Marfa art exhibit centers lives of Chinese railroad workers

Kenneth Tam's works at Ballroom Marfa include artifacts that workers left behind.

By Michael Marks  |  February 2, 2023

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Installation view of "Kenneth Tam: Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory," running from October 26, 2022 to May 7, 2023 at Ballroom Marfa.
In the late 1800s, railroad companies in the United States were desperate for labor to finish cross-country rail lines, including tracks that ran through remote parts of Texas.

The answer was immigrant laborers – mostly from China. They lived and laid track in the West Texas desert for a couple years. When the job was done, few people were concerned about telling their story.

But a unique art exhibit at Ballroom Marfa has brought them back into focus. It’s called “Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory” – and includes a series of sculptures and a video by artist Kenneth Tam, also a professor at Rice University. Tam spoke to the Texas Standard about his work and research. Listen to the story above or read the transcript below.

*This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity:*

**Texas Standard:** I think a lot of people are more familiar with the stories of Chinese immigrant labor on the transcontinental railway, especially on the western coast, as they were building out through the mountains and all of that. When did you first discover the history of railway workers from China in Texas?
Kenneth Tam: I think I learned about that when I was invited by Ballroom Marfa to stage an exhibition there, and the curator, Daisy Nam, was interested in having me respond to the histories that were in West Texas. And I think she was the one that actually clued me into the fact that there were Chinese railroad laborers working, if not in Marfa, at least in the region.

Well, now, I understand you spent some time out in Seminole Canyon, which is a state owned natural site, looking for artifacts left behind by these migrant laborers. Can you describe what that experience was like and why Seminole Canyon?

The Southern Pacific Railroad went directly through Seminole Canyon. And so we thought that would be a good place to do some research. And at the park, there is a small museum that actually contains some of these artifacts left behind from the railroad workers. Some of these things included, you know, kitchenware, glassware, basically the refuse – the garbage. Things that were able to survive the harsh landscape over about 150 years ago. So these are the kinds of things that we were looking for and hoping to sort of be able to see firsthand.
Is there any way of knowing how many of these laborers stayed after the work was done or if they went back to California or back to their home country?

I think that’s really hard to know. You know, I think from my research, what I understood was that most people that came here did not expect to actually stay in the U.S.. These are people that came here just to work and return to their families and reunite with their families. It was really never their intention to start a new life in this country. Certainly, they were not welcome in any way to continue their lives here. So I’m sure many, you know, returned home that were able to. But however, there are many, you know, Chinese that continue to find other work, start businesses across Texas – across West Texas and beyond. And their descendants continue to live throughout the region today.

Kenneth, I wonder if you could say something about the working conditions for these laborers. How well-paid were they and what was the work like?

Well, if you can imagine the harsh landscape of West Texas and being outside and doing really strenuous manual labor without the aid of machines. There was no sort of mechanical aid to what they were doing, which included shoveling, surfacing, grading, hauling debris and, of course, laying track. I imagine it was pretty difficult, if not incredibly dangerous as well. In terms of what they were paid, there’s evidence they were paid less than their white counterparts, let’s say. They were chosen to work because they could be paid less and because no one else wanted to do this work, to be honest.
"Why do you abuse me," by Kenneth Tam.
Yeah. So I should also say that, you know, while my work does depend on a certain amount of research, my work is by no means academic in and of itself. And in fact, I kind of take liberties with the materials that I research. So some of the sculptures, in particular this one series of cast dirt coins that I made, are composed of organic vegetable matter that’s embedded within these enlarged coins that are largely made of dirt.

And these coins resemble actual coins that were found on many of the worker campsites. These are coins that were brought over from China. And of course, when they were in America, these coins lost their actual value, their economic value, but they were reused as good luck charms and often buried in the ground for superstitious value. So I took some of these coins and enlarged them, and I thought that they were an interesting way to think about the sense of loss and perhaps even finding a way to memorialize them while still understanding their absence maybe is the best way to describe it.

The embedded vegetables in the sculptures will one day also disappear. They will decay. They are not archival materials and they will leave behind these kinds of small voids within it. I think I’m really interested in the void as a way of marking this absence. I’m not trying to fill in history as much as trying to make us understand and appreciate the fact that there are so many gaps and forgotten histories in the way we understand the West and the larger story about our country.

Tell us about the video. What did you do with the video?

The video was a piece that was actually commissioned originally by the Queens Museum in New York. And it’s a video where I worked with a number of Asian-American men who were not actors but were interested in performing in a kind of different way. And some of these men I had dressed up as cowboys and sort of do activities or tried to emulate some of the gestures of, say, a rodeo rider, while also at the same time, there is a kind of parallel story happening that talks about the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad, where we actually went and shot material at various tunnels that used to house the railroad in Northern California. And that site is a massive void literally in the rock.

And again, this is a project that thinks about the void and what it means to have these gaps and absences within history, within time, even within the landscape itself. So the video is a kind of layered and somewhat fragmented attempt to think about the past in the present and perhaps even the future when it comes to these histories of labor and migrant populations.
And that seems to be what your goal is, to sort of tie together those strands as they still exist of the past with the future. I mean, how we think about identity and issues around the way stories can disappear from the landscape.

Absolutely. And while I do try to create these overlaps, I’m not interested in creating any sort of easy resolution. I don’t think that my job as an artist is to kind of give you an easy answer in terms of how to think about these histories. Rather, I would hope that can raise more questions and have people continue to think about the past and to question the sort of received understanding of how we understand our own country.

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