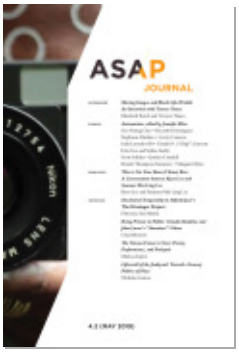
This is Not Your Bone (China) Box: A Conversation between Kyoo Lee and Summer Mei Ling Lee



Kyoo Lee, Summer Mei Ling Lee

ASAP/Journal, Volume 4, Number 2, May 2019, pp. 327-343 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2019.0017*

Kyoo Lee and Summer Mei Ling Lee

THIS IS NOT YOUR BONE (CHINA) BOX

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN KYOO LEE AND SUMMER MEI LING LEE

During the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it was difficult to bury the remains of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Permanent aliens until its repeal in 1943, Chinese Americans were excluded from citizenship and unable to return if they left the country. As such, most did not want to be buried so far from ancestral homes, where they would be forgotten and left out of family ritual customs, particularly second burial. This rite of

Figure 1.
Kyoo Lee and Summer Mei Ling Lee in conversation. Stills from An Initiation into Personal Mystery. *Film by Jim Choi (2018). Image courtesy of the artist.*

ASAP/Journal, Vol. 4.2 (2019): 327-344

exhuming the dead, cleaning the bones, and burying them again is a long tradition in southern China, dating back thousands of years to when the Han Chinese migrated from the north.

With assistance from family associations established by the first immigrants to America, Chinese Americans were able to ship bones back home. At the heart of this enormous repatriation effort was Tung Wah Hospital (TWGH), Hong Kong's first hospital and charity for the care of Chinese people. TWGH facilitated the return of tens of thousands of bone boxes, housing them temporarily for family retrieval, and even delivering many back to hometowns and villages.

On the occasion of the 135th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act and in an effort to bring new attention to the hospital's critically important role in the history of the Chinese American diaspora, the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, with support from the present-day TWGH, commissioned third-generation Chinese American artist Summer Mei Ling Lee to create a new work in response to this legacy.

In early 2017, Lee traveled to Hong Kong where TWGH historians shared the story of their remarkable efforts and, on one of her visits to the archives, opened for her one of the many unclaimed bone boxes they continue to protect. This one, like one-third of the boxes shipped overseas from the U.S., was empty—perhaps a "soul summoning box," with just a name in it for an individual whose body was likely vandalized or in some way unrecoverable.

Lee's exhibition, *Requiem*, is her expression of that discovery. In an installation that occupies the entirety of the Chinese Culture Center gallery, Lee investigates the experience of dislocation and immigration and pays homage to TWGH's extraordinary effort to seek a home for the displaced and its continuing custodianship of scores of forgotten ancestors.

The installation leads visitors through dark galleries where hanging veils partially obscure murals painted with ash collected from the incense that TWGH lights daily for the bone boxes still under their care. Video projections of geese flocks reveal these paintings in brief glimpses. Deep within the exhibition, visitors encounter the exact bone box that was opened for Lee in Hong Kong.

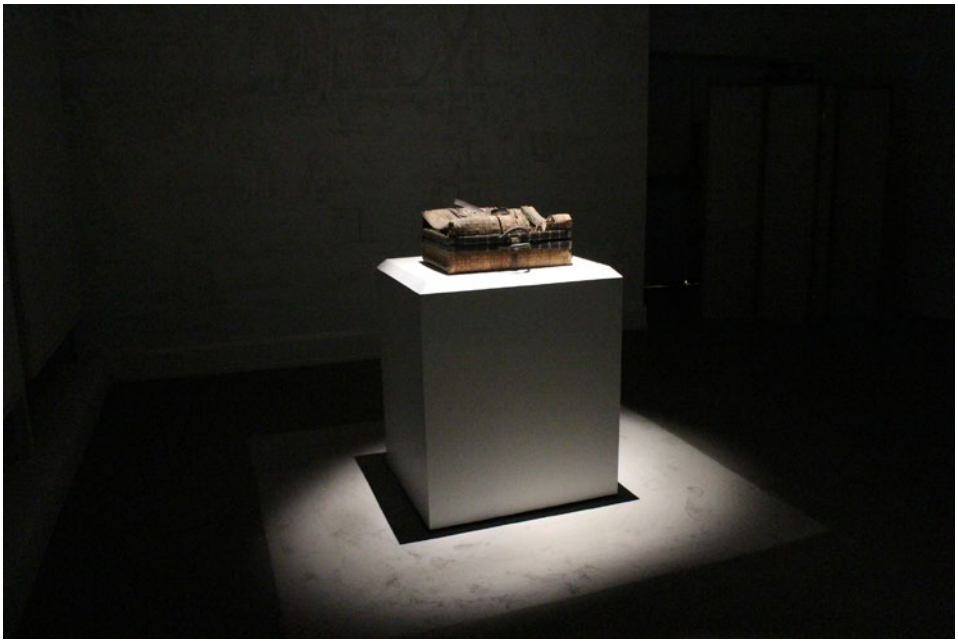


Figure 2.
Summer Mei Ling Lee, Installation component of Requiem *(Bone Box). Courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. Photography by Pamela Gentile. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The following is a condensed and edited script of a philosophical conversation between Summer Mei Ling Lee and Kyoo Lee about the exhibition and the history of the bone boxes. The conversation took place in October 2017 in Hoy Sun Ning Yung Cemetery, San Francisco, one of the oldest Chinese cemeteries in the U.S., where Summer's great grandmother is buried. Their discussion, which lasted nearly two hours, covers ideas ranging from the broadness of absence and presence, to the almost invisible subtleties of dust and memory. While querying on the dead from one's life who are no longer here but remain here, Summer and Kyoo draw luminous reflections on how art can bring the infinite and finite into coincidence.

KYOO LEE/ Your connection to the immigrants in this history, in this exhibition, who were repatriated in bone boxes back to China, concerns your relationship to your own grandmother. The absent presence of your grandmother in your life, who was an immigrant during that period, to whom you were very close, and who is buried in this

cemetery, is central to you as "a sense of obligation"; I also remember you saying that your grandmother kept telling you to "remember, you are Chinese." Again, this "obligation" you say you feel is anchored in that embodied experience of that person, that person of special importance, in your life, as a link to your life right now. We talked about this world-historical miracle, these third-generation, fourth-generation, fifth-generation individuals. How does it happen? We survived. Here are the children, the offspring. That seems really connected to your sense of, and practice of, art as an artist. That autobiographical, biographical, familial and existential, social, political—your whole aspect is somehow the condensed metaphoricity of your grandmother as the literal index that can never be somehow unpacked completely.

We are talking about your art that is evolving right now. . . . there's a very intense duality of references or directions. "References" isn't quite right—rather, directions to that homage. You pay homage to that particular personal connection; yet, the oneness becomes infinite. And that's what I also saw in your current show that prompted us to have this conversation. Your practice as an artist, from my point of view as a friend and reader and participant in your work, seems quite striking in that you're carrying this duality on the levels of a sense of task.

I wonder if you can say something about some episodic moments in your childhood, your life with her: what your grandmother was to you, how she also had a sense of mission, how she wanted to transmit something to you, and how is that connected to your artistic practice.

SUMMER MEI LING LEE/ Well, my grandmother, in her resilience to the immigration experience during the Exclusion Act, insisted on remembering her Chineseness. And directed me, in these exact words, to remember that I am Chinese, as you recalled me telling you about that, yes. But, I am, for all intents and purposes, white. I didn't grow up in China. For me to remember my Chineseness was a choice; it has to be a choice, because I had the freedom to not remember, growing up in this white context.

KL/ Yeah, that duality vis-à-vis a "choice," in your case, is interesting. In a curious way, you, three generations distant from that period in the Chinese immigrant history, cannot choose *not* to be Chinese; consider the more recent immigrants who, *because* it's so obligatory, would choose not to be or become Chinese, regardless of whether they are seen, considered, or identified as Chinese. We are talking of certain kinds of *decisions*, like you were making a decision without really making a decision. It's decided for you, but you were actually responding to that. In this kind of "mixed" situation, the ethics of identity is fused with a certain responsorial dissonance. Some people struggle with that state of confluence and confusion with a fairly prescribed determinist structure. Your way of dealing with that is a little different, because of the literal dissemination of diaspora, the multiplicity that you get caught

on. It becomes very literal, right? Your choice then is not something you make consciously; again, it's a kind of a response. Something was already transmitted or planted in you, and you're responding to that. But you have to take it as your obligation, so in a sense you have no choice, but you're making a decision.

SL/ Maybe the choice is to just to be hospitable.

KL/ That's right, and being able to open up and own up to the very zone of confusing and confused identities, to "accept" those ancestral traces facingly, so to speak, as part of you, means entering into a vulnerable position. You have to allow yourself to be in that position of being easily overread or misread, with certain aspects remaining "inscrutable" then. So you're putting yourself out there with this discourse and see how you're positioned in certain discourses: you can be anything and you can be nothing at the same time. I think this resonates with the idea of "the end of this road" allegorized in your *Requiem* exhibition (Fig. 2). There's this emptiness, a bone box without bones—there's a reason for that, but it's also an artistic decision you're making: the need to reconcile the space between everything and nothing. You want to be, to embody, to be in a position of hospitality but to also recognize this hostility of negation. So it's not a multicultural kumbaya.

SL/ Exactly. Maybe this bone box is the best vehicle to carry the burden of representation.

KL/ That's why it had to be the ethics of vacancy: you're leaving the room for the other to come in to inhabit. That is the reproductive emptiness. There's also all this, the box; when you talked about bone boxes, I imagined a box, like a sealed box. I told you, I was struck by it, it's really beat up, like a suitcase with all these holes. It's open, it's—

SL/ Fragile.

KL/ Fragile. And just like the very metaphor and the metaphysics of the bone. Bone is sturdy, but fragile; there's a fracture. Dead bodies' bones come in a fractured form, but they remain as residue, the remains of the body, so fragile because that's what we're reduced to at the end of the day. But it's something you cannot simply push aside: being there and not there at the same time. It seems you're reconciling with that space of contradiction, and your art is constantly returning to that abyss, that abyss of ashes that every-body, any-body becomes. And so your dedication *of much of your art practice* to your grandmother is a gift back to your grandmother, but everybody, anybody who steps into that space to grieve and hear themselves and recognize something from the other can also receive that gift. In regards to this abyssal moment of transition, or transmission, in short, there's nothing there; it's because there's everything in there. But if you look around, there are ashes, ash paintings. Like a visual and performative illustration of that moment of diaspora, that sort of freedom, you liberate and release that energy into the abyss. The dust and ashes on the exhibition walls surrounding the bone box are the particles of freedom, the irreducible poignancy of

Figure 3.
Summer Mei Ling Lee, Installation component of Requiem. *Courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. Photography by Pamela Gentile. Image courtesy of the artist.*

transient beings rendered visible. For me, your art bears a visceral ethics and we can see how these every-bodies and any-bodies materialize in these ash paintings and walled space.

SL/ Well, as you're talking, it occurs to me—as you open up an articulation that is beyond me—that when you're painting with ashes you realize that they're just fine little bits of indexical material. They're the closest we can get to the microscopic in our field of vision. And they accumulate to the point where they're just making all these images, and accumulated in turn to cover almost the entire gallery. There is something atomic in this, the ability for the spirit in this box to become—to come from nothing—to expand and then come back to nothing.

> ***"... when you're painting with ashes you realize that they're just fine little bits of indexical material. They're the closest we can get to the microscopic in our field of vision."***

KL/ The dust. When I like to think about dust and death and dust, I sense that this aesthetics

is also very much part of a certain philosophic imaginary we see in the Eastern, in Chinese culture. The very wishes: "bury my bones." Or: "take me home." Right? Or welcome home to your unhome? There was actually a "welcome mat" at the entrance to the exhibition hall, as I recall. Quite straightforwardly, it signals your art, your frame. So there's a tension to that stage where death becomes literally the marker of a certain passage within the universe, so that dust becomes atomic, quantum, something *there*, anyway. The irreducibility of that marker translates to ashes. It's like a cave painting, fresco, something like that, but the joke is that this metaphysics of temporality is embodied in the idea of dust. I'm also thinking, for instance, coming from New York, of 9/11: the destruction, the human cost, the destruction, and how people continue to grapple with the question of dust.

SL/ Yes. Because there were bodies in that dust. It was scattered all over.

KL/ Yes, and the grieving: this dust is a key indexical moment, an ingredient, as it were, in your show. I was drawn to the poignantly "universalized" indexicality of that box at the "end" of the show. When I looked around, there's all that dust *in* figures; figures made in and of dust. . . . what do we make of them? Also, quite simply, where do they come from and where do they go? The dust you gathered from the cemetery site in Hong Kong and brought to the exhibition hall is a particular kind of dust, which makes your show a particular form of mourning. By restaging the irreducible end-point of the process of burning, your work discloses some traces of life in and of death. So this requiem, this space, is intimately connected to the life and death cycle of the universe. You as an artist—as a telepathic and telephonic operator—you're letting yourself be the site through which the voices of the dead speak for themselves. In order for that to happen, the structure has to be disclosive, to allow disclosure. It's an acknowledgement of tragedy as the condition, the necessary condition, for the possibility of life.

Because you're dealing with someone else's unfinished business, right? It's unfinished business and she knows that when she dies—and when I say "she," I mean your grandmother, but also "she" the proper, almost the pronounced, the generalized proper name—there's a gender, there's a difference between "he" and "she," the incubator, the one who keeps generating, the gift of life and the gift of death. That moment of disclosure: you allow this seemingly closed door to reopen because you know it contains something rather uncontainable after all. It's a bone box, the historical trajectory you're responding to, your trip to Hong Kong, what you're discovering and thinking about.

SL/ That hits it right on the head. The boxes that remain at Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong are a question mark of unfinished business. At the pedestrian level, they're never going to go home. They sit as a testimony to unfinished business, which is then

> ***The boxes that remain at Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong are a question mark of unfinished business. At the pedestrian level, they're never going to go home. They sit as a testimony to unfinished business, which is then the opening to generate something.***

the opening to generate something; whereas if they had been returned home, this project would never have happened. In fact, Stella, who manages the Tung Wah archives, said that the archives were speaking to her, which initiated this whole project. So there is unfinished business on that level; but what also struck me is the bone boxes wanting to go home—and home is never settled, and will never be settled. That business will never be finished. So the bone boxes stand as a metaphor for never settling home while they are forever in this coffin home.

KL/ Coffin home, yeah, I noticed that. "Coffin home," that's strange! It's storied. You never use the word "home" to house dead people. Is it a translation of the Chinese words?

SL/ No, no, they called it coffin home. It's historic and they always called it that. The question of a home—

KL/ Not "tomb," but a coffin home.

SL/ Exactly. Or even "resting place." Or mortuary, which comes from the word "dead." They call it a home. And yet, clearly, it's not anybody's conception of home in there. It's a passage.

KL/ If I may move that back into the earlier part of our conversation on the sense of your own, say, cyclical philosophical affinity, this sense of being in the middle, of being stuck in the middle.

SL/ Unbelonging.

KL/ Unbelonging. That gives you an incredible level of flexibility. You can elasticize your identity in all sorts of ways that fit or misfit, but the precise location of belonging creates a bird-like precarity and constant need to know where you are, right? Because you're not there, there. So that's unfinished business too, because it's always business as usual in that unhoming.

SL/ And to always be aware of not congealing myself into displacement also. To resist fixing my identity or work in the state of unbelonging.

KL/ As you elevate that act of unhoming to an art of displacement through, say, disclosure, there's a kind of vulnerability and articulation. Another idea, the idea of this initiation. . . .

SL/ Yes, art is not an act of communication but an initiation into private mystery.

KL/ So, that private mystery remains really murky in the sense that it's dirt. I don't mean it in a moral sense but an almost literal, material, aesthetical sense. Maybe this zone, the compaction, where you're stuck and something sticks and you're there, is unlocatable and beyond any categories because you remain just you in that the bone of you—you yourself become *the* bone of contention. Guess this might be when one becomes aware of this Dasein myth of oneself, one's being-toward-death. We talked about this last night in terms of Heideggerian disclosure. The being of you, the beingness of you, and what can art do in that, various points of cyclical disappearance and appearance of you.

SL/ Right, and one of the aphorisms from my mentor, Takeyoshi Nishiuchi, is how being reveals resistance when you try to translate it into language, and I think art, when it's at its best, circumvents this and embraces the resistance of being in a certain way, it maybe discloses being as resistant to translation.

KL/ Because your art, your performative and procedural intervention takes up someone

Figure 4.
Summer Mei Ling Lee, Installation component of Requiem. *Courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. Photography by Zhengdong Ye. Image courtesy of the artist.*

else's unfinished business and unfurls it, this is you breathing a certain life and afterlife into that impossible site and state of being.

And back in that vein, do you want to say something about your decision without decision—you know, people giving you this feedback saying it's good you didn't bring in twenty boxes.

SL/ Yeah, it didn't occur to me! It's very intuitive. The sound—I knew I needed the sound—I had a friend that came in and said you need something violent in here, and I said I agree. This is where I think the best things happen in art, where the thing things itself, and I do a good job if I'm listening. And the worst art in the exhibit—the decisions I'm least pleased about—were the ones I had to reach and project myself to solve something. The best ones were me responding to what it needed. And how I met that bone box: it would've never occurred to me to have thirty of them, because the box said to me what it needed. And it needed to be on an altar. It needed to be that one, to be elevated to a holy moment and placed in that context. And when you go into a church—some churches may have naves, but mostly there's the Jesus and the Mary, right at the end. There is the one main altar in front, and that is where everything happens. So it would've never occurred to me!

KL/ The multiplicity of this event is in the reverberation of this event in the reception, so it had to be just one. This had to be the function of the altar, the alterity. Your aesthetic mirroring of this altar-like staging is interesting also because the altar is a site of rituals where one and the other are both summoned like intimate strangers. When we write a book, we write this book that will instantly become different copies, but it's singular—it's the book of the dead, living dead. Well, the book you're writing is the book of the dead in this visual and performative sense as well as in a procedural sense. It's an open book, half legible and half illegible, a very conceptual piece in that regard. And this conceptuality, as I return to this theme, is miraculously anchored in that entirety of history and the body, and

> ***"the book you're writing is the book of the dead [. . .] It's an open book, half legible and half illegible, a very conceptual piece in that regard."***

so we have this very specific context of the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the struggles that typically, but not exclusively, the early Chinese immigrants were having. And I see many Lees, which is interesting—you're a Lee, and I'm a Lee too—and so we went to a Lee family banquet yesterday, what kind of Lee was I in this case, and am I now? I'm interested in that kind of problematic. Ontologically problematic, multiplicity as not

simply a problem we want to solve, but it is what it is; life is a problem, right? It poses itself as this riddle: this riddling multiplicity that cannot just be neat, tidy, and boxed. It contains that alterity that cannot be one, but it's all in one. It seems your box is a little like a box, but it isn't a box. It's interesting, like the coffin home, the bone box, the slip—this linguistic framework retains something about the idea while allowing something else to "slip" through. So when you chose a particular bone box, did you choose that?

SL/ They gave me options, but that was the first box they presented to me. And it's the one I had the experience in front of, so I felt there was an aura in my own experience with that particular one. I had to use that one.

KL/ You didn't see a second, third?

SL/ I did, eventually. They showed me more and they even asked me if they should send more, some made out of metal, and I said no no no, it's the first one. And that it was improvised made it feel like it was closer to otherness. And I can't articulate this—

KL/ This is beautiful.

SL/ I had to keep going back to the first experience to make the exhibit true to that

Figure 5.
Summer Mei Ling Lee, Installation component of Requiem. *Courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. Photography by Pamela Gentile. Image courtesy of the artist.*

experience. It was the North Star I had to keep returning to. And even when the voices were coming from every direction—whether it needed this, needed that—sometimes I was open to those voices because sometimes a third voice can happen, and something good enters in that process. But I had to come back to "what did that box need or want" in that experience that moved me so much. I can see the weaknesses of myself as the translator of that moment, and I hope that at the end of my life I can be a better translator in that moment, but I knew that it needed to be the North Star. And yeah, if I substituted the other box, I knew I'd lose my own connection to the voice inside that box speaking to me.

KL/ Also, this finitude of life being what it is, you just have to let things happen, and trust it.

SL/ Trust that moment.

KL/ Yeah, trust that moment. And that's the dust, the ethics of embodiment, hospitality. And this whole thing, this exhibit was about hospitality. Yeah, and also Tung Wah, this group of hospitals—is that a translation? And the hospitality, I would have to then evoke the interesting etymological intrigue here: hospitality, where you're welcome, is also where you literally come sick or at times even become. The hospital embodies this ambiguous image of hospitality, of life and death coming together, and this is where the hostility of and toward the other is being managed, the hospital—the allergen, again, the allegory of life and death is all there. So this is a very deconstructive insight I also learned from philosophers like Derrida and Levinas, and we all share, in terms of the ideals, all of that the ethical imperative of welcoming, but recognize and understand the complexity of it as well. You just cannot welcome because they don't come well.

SL/ No, and as Steiner says, the guest can turn despotic.

KL/ That's right. So the quirk that we thought about earlier too, regarding the ideal of, say, this home: as Takeyoshi's aphorism goes, when you welcome a guest you have found your home. The house "becomes" X: such is the *al*logic here. I think he's a more optimistic humanist in this case, there's sort of the positive side of supplementarity when you found yourself, but you're asking: what self?

"The hospital embodies this ambiguous image of hospitality, of life and death coming together, and this is where the hostility of and toward the other is being managed, the hospital—the allergen, again, the allegory of life and death is all there."

SL/ Right, and the guest can destroy you.

KL/ Exactly. So I had an afterthought. Your entry, you have to go around, there's a passage, it's not direct, you have to slightly go around and then see it, it's convoluted. The entry is very interesting and that reminds me of some of the thoughts I seem to have been playing with, and that is about the welcome mat: which direction should it go?

SL/ Yeah, very nice, right. From the inside or from the outside?

KL/ Right, this is interesting: wel-come, for whom? Thus, this welcome mat. And here we are, we're looking at these tombstones. They're welcome mats.

It becomes part of this linkage of this relay of this goodwill and trust and so Tung Wah Group of Hospitals. It's like—if I may also come up with a bit of twist here—business "as unusual." And that's art; it's a chancing trusting that things happen and we just go along with it. The whole transmission system at work; we talked about including some of the alittle disappointing cases, right failures, right? When things don't work out in the way we project, that's part of happening, and so it's incredible to see like this series of encounters and happenings, just as an artist does not know and should not know what it is that she or he or they gives. Because you're just there at a nexus at this transition, right?

SL/ Exactly, amen.

KL/ Amen, right? And so it's the anonymous temporary home-making, so to speak: it felt like that was my home, you know, being in that gallery space for a good hour, sitting there in the chair, gazing at this box that is not a box. . . .

SL/ The un-box.

KL/ The un-box! And at stake is a sort of hardcore fragility, anonymous exposure trusting its own abandonment . . . right? And it was picked up by Tung Wah. One travels through the various systems of such precarious chance encounters and transmission . . . like one feather out of all just moving along together and all along, and in some ways "it" is all sort of there. And you cannot do anything else with it, for that's just what happens. Then you have this viewer of some sorts, indeterminate and intrusive, oddly intimate . . . sitting there, like I'm making this eye contact with the invisible body of the stranger, the dead stranger there.

Not just a stranger but the stranger in a stranger. It goes, it is one, somebody there. And how do we unpack that? How do we also repack it?

Yes, alienation and intimacy come together in that moment because that person will never be known completely, but yet there's a felt intimacy with that person and that space.

SL/ Resonating, reverberating.

KL/ Right, right, and I'd also like to note that that's what a person is per sound. Everybody is a sound box, right?

Figure 6.
Summer Mei Ling Lee, Installation component of Requiem *(Ash Mural). Courtesy of Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. Photography by Zhengdong Ye. Image courtesy of the artist.*

SL/ Wow, beautiful.

KL/ James asked: is all art a priori? Has art already happened? Take Magritte's "This is not a pipe": it is an annunciation in that sense. It's a speech-act becoming visual; it's a critique of representation done in the photo-realistic, representational mode. And so, there is an avant-garde moment in that move. We are looking at the afterlife of life, of art—art as having already happened, and with a deictic "this" that is the matrix of the invisible, something that is beyond and after and below. So that's the invisible frame that I think is prompting you to get out . . . into something . . . and as you enter into that zone, a matrixial no man's land, it gets all jumbled, and then you get so confused, and delighted, of course, but that's not the point. It's just an effect. The way you mark this space of time by allegorizing the "unfinished" business of identity, by accentuating the bone and the bone box—its transhistorical temporality in particular—brings into the "show space" what lies outside that space. For me, that's art. In a similar way (although not the same, as a matter of course), there's the parallel with Magritte. This is not a pipe: this is not a bone.

SL/ Oh, wow.

> ***The way you mark this space of time by allegorizing the "unfinished" business of identity, by accentuating the bone and the bone box—its transhistorical temporality in particular—brings into the "show space" what lies outside that space. For me, that's art.***

KL/ This is not a bone. It's true. It's not a bone—and yet this *is* a bone. What are you going to do about this paradox? Ask these questions, right? So it's a priori in the sense of responding to the question that generated the event, so we need to be able to sense this event. We are talking about the structure of representation here—something is constantly pushing (itself) forward, and then something follows. I think there's a kind of doubling and constant intermirroring of the uncontainable within the space.

SL/ The first thing that occurred to me about the bone box is that it's closed, but that it's also open, because whatever's in it is not containable.

KL/ Again, on boxing—on boxing the box, but not in the sense of repackaging. You are familiar with some of those artistic practices? Well, what you're sharing is the undoneness of the box, of box-ing. It's like a half: something opens up—what are you going to do about it? That's the ethics of the box. Let's pay attention to that. Look: it's there. It's unfinished. How do you spot it?

This line of thinking reminds me also of Erich Auerbach's discussion of Odysseus's scar. Odysseus, the hardened traveler, is displaced, exiled, heroic, macho, and nonmacho . . . all that. Now, how does this "homecoming" hero or a random beggar passing by get "identified," when returning home almost unrecognizable through all this ordeal, this journey?

SL/ Wow.

KL/ James was asking about your reference in the exhibition to the Annunciation.

SL/ Again, many layers. The most pedestrian is the Annunciation moment when you have to leave home, when the house of cautionary being is being intruded upon. Then, there's the annunciation that I feel good art does; something intrudes upon you, and you cannot go back to your house of cautionary being which collapses, and then of course is rebuilt, because we need that tragic flaw of security. I am incredibly obsessed with this motif. That Sant'Ambroggio put the book in Mary's hands—she had to be reading. And this was

at a time when women were not reading, or allowed to be literate, but Mary has a book. It put her in the condition of solitude that an angel could come visit her in that state of literary piety, and then when the angel comes, the Word inside of her literally becomes alive. The Word, in the form of a baby, has been enunciated. And that moment of transmutation, her reading to the Word becoming alive, is the aesthetic moment. In this case, an angel came and did it—I believe in that. If I look at my volition in this project, it was very little. It was that something other entered. The conditions are set and she had to be hospitable. One of my favorite paintings, she actually turns away, is like—no no no no no no! She looks like, in most of them, like, oh shit. My friend made a joke, no I don't want to have a baby, I wanted to have a career!

KL/ I have a book to write, another book to write!

SL/ Yeah, exactly!

KL/ Or to read. It's not the book that I want! Yeah, it's not the Word I want.

SL/ That's funny. And that is life. How hospitable are we to these annunciations? Mary gambles a welcome, but really there is no choice; she opened the door and three men came knocking. I feel that the Jesus story is—as I read it—a tragedy. What's being announced to her is that a horrible thing is gonna happen to her; there's hope that he's going to save humanity or whatever, but we know in this context that there's a very tragic ending, that a mother loses her son.

KL/ You're right. Something is gained in transmission and lost in transmission too. This is the gamble.

SL/ And so if I take that back to this pedestrian moment where mothers lost their sons in immigration, most of the bone boxes meant that mothers were sending sons across the sea who wouldn't return. . . . I mean, I can really just riff on this.

KL/ That's a really important detail: certain demographic patterns in the house of cautionary being, the specificity of "X" especially in that period—I mean, those bodies burnt, boxed and sent, and marked as such, also an "X" number of bodies, also most likely and mostly men! And their longing to be, to go home, return home, and to be . . . unhome.

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of the bone boxes in Hong Kong and Taishan, China is featured in a documentary film, Requiem. *Her work is in the permanent collection of He Xiangning Museum in Shenzhen, China.*

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