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Tiffany Chung’s exhibition at the AD&A Museum maps history within deep geological time

Human history is brief when measured against the age of the Earth.

At UC Santa Barbara’s Art, Design & Architecture Museum, Tiffany Chung’s mid-career survey exhibition considers human history alongside the planet’s much longer timeline. “Tiffany Chung: indelible traces” brings together more than 70 artworks spanning 25 years by the Vietnamese American artist and UCSB alumna.

Known for her detailed hand-drawn and embroidered maps, Chung depicts history as layered and interconnected. She combines statistical data, archival research and lived experience to build fuller accounts of historical events — and to represent what has been left out or remains unclear.

Organized by the AD&A Museum and guest curated by Orianna Cacchione, deputy director at the University of Richmond Museums, the exhibition reflects a practice grounded in research.

That research takes visual form through various mediums, in which mapping plays a key role.

“I’ve been acutely aware of the power of cartography,” Chung said, referring to its long history as a tool of colonial authority and state control. At the same time, she

sees mapping as a way to “counter official historical accounts, reclaim what has been erased, and shift established narratives, as an act of refusal.” Through layered compositions, she synthesizes vast amounts of material into what she describes as “palimpsests of condensed imagery and information that otherwise can be incomprehensible.”

Rather than simplify the past, her maps hold contradictions. While they translate data into image, they also render it “both legible and illegible,” resisting the idea that history can be reduced to a single storyline. “Maps draw out the complexity and the inaccessibility of the past, of the unknowable, allowing space for multiple perspectives and interpretations,” she said.

“What is most arresting about Chung’s art is her ability to document and give voice to the memories etched into these landscapes. In much of her work, the artist takes on the role of ethnographer and historian to chronicle what the cartographic records and statistics cannot: the lived experiences and personal accounts these topographies have witnessed,” said AD&A Museum Director Gabriel Ritter. “Ultimately, Chung is able to translate vast datasets and world histories into aesthetic objects that speak from the heart in deeply moving and personal ways.”

Much of Chung’s work — spanning drawing, embroidery, video and sculptural installation — examines the climate-conflict crisis and forced migration. But her research reaches beyond human-centered narratives. “As I continue to unpack the impact of our progress,” she said, “I’m interested in tracking the movements of plants, of spices, of foods, of languages, and the traces of Neolithic earthworks and ditched enclosures in Europe and Southeast Asia.”

Looking at these movements reframes displacement as ongoing rather than exceptional. “Human movements are ancient and migration has always been what we do.”

Tracing these migrations also reveals how deeply people have reshaped the natural world. “It reveals that we’ve often left our traces in the natural world and altered the landscape and flora and fauna since prehistoric times,” she said. Archaeobotanical remains of spices, grains and tools found across continents point to long histories of exchange.

“The transplanting of botanical organisms from their native environments to all corners of the Earth indicates the extent of human migration and our colonization of nature, resulting in significant changes in various forms of biodiversity,” she added.

A recent shift in her work grew out of encounters with deep time. Research in Chemnitz, Germany, on an early Permian forest buried beneath the city, and at the Petrified Forest National Park of the Triassic Chinle formation in Arizona, reshaped her sense of scale.

“The most recent shift in my work is the recognition of how microscopic our human history is when situated within a vast stretch of Earth’s deep time,” she said. “Being in awe of such earth’s ancient remnants, I felt profoundly humbled learning that these depositional environments can indicate processes and climate events that had taken place in deep geological time.”

That awareness informed “Spheres of Time,” an immersive multi-channel audio and 360° video installation currently screened at the AlloSphere at UCSB, and continues through the exhibition.

The presentation also marks a homecoming. Chung earned her MFA at UCSB in 2000, where she was advised by Professor Emerita Kim Yasuda and Professor Emeritus Colin Gardner, and where she developed the analytical and visual framework that continues to shape her practice. “Grad school taught me critical thinking in building the conceptual framework for each project,” she said. It was also where she refined her approach to making and discussing art. Living outside of the U.S. after graduate school and meeting artists from around the world, she added, “reignited my childhood curiosity about the world through literature.”

Throughout her career, Chung has worked with archives and lived experiences outside official accounts. “It’s important to recognize there is a space between a person’s lived experience and the act of someone observing or learning about it,” she said. “Empathy is not the same as understanding or knowing the actuality of surviving war and disaster.” Borrowing from Trinh T. Minh-ha, she described the need to “‘speak nearby’ rather than to speak for someone.”

Being given a platform, she added, carries responsibility — not only to highlight people’s stories and memories, but to share that space “with care and the right ethics.”

“Tiffany Chung: indelible traces” is on view Jan. 17 through April 26 at the AD&A Museum.

Tags
Climate Change

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