

ARTFORUM



Kenneth Tam, *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 1/2".

MARFA

Kenneth Tam

BALLROOM MARFA

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In a video interview with the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University, Connie Young Yu, whose paternal great-grandfather was a laborer on the first transcontinental railroad in the US, built in the late nineteenth century, shares stories about her relative. One of them involves the Chinese

workers who lived in the labor camps around Northern California: They would go into the Sierra Foothills to look for the remains of other men who were killed during the railroad's construction, according to stories from her father. This effort to find the deceased is different from an archeological or scholarly imperative to unearth truth. Their search was motivated by the need to commemorate and grieve their loved ones, as they were seen by their employers as expendable commodities. These workers were reclaiming their dignity, their humanity.

Young Yu's narrative came to mind when I saw Kenneth Tam's exhibition, "Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory." Here, the artist assumes a number of roles: healer, historian, and cultural critic. The show examines the bigotry that the railroad's Chinese laborers dealt with in the American West, as well as the brutal conditions they endured. Take *Why do you abuse me*, 2022, a sculpture crafted from dirt, sand, and various types of food that these men ate, such as preserved apricots and sunflower seeds. The object is an enlarged version of a coin from the Qing dynasty, an item that the Chinese workers frequently carried around with them as a good-luck charm. Intertwining this token of hope with examples of the men's daily sustenance suggests that staying alive was a multifaceted endeavor that went beyond the physical.

Yet Tam provides a counterpoint to all this hardship in *Silent Spikes*, 2021, a two-channel video installation that features images of Asian-American men in cowboy garb, dancing, conversing, and reflecting on the meaning of sensuality. Their slow and graceful movements mimic those of a bull rider, a symbol of white masculinity that the artist cleverly and beautifully subverts here. The actors in this work are presented as sensual and multidimensional beings—figures who eschew "macho" stereotypes because they fully understand the power of softness.

—Salome Kokoladze