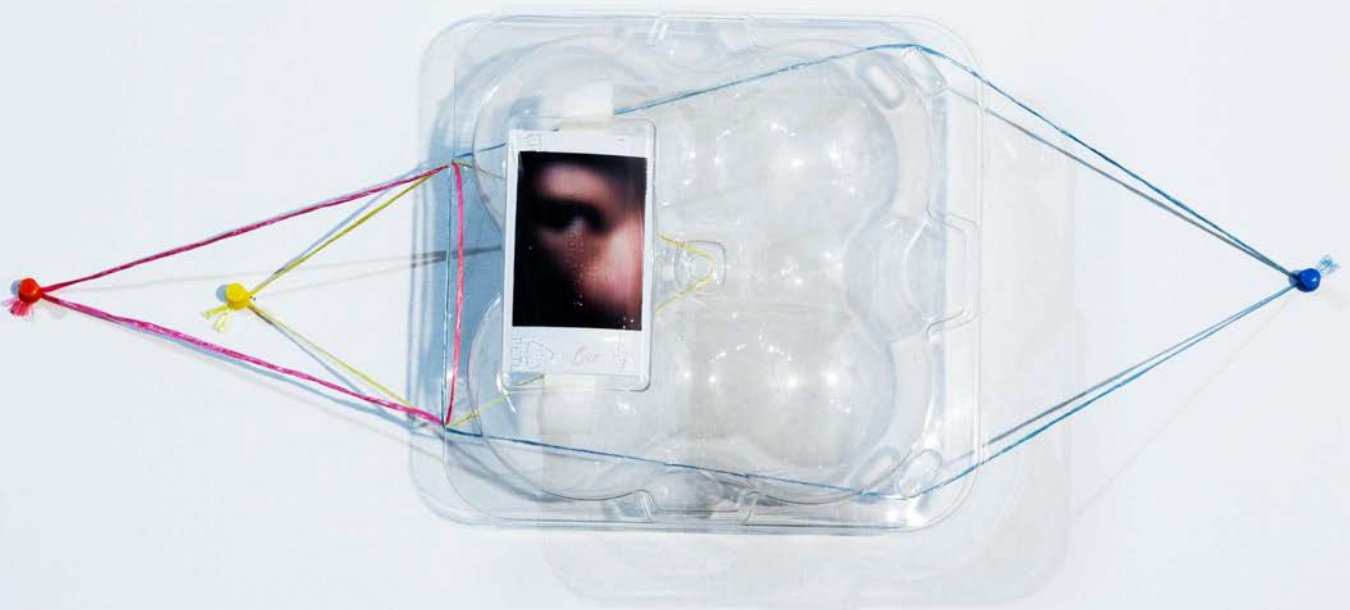


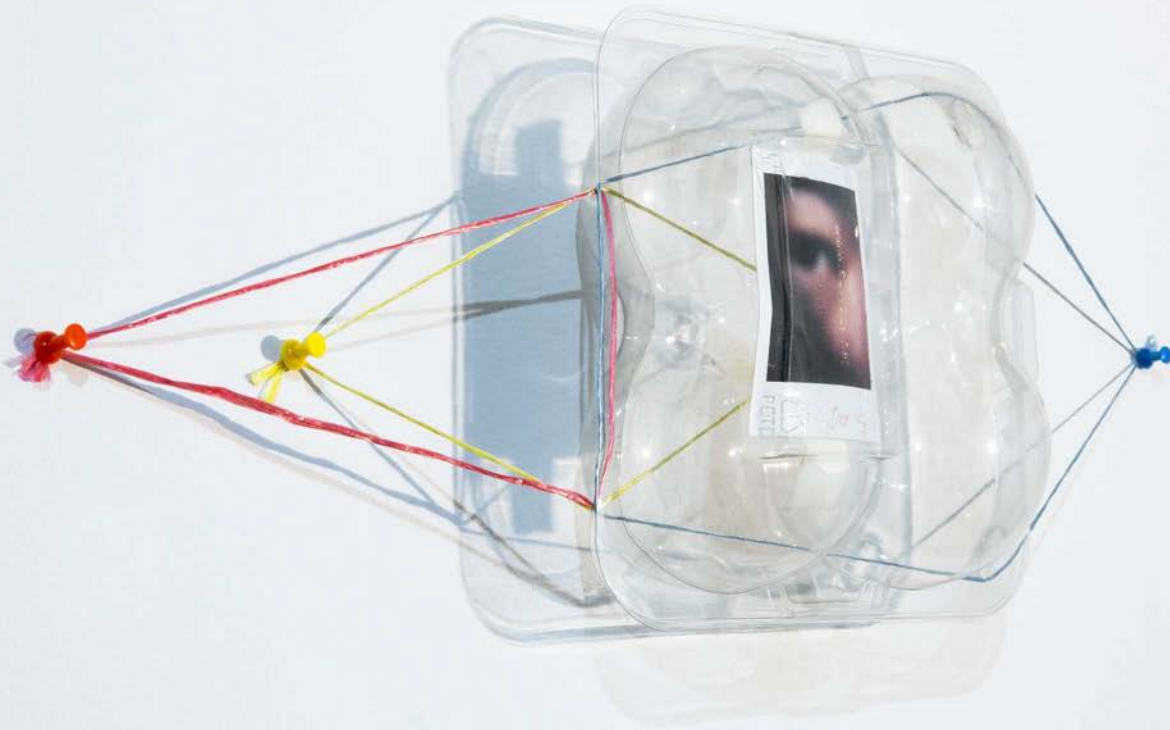




The worst part about bereavements is having regrets about the dead. When death occurs, the living often wish they could turn back time. What if we have the power to do that?

~The time bender~ (2018), made primarily of transparent fruit packaging, is my fantasy time machine. It holds an Instax Mini photograph of my eye - taken a year before Pam died - looking out from within. Raffia strings in primary colors penetrate the 7 1/2-inch square contraption, as if they might refract time and take me back to when I could change history.





The time bender

Used fruit packaging, Instax photo,
artist tape, raffia string, and pin

19 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 3 6/8 inches

2018

The time bender
(detail)

Used fruit packaging, Instax photo,
artist tape, raffia string, and pin
19 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 3 6/8 inches

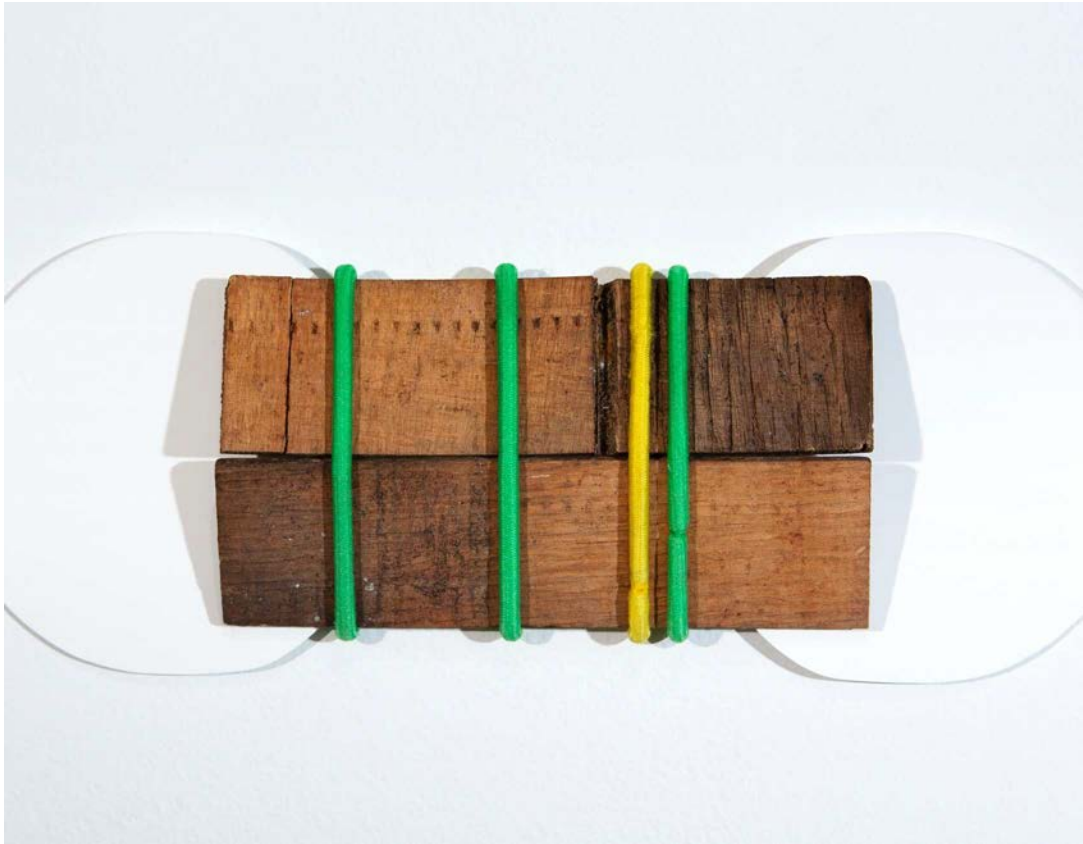
2018



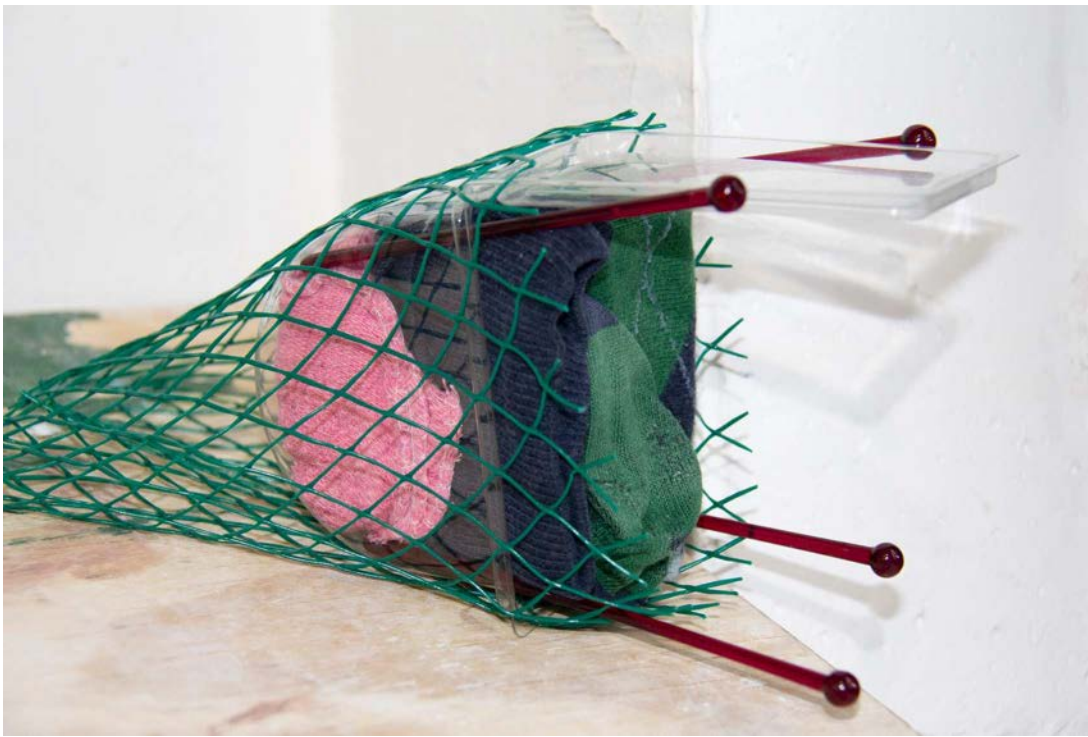
Oct 77



Walking out of time
Used invisible socks insert,
found wood and hair tie
9 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 1/2 inches
2018



My Dad and sister-in-law are gone, too young, too soon. ~Walking out of time~ (2018) refers to that. At 9 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 1/2 inches, it is among the smaller works in the group. Two pieces of old barn wood, each no larger than a small ruler but full of the traces of time, are held together against a used sock insert by four hair ties. The latter were still new when I found them. I'd like to think that they are in each other's good company, the young holding the old tight. Installed at height in a corner of my studio, the assemblage brings to mind security lights and looks as though it's watching over and protecting me.



Death is a strange thing, and some of the rites and rituals surrounding it perplexing.

At my aunt's funeral, we had to look away when her coffin was being loaded onto the hearse, because it was inauspicious otherwise. Everyone was invited to have swiss rolls and drinks after sending her body into the cremation chamber and had a good cry. We were given small pink handkerchiefs for our tears but had to discard them so that we didn't bring negative energy home. Instead, we took away two coins wrapped in pink paper and were encouraged to use them, for good luck.

How very odd indeed that our love for someone turns into a kind of self-centered fear and interest when they die.

~The curious quietus~ (2019) emerged from these ruminations about death. At 1 x 12 x 5 inches, it consists of the aforementioned handkerchief and coins, socks I wore at the funeral, and purple beverage stirrers I collected on the flight to and from the event, all stuffed into a used transparent swiss roll packaging. Cloaked in green protective netting, it sits on a discarded 12 x 12-inch board covered with ash-colored dust. The snail-like creature leaves a trail of something bizarre in its wake, like death does.

The curious quietus
Used swiss roll packaging,
handkerchief, good-luck coins and
socks from Teochew cremation
ceremony; inflight beverage stirrer;
used wine bottle sleeve; and found
wooden board
Approx. 1 x 12 x 5 inches
2019







We live in volatile times. I don't know of anyone who is not encumbered by something in their lives. In *~The burden~* (2018), air bubble cushions, rolled and tied up, hang from near the dislocated arm of a small rectangular wooden frame, found with unstable joints. I wonder if the air cushions might deflate or slip from its tenuous grip before the feeble frame collapses.

We are surrounded by the detritus of life; it's hard not to be overwhelmed. I happen to love that detritus. Found materials have second lives in my hands too, as they did in my father's. As abject as they often are, they also embody latent capacity and potential for regeneration.

Through *~Floating on Detritus: A Karung Story~*, I was searching for recovery from loss, and for renewal from healing.

My aim was, and remains, simple - to reclaim and elevate humble materials, and life, through acts of transformation.

The burden

Found wooden frame and metal cap,
used canvas tie and air bubble
cushion, and T-pin

Approx. 39 x 13 x 10 inches

2018







I
t is clear that the object of my quest,
the truth,
lies not in it
but
in me.

Marcel Proust
~
In Search of Lost Time



G

ratitude to:

Alison Kuo
Class of 2019
Class of 2020
Dave McKenzie
David Row
Dulce Lamarca
Gary Stephan
James Clark
James Siena
Johan Grimonprez
Kameelah Janan Rasheed
Marilyn Minter
Mark Ramos
Mark Tribe
Matthew Deleget
Media Farzin-Rad
Michelle Sumaray
Miguel Luciano
Omar Lopez-Chahoud
Rico Gatson
Sharon Louden
Sheetal Prajapati
Sheila Pepe
Tsibi Geva
William Powhida



Floating on Detritus: A Karung Guni Story
by Yam Chew Oh

Thesis catalog presented to the
MFA Fine Arts program
School of Visual Arts
New York, USA

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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April 2019
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