

*Kenneth*

*Tam: Tender is the band which  
holds the stone of memory*



**October 26, 2022  
–May 7, 2023**

**BALLROOM** MARFA



# Thoughts on the Exhibition

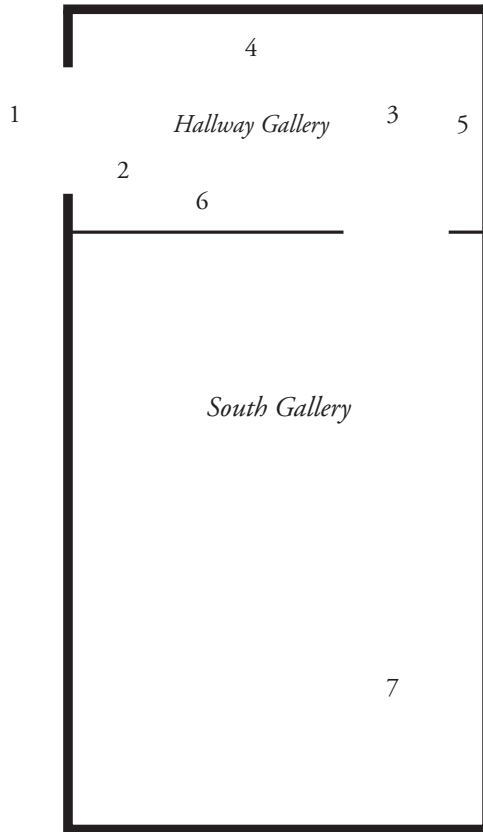
Kenneth Tam's solo exhibition *Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory* features a series of commissioned sculptures alongside a two-channel video installation. In his exhibition, Tam unearths forgotten histories in order to reimagine our own identities and to question dominant myths that shape and govern our bodies. One of the most enduring myths that still haunts our nation is Manifest Destiny and the conquest of the American West. These ideologies have circulated and remain embedded in popular culture through Westerns and advertising, such as the figure of the Marlboro Man. These images reified claims to Indigenous land as well as distorted Indigenous histories, while also enforcing stereotypes of Anglo-American masculinity that remain pervasive.

Tam's examination of American westward expansion is rooted in the unrecorded lives of nameless Chinese laborers, who toiled under the most physically arduous conditions in the late nineteenth century. *Silent Spikes*, the video installation on view at Ballroom, weaves together improvised dialogue and movement sequences from a group of participants, along with semi-fictional scenes of a Chinese worker from inside the tunnels of the Transcontinental Railroad. During Tam's site visit to West Texas in 2021, his encounter with artifacts and fragments of objects left at workers' camps along the railroad led him to consider how physical remnants function as stand-ins for the disappeared histories of laborers. Tam's sculptures suggest other ways of thinking about these men. His use of archaeological fragments as visual and material language complicates the simple narratives that have been constructed about migrant lives. In their lifetimes, Chinese laborers were reviled for their race but praised for their industriousness, their worth as people always tied to their ability to labor. Bits of dried food, broken jewelry and other personal items are integrated into the sculptures to point to experiences of precarity, but also tenderness and care. Physical traces—and even the sounds of the railroad passing through Marfa still today—can serve as reminders of how this nation was built, and by whom.

The exhibition is organized by Daisy Nam, Ballroom Marfa Executive Director and Curator with assistance from Alexann Susholtz, Exhibitions and Curatorial Assistant.

– Daisy Nam

# Map



# Exhibition Checklist

**Unless otherwise noted all works are by Kenneth Tam and are commissioned by Ballroom Marfa.** Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles and Mexico City.

1. *Why do you abuse me*, 2022. Epoxy resin, dirt, sand, dried mushrooms, dried seaweed, dried bamboo shoots, dried jujube, dried goji berries, preserved apricots, sunflower seeds, dried roots, dried sweet potato and steel.
2. *He does not know the custom*, 2022. Epoxy resin, dirt, sand, dried mushrooms, dried seaweed, dried bamboo shoots and steel.
3. *Why did you strike me*, 2022. Epoxy resin, dirt, sand, dried mushrooms, dried seaweed, dried bamboo shoots, preserved kumquat, pumpkin seeds, preserved apricots, dried roots and steel.
4. *Dear Mother*, 2022. Leather saddle, aqua-resin, safety whistle, jade bracelet, glass opium vial, Taoist priest doll, paint and steel.
5. *The scent of tea*, 2022. Leather saddle, aqua-resin, cologne bottle, jade, hand of doll, paint and steel.
6. *At night we talk of home*, 2022. Leather saddle, aqua-resin, pepper spray, broken ceramic, paint and steel.
7. *Silent Spikes*, 2021. Two-channel HD video, sound, 20:29 minutes. Commissioned by Queens Museum, with support from the Asian Art Circle at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Production credits:

Participants: Tyler Chen, Theodore Lee, Virgo Raaz, Alfred Tom, Ahnaf Zitou

Dancer: Andrew Chung

Director of Photography: Christian Carroll

Additional Photography: Camen Hodges

Choreography: Alyssa Forte

Cantonese voiceover and translation: Christopher Sin

Sound Technician: Jeffrey Rowell

Wardrobe Stylist: Daisy De Jesus

Costume Designer: Curie Choi

# Thoughts on the works

## Floor Sculptures:

On the floor of the South Hall Gallery, three circular sculptures precariously stand on their edge. They resemble enlarged coins or tokens. With a closer look, one can see dried foods embedded into the sculpture's material that resembles the soil of Marfa. With an even more careful approach, one can get a slight whiff of scents emanating from the work. Kenneth Tam's sculptures are modeled after Chinese coins from the Qing Dynasty of the 1860's. While the Qing Dynasty ruled in China, across the world, the construction of the U.S. Transcontinental Railroad was taking place. Like two sides of a coin, the sculptures draw a link between the timeframes of two empires and important periods in global history.

On the front and back of the surface is the emperor's name inscribed in Chinese and Manchu script (the imperial language of the Qing Dynasty). In Tam's research of the Chinese camps along the railroad, he learned that among the remnants were coins, most likely brought as good-luck charms and talismans. These objects held meaning to the laborers,<sup>1</sup> perhaps embodying ones' memories of home or dreams for the future. Tam's sculptures themselves hold life in them—sustenance is embedded within them. His further research led him to this account:

“Here is a list of the food kept and sold there to the Chinese workmen: Dried oysters, dried cuttle-fish, dried fish, sweet rice crackers, dried bamboo sprouts, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar ... four kinds of dried fruits, five kinds of desiccated vegetables, vermicelli, dried sea-weed, Chinese bacon cut up into salt cutlets, dried meat of the abelona shell, pea-nut oil, dried mushrooms, tea, and rice... Compare this bill of fare with the beef, beans, bread-and-butter, and potatoes of the white laborers, and you will see that John<sup>2</sup> has a much greater variety of food ... The desiccated vegetables were of excellent quality, and dried, evidently, by a process as good as the best in use with us.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Chinese coins were meant to symbolize the sky, while the central hole represented earth. The body of these coins was also called their “flesh” (肉) and the hole was known as “the good” (好).

2 John is short for “John Chinaman,” a racist term used during the 19th century along with other derogatory terms like “coolie.”

3 Nordhoff, Charles. *A Book for Travellers and Settlers*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1873.

The aliveness of these sculptures brings out the humanity of the forgotten lives of the laborers; the objects themselves seem to be emerging from earth and speaking to us. When faced with the coins they ask, as the titles suggest: *Why do you abuse me; He does not know the custom; Why did you strike me.* In many ways, the sculptures are stand-ins for the forgotten lives and histories of migrant workers.

### **Wall Sculptures:**

Tam uses the physical seat and symbol of the American West—a cowboy’s saddle. He splices, upturns, and fuses them with rock formations. Embedded in the rocks (made of aqua resin) are remnants of objects: a piece of a jade bracelet, a safety whistle, a glass opium vial, the face of Taoist priest doll, the hand of the doll, and a broken ceramic cup. We encounter the works as if happening upon an archaeological site. The more contemporary objects—a bottle of pepper spray and cologne—makes one do a double take. What is a bottle of Bleu de Chanel doing there? The product’s tagline, “a timeless scent with a strong masculine signature” comes into question. Will using Bleu de Chanel make you the man you need to be? What can the objects in our lives reveal about our identities? How are our identities shaped and formed? As the pepper spray or whistle suggests—what, or rather, who do we fear?

The wall sculptures are also reminiscent of Chinese scholar rocks, which are ornamental rocks found in nature resembling mountainous landscapes that were collected by Chinese literati. They represented nature’s grand transformational processes embodied in these small rocks. The tension that Tam creates in his sculptures is that they are obviously unnatural formations. The transformational process of our identities is not always natural and can be constructed. Through the re-orientation and reconstruction of the saddles fused with rocks and objects, we can see anew. Variations of shapes, forms, lines, and hidden objects emerge in ways that we have not seen or known before. Similarly, we may be able to see the myths embedded in our culture in a new light and perhaps realize that some stories are in need of excavation.

## Video Installation:

*Silent Spikes*, the two-channel video installation in the South Gallery, begins with footage from a dark and rocky tunnel. Located in Northern California, the tunnel was essentially dug by hand without modern machines by immigrant laborers for the Central Pacific Railroad. A major strike occurred there, as we learn from the film's narrator. His disembodied voice recounts the workers' protest for equal pay and eventually conceding for fear of dying from hunger. The fictional character who speaks in his native tongue was created using the few accounts of Chinese laborers working on the Transcontinental Railroad. The melodic string music of the *guzheng* (the Chinese zither) perhaps articulates and speaks for the immigrant workers, as it evokes a sense of longing. The tunnel functions as a portal to the present day. We see a group of Asian-American men (all hired participants), freely moving their bodies as a counterpart to the brutality of labor on the bodies and spirits of the Chinese railroad workers. At times the men move fluidly and sensuously, and at times awkwardly. We also see the Asian American participants dressed in cowboy drag and performing softer and more tender modes of masculinity: two men sitting side-by-side sharing platonic intimate moments by complementing one another; a man caressing an object—a plastic head of a calf used for roping exercises; men offering their personal definitions of sensuality. These moments of intimacy, humor, and liberation offer new forms of masculinity. It is rare to see this kind of raw and vulnerable portrayal of men. Figures such as the Marlboro Man or the lone cowboy of the American West<sup>4</sup> are still the epitome of masculinity. Like many great American myths, there are secrets and silences, in order to create a hegemonic narrative. In *Silent Spikes*, Tam reminds us that Asians *were* in fact in the American West. While the nation's infrastructure was built on the backs of immigrant workers, their histories were excluded, forgotten, and marginalized.

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<sup>4</sup> Even in Marfa, which was established in 1883 as a water stop for the railroads, there was known to be a saloon, boxcar depot, and a Chinese restaurant



# Artist Biography

Kenneth Tam (b. 1982) was born in Queens, New York, and lives and works in Queens, New York. Tam received his BFA from Cooper Union in 2004. Tam has held solo exhibitions at MOCA Tucson in 2022, ICA LA in 2021, Times Square Arts, New York in 2021; Queens Museum, New York in 2021; Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in 2021, The Kitchen, New York in 2020; Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York in 2020; Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin in 2019; 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, CA in 2018; the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2018; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, Boston in 2017; and Night Gallery, Los Angeles in 2013. Tam has participated in group exhibitions at The Shed, New York in 2021, SculptureCenter, New York in 2019; 47 Canal, New York in 2018; Hollybush Gardens, London, UK in 2017; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles in 2016; and Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2016. He is the recipient of a NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Work in 2021, Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant in 2016 and 2019; California Community Foundation Fellowship in 2015; and Art Matters Foundation Grant in 2013 and has participated in residencies including Artist Lab at 18th St. Arts Center in 2018, LMCC Workspace in 2017-18, Pioneer Works in 2019, and the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2015. Tam is faculty at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, and beginning in January will be an Assistant Professor at Rice University.

Tam's work is in the collections of Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and Dallas Museum of Art, Texas.

# BALLROOM MARFA

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