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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 $seeds, dried\ roots, dried\ sweet\ potato, and\ steel, 30\ x\ 30\ x\ 1.5\ in.\ Photo:\ Heather\ Rasmussen,\ Courtesy\ Ballroom\ Marfa\ and\ Kenneth\ Tam$

Object Lessons: Kenneth Tam

January 11, 2023 by sculpturemag

The title, *Why do you abuse me*, comes from a book of English-language phrases given to Chinese laborers who were traveling abroad in the mid-19th century. I was struck by the directness of the question and how matter-of-factly it presented an uncomfortable truth. This simple, yet ultimately unanswerable question says so much about how vulnerable the lives of migrant workers were then, and perhaps are now.

The form of the sculpture references metal currency minted in Imperial China, also known as cash coins. Superstitious railroad workers would often bury them at their camps to bring good luck and fortune, and they now form part of the archaeological record. These gestures were not only necessary because of the dangerous nature of their work, but were also meant to ward off attacks brought on by racial animus, xenophobia, and fear of economic displacement.

At Ballroom Marfa, I tried to reframe ideas about the American West through experiences of vulnerability and the sensuous. This sculpture is one of three enlarged reproductions of a cash coin. It is cast in epoxy resin mixed with dirt and various dried fruits and vegetables, foods that were known to have been brought over from China to supplement workers' diets. These disks of compressed earth can be read as embalmed expressions of precarity and foreignness. They are markers of movement and displacement, memorializing what would otherwise be lost within the couch cushions of history.

"Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory," Tam's exhibition at Ballroom Marfa, is on view through May 7, 2023.