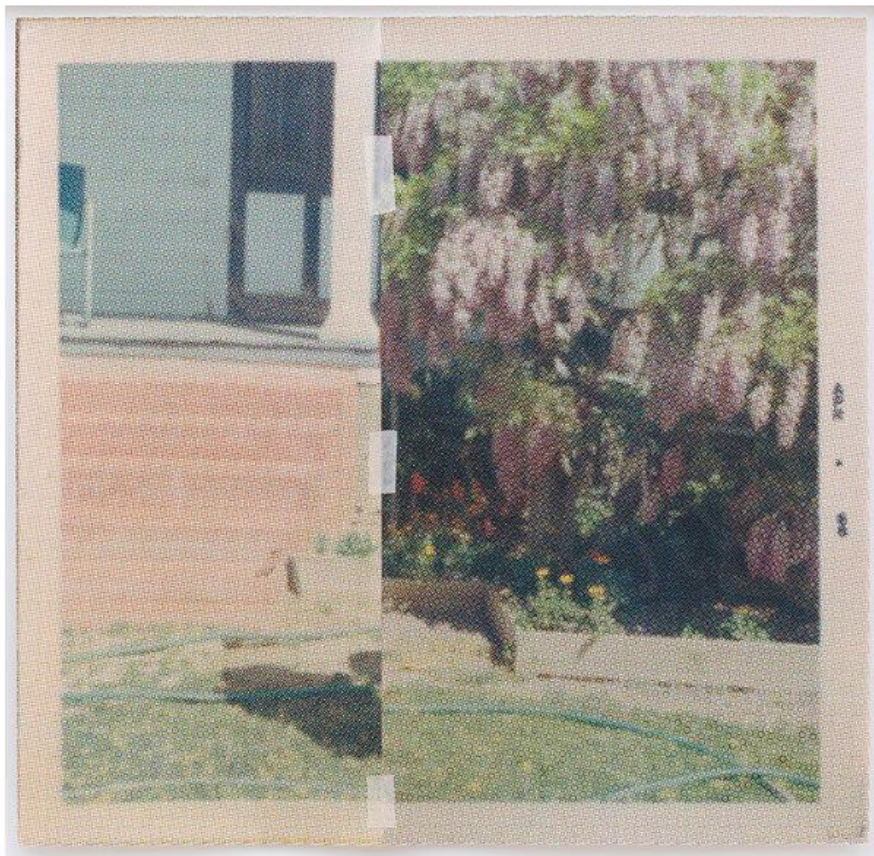




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APR-66-Wisteria © Chinn Wang

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Chinn Wang Conceals and Reveals Her Family's Hidden History

Recent 93rd Annual Print Center exhibition finalist Chinn Wang cuts up and recasts her family's photos to make sense of their missing pieces.

Exhibition Review by Deborah Krieger

It's like the classic riddle: what casts a shadow but cannot be seen? In [Soaking Up Local Color](#), Chinn Wang's solo show at Philadelphia's Print Center, the answer might be something like "the

past” or “history” or “family heritage.” The child of immigrant parents who purposefully chose to focus on their American future instead of sharing their family histories with their daughter, Wang addresses this gap in knowledge and representation in a haunting visual manner. The works on display are screen-printed enlargements of photographs of Wang’s mother, newly on American soil soon after she immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1960s in a variety of settings: a field of flowers by a mountain, the gravel of a parking lot, the manicured grass of a lawn.



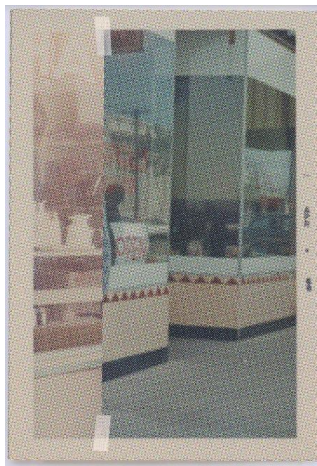
APR-68. Installation Photograph by Jaime Alvarez

Or, rather, we must take Wang’s word for it that these works once depicted her mother. Critically, Wang has then edited these images viscerally and physically by cutting her mother out of each photograph, collapsing each image on itself until the only indications left of her mother’s presence are the purposefully obvious seam, held together with tape, and the literal shadow of her mother’s form in each image as it appears on the ground of each composition. Her mother is both there and not-there, gone in physical form even as the evidence of her existence is also simultaneously visible.

What do you remember of your family history? How did each of us in the United States, that famed melting pot of cultures and peoples from around the world, get here today? My family’s own most incredible apocryphal story is that my great-grandfather Lou only met my great-grandmother Mollie by a chance of fate, when he dialed the wrong number on the phone and reached her instead of the person he was trying to call. Apparently, Lou was charming enough to keep Mollie on the line long enough to convince her to meet him, a total stranger, in person, and so it went from there.



Installation Photograph by Jaime Alvarez



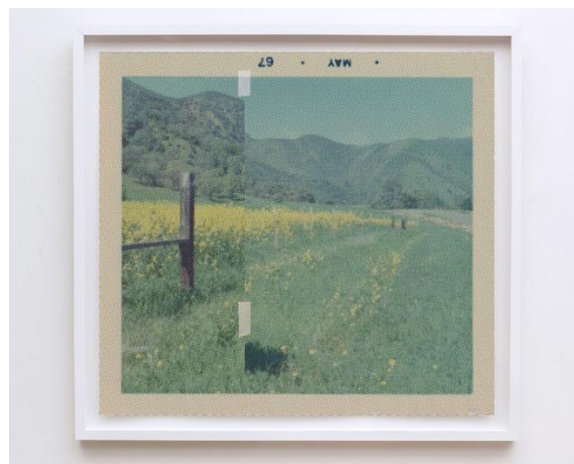
APR-66 - Hardware. © Chinn Wang

Each of us are only on this Earth by some kind of accident of the universe, and this accident is so precarious that it bears repeating down the generations inside family homes and blasted onto a billboard by the highway. Without this family history, I wouldn't exist. Without this knowledge, I would be missing a part of myself, only experiencing its shadow as a fact of my having been born to Lou's and Mollie's grandson. I would know its effect, but not its cause. Wang's works in *Soaking Up Local Color* present a similar conundrum; the images on display are of a purposeful nothing, of a disappearance, of the elision of history making its presence unmistakably felt, even if we cannot see it.

On a purely theoretical level, it's worth wondering whether the technique Wang uses – removing her mother's form while keeping her presence evident – is a potential way of eliding, or at least complicating, problems of the gaze. We cannot see Wang's mother; we cannot study her for some kind of attempt to understand her emotions or state of mind in each image, but she is also unmistakably there in each image. Not knowing who took these photographs adds to the intrigue, as it creates another layer of remove between us and Wang's mother.

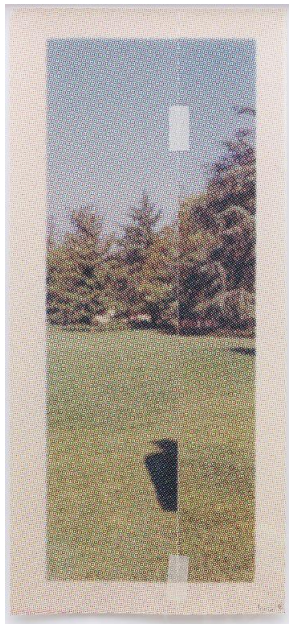


OCT - 66 (*Two Towers*) © Chinn Wang



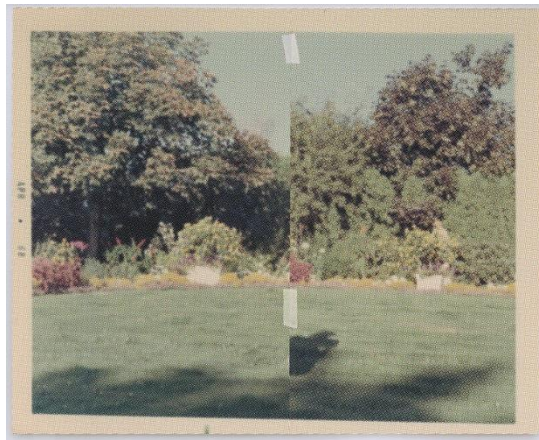
May 67 - *Mountains*. © Chinn Wang

Depending on who takes our photo, we show different sides of ourselves, so that even the most so-called honest or candid photograph of ourselves might only represent one small aspect of who we are. Of course, there is inevitably the tendency to wonder, to imagine based on the faint body language visible in the shadows, what Wang's mother was thinking, or feeling, in the original photographs before her absence became magnified through Wang's manipulations. Was she bothered by the pollen from the flowers in *MAY 67 (Mountains)*; did she want to just stand like a statue and admire the blue sky over the water in *OCT 66 (Two Towers)*? The degree of contrast between the shadow and the ground it's cast upon, wrongly or not, allows for a level of interpretation of the mood of the work.



GRAD, 2018. © Chinn Wang

In *GRAD, 2018* the sharp delineation of Wang's mother's shadow across a neatly-cut grass lawn evokes a sense of exhaustion, of tired stasis. In contrast, the feeling derived from *APR 68 (Garden)* is one of peace, of satisfaction: while we cannot see how Wang's mother is standing in this garden of grass and rows of planted flowers, the outline of her form is softer; it almost appears as if she is holding up a camera of her own, determined to capture the plants in her garden just as she's being captured and memorialized in this photograph.



APR 68, Garden. © Chinn Wang

The title *Soaking Up Local Color* comes from an episode of *I Love Lucy*, "Lucy's Italian Movie," (April 16, 1956) where Lucy travels to Italy to study for a role in an Italian movie and ends up stomping grapes in a wine factory. The joke is that her feet are [getting covered in purple grape juice](#), and that

Lucy is gaining some understanding of the practice of Italian winemaking practices, “soaking up local color” both literally and figuratively.

The use of an I Love Lucy reference in an exhibition about immigration and assimilation is a knowing one, given that the inclusion of Desi Arnaz, Lucille’s Cuban-born husband, as her husband Ricky Ricardo in the narrative of the show arguably [changed how Americans viewed Latino immigrants](#). Desi was able to hold onto some aspect of his identity and succeed in postwar America; the corollary, as presented by Chinn Wang, is that her parents felt they could not do the same. In order to soak up the local color, as we see in these manipulated photographs, you literally have to disappear, to assimilate, to vanish the parts of yourself until only the shadows remain.

[Older: Wig Heavier Than A Boot: A Collaboration of Poetry, Photography and Queer Identity](#)

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