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Added on July 23, 2014

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Site-Specificity: Eight Ounces Half a Pound

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Vancouver's racialized labour history inspires a sculptural response at Chinatown's Access Gallery.



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Eight-Ounces-Half-a-Pound-Access-Gallery-cell-phone-snap-by-MBJ.jpg)

Eight Ounces Half a Pound – Access Gallery – cell phone snap by MBJ

There is no shortage of artists who concentrate on site-specific work these days; and there is no shortage of galleries looking to display work that bears the strong formative and associative imprints of having arisen in a particular time and space. But most often, the relocation of the work into the gallery setting cannot help but to attenuate much of what was compelling about its site-specificity.

The very opposite is true of the sculpture installation, Eight Ounces Half a Pound, at Access Gallery (http://accessgallery.ca/) in the heart of Vancouver's Chinatown, addressing the racialized labour history on which the neighbourhood was built. The physical and emotional proximity of the gallery to the essential references of the work gives the show a stunning immediacy.

Curated by Access Gallery director Kimberly Phillips (http://accessgallery.ca/all/events-2/congratulations-kim-phillips-access-gallerys-new-director-curator/) with assistance from Areum Kim, the impetus for exhibition was the closing (http://www.vancouversun.com/Canada+oldest+Chinese+print+shop+closes+today+after+years+business/9671 of Canada's oldest Chinese language print shop (http://www.vancouversun.com/Canada+first+Chinese+print+shop+still+operating+East+Georgia+with+video/70 across from the gallery on East Georgia Street. Ho Sun Hing Printing Company shuttered its doors on 16 March 2014, after 106 years in business. "Without trying to redress the problems of change and gentrification, we wanted to address issues of urban transformation and acknowledge the unwritten history of this place," says Phillips. The space now occupied by Access Gallery was formerly a small denim factory, whose workers lived in apartments above the industrial space. While evidence of this past incarnation has mostly disappeared, the traces that remain have left Phillips and her colleagues acutely aware of the neighbourhood's centrality in the city's history of racialized labour and ethnic segregation.

Phillips and Kim have brought together artists Guadalupe Martinez (http://www.guadalupemartinez.com/), Katherine Soucie (http://www.katherinesoucie.com/), and Tommy Ting (http://www.tommyting.com/) to wrestle with the gallery's place within a rapidly disappearing Chinatown. While Martinez deals directly with the Ho Sun Hing closure and the transformation of Chinatown itself and Ting takes-on a geographically similar history of Chinese labour in the British Columbia, Soucie addresses broader themes of the impact of social transition on the working class. The work of all three artists speaks to the embodied experiences of those who worked within this specifically situated economic and social context, rather than treating labour in a conceptual or generalized way.

There are similarities and commonalities that conjoin the three sculptural pieces quite beyond addressing the relationship between industrial labour practices and the rapidly evolving post-industrial urban context. All three works are engendered by a well-considered, intensively researched performative practice, making the artistic undertaking far more elaborate than merely producing the finished objects. The process-based constructive methodology of each of the artists is deeply imbued with layers of ritual, reenactment, metaphor, and meditative reflection. As a consequence, the means of creation convey as much significance as the pieces they manifest.

The title of the show reportedly refers to a Cantonese working-class idiom, crooned (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coHyLOH1sBE) by 1970's Hong Kong Cantopop singer Samuel Hui (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Hui), suggesting that no matter which way we do things, we tend to wind-up with the exact same result. The transformation of Vancouver's Chinatown – for better or for worse – seems to refute this resigned fatalism. The individuals whose labour built and sustained Chinatown – and thus also Vancouver and even the Canadian confederation – may not have enjoyed sufficient critical distance to appreciate the role or value of their agency; but we have no such excuse. We cannot dismiss the dynamism of social change as a teleology of sameness. This is why the thoughtful collaboration of curators and artists in "Eight Ounces Half a Pound" is both resonant and deeply important. It represents acknowledgement, if not exactly memory; it identifies vectors of social change, if not exactly bending them; it suggests a historiography, if not exactly recounting history. This show contains the echoes of social and economic relationships that were complex, deeply problematic, and profoundly significant to the making of the contemporary society that is rapidly supplanting them. It serves as a reminder that the course of history is not an abstraction to the individual human beings who have lived it.

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***Across the street, far away*: Guadalupe Martinez**



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Across-the-street-far-away-by-Guadelupe-Martinez-Eight-Ounces-Half-a-Pound-Access-Gallery-cell-phone-snap-by-MBJ.jpg)

Across the street, far away by Guadelupe Martinez – Eight Ounces Half a Pound – Access Gallery – cell phone snap by MBJ

Just inside the entrance to Access Gallery, stand several timber posts. They remain vertical as if by habit, but only barely. These columnar forms, which first announce Martinez's installation, evoke the venerated, romanticized architectural ruins of great civilizations past – at least within the Western visual lexicon, in which Greek and Roman remnants like the Parthenon or Ephesus remain iconographic. And yet, there is no illusion of grandeur in these artifacts or in the once-upon-a-time structure they represent. The evidence lays here-and-there amid the columns: tattered wall-board, fallen planking. These are not grand forms hewn by artisans from boldly quarried marble or granite; they are the non-descript, prosaic materials of our more contemporary, disposable architectural creations. They are the kinds of materials that lacked magnificence when they were new, to which age has given no patina of respectability, and for which destruction yields no sense of nostalgia. They resist our best efforts at sentimentalization. These relics represent a place that will linger no longer in our collective memory than the edifice itself took to dismantle.

That place, of course, is the Ho Sun Hing Printing Company. Martinez and her select cadre of scavengers extracted the debris from the Ho Sun Hing premises as the business was being shuttered and the space readied for conversion to a new use, a new-and-different object of our consciousness. Their removal of fragments of the building is memorialized in video, projected as-if-from-nowhere onto a pile of debris in the background of the piece. The salvage work of the performers is carried-out with a degree of solemnity that suggests an exhumation more than a demolition or recycling effort.

Martinez's work is a memorial doomed from the outset. Our collective memory of Ho Sun Hing and the people who toiled there is as fragile as the once-stout building materials on display. Our appreciation of the diligence and skill they applied within the Chinatown of old is as inadequate as the scavenging of a handful of artists in the face of massive social and economic change.

Like Ho Sun Hing, the ruins Martinez has created will disappear. But her piece demands that we pay at least momentary attention to the ways in which the many casualties of social transformation, small and great, are played-out in individual lived experiences. These once-embodied narratives cannot plausibly persist when their setting has been reconstructed beyond recognition and when our awareness of

social evolution has given way to a mendacious, amnesiac sense of the self-made present. But, for the moment, we can remember and feel the connection of those stories to the narratives of our own lives.

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***Skid Row*: Katherine Soucie**



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Skid-Row-by-Katherine-Soucie-Eight-Ounces-Half-a-Pound-Access-Gallery-cell-phone-snap-by-MBJ.jpg)

Skid Row by Katherine Soucie – Eight Ounces Half a Pound – Access Gallery – cell phone snap by MBJ

Like Martinez's work, Soucie's piece problemetizes the failure of bourgeois memory with respect to its working-class roots. Shipping pallets and hand tools – discarded relics of an industrial economy that fades rapidly from relevance in North America – are mummified in swaths of pre-consumer waste nylons from a hosiery factory. But, as with Martinez's ephemeral commemoration, Soucie tells us that the forces of forgetting are stronger than attempts at physical preservation of keepsakes. Rust and tannins bleed through the once-clean white swaddling, staining it the color of the earth, as if already buried, and revealing the mnemonic act to be as obsolete and useless as the implements themselves.

The power of *Skid Row* comes, in substantial part, from the process through which it was created. Soucie works with found objects that tell the stories of men and women who once contributed their largely invisible and now-forgotten labour to the great movement of industrial progress. The painstaking process of binding these relics is not only a funereal act of reverence; it metaphorically recreates the inequity between the personal hardship and the systemic triviality of an individual's toil within the vast montage of industrial output. The sculpture is given form through Soucie's embodied experience of creation, which pays tribute to the embodied experiences of others. Her process honours the personal effort expended by legions of workers in the service of bygone industrial practices; and it laments the disposability of the materials and people who were once integral to the production of goods and services.

Despite the title, *Skid Row*, the sculpture bears no specific relationship to Vancouver's Lower East Side (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skid_row). The work was generated in a different transitional neighbourhood – in Atlanta, Georgia, where the artist lives and works. While it speaks to that venue with a directness and force it cannot replicate on exhibition in Vancouver, the piece clearly captures universal themes. It expresses the depth of the heartbreak and the waste so easy to characterize as minor collateral damage – or to overlook entirely – in the physical and ideological transformations of our economy and society.

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***Iron Chink*: Tommy Ting**



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Iron-Chink-by-Tommy-Ting-Eight-Ounces-Half-a-Pound-Access-Gallery-cell-phone-snap-by-MBJ.jpg)

Iron Chink by Tommy Ting – Eight Ounces Half a Pound – Access Gallery – cell phone snap by MBJ

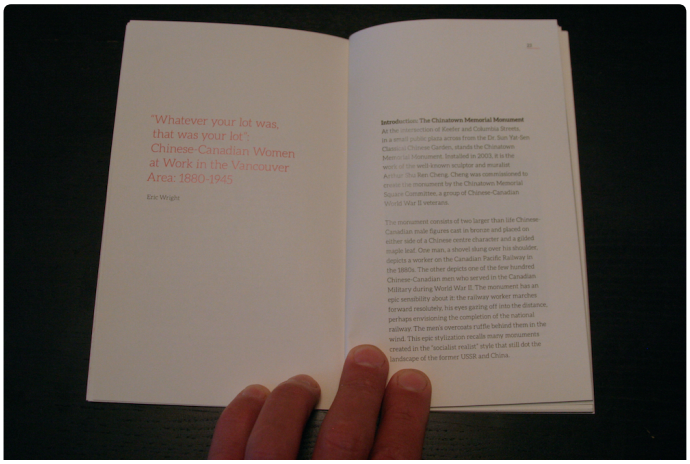
The racist epithet, "Iron Chink", was given to a piece of industrial fish processing equipment (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_7gaREdVV8) developed in the canneries of British Columbia in 1903 to mechanize fish gutting – work typically done by Chinese contract laborers. When artist Tommy Ting discovered this device, he sought to recontextualize it by reproducing it in a decidedly post-industrial Canadian way. He outsourced the reverse engineering and sculpting (from PVC, not cast iron) to an industrial model-building firm in China. The sculpture's pedestal — its shipping container still bearing the bill of lading — helps to explicate the ironic and chinky origins of the work. (This semi-ugly wordplay must surely have been considered by Ting in imagining his project.) The colour of the piece? China red, of course.

Like the Ho Sun Hing Printing Company, which eventually saw its manual typesetting practice yield to new technology, cannery workers gave way to the Iron Chink. The mechanization and automation of labour are dehumanizing, both literally and per force. But the Iron Chink took the process a step further by retroactively denigrating the labourers with a dismissive, nasty racial slur. Machines didn't replace humans, they replaced "chinks". By explicitly calling-out the abusive racialization of cannery labour, Ting's sculpture pays belated tribute to the stigmatized workers. In his clever process of reconstruction, he highlights Canada's over-inflated sense of its own accomplishments, as well as the superb skill of the very people white Canada once sneered at and exploited. Ting's sculpture reveals the Iron Chink to be

as obsolete as the manual labour it once replaced; and it asks a critical question: are the racial attitudes that underpinned the machine equally outdated? A sanguine answer seems a long way off.

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The Exhibition Catalogue: Kimberly Phillips and Eric Wright



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Eight-Ounces-Half-a-Pound-Catalogue1.jpg)

"Eight Ounces Half a Pound" Catalogue – cell phone snap by MBJ

The catalogue for "Eight Ounces Half a Pound" is worth special mention. Perhaps as an homage to the printing legacy of Ho Sun Hing, Access Gallery (with particular contribution by Chelsey Doyle) had a beautifully designed small book produced for the exhibition. The 75-copy, 70 page limited edition contains Phillips's reflections on putting this special project together, introductions and images of the work, and artist biographies. The gallery also commissioned an essay by local historian Eric Wright, entitled "'Whatever your lot was, that was your lot': Chinese-Canadian Women at Work in the Vancouver Area, 1880 – 1945", describing the challenging lives of first- and second-generation Canadian-Chinese women, as they fulfilled dual roles as both wage-earners in the developing Vancouver economy and matriarchs with traditional household responsibilities.

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The Exhibition Opening



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Yee-Fung-Toy-Chorus-at-Access-Gallery-2014-06-27.jpg)

Yee Fung Toy Choral Ensemble sing at Access Gallery for the opening of "Eight Ounces Half a Pound" — cell phone snap by MBJ

For the exhibition's opening reception on 27 June 2014, Phillips invited the elderly women of the Yee Fung Toy Society (http://www.yeefungtoy.org/vancouver/Vancouver.html) Choral

Ensemble to perform several Cantonese folk songs. She had heard the group practicing regularly, since the society – a Chinatown institution "serving Yee Family members in British Columbia for more than 100 years" – is the next-door neighbour to Access Gallery.



(http://vandocument.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Yee-Fung-Toy-Society-Access-Gallery-2014-06-27.jpg)

Neighbours: Yee Fung Toy Society and Access Gallery – cell phone snap by MBJ

00:00 00:00

AUDIO: Yee Fung Toy Society Choral Ensemble sings at Access Gallery

A funny and lovely thing happened as the singers entered the crowded gallery – a kind of instant validation of Phillips and Kim's project. Those carrying purses and shopping bags looked for a place to stash them while they performed. The stocking-encased shipping pallet of Soucie's *Skid Row* installation was propped against the wall adjacent to their performance area; and, without a second-thought, the women began to shove their bags behind it. At the conclusion of the performance, after the last appreciative applause had ceased, they dug behind the sculpture to retrieve their belongings with the same nonchalance. It is not simply that they were unfamiliar with the behavioral norms that apply in an art gallery, although this is true enough; it is that they apparently had not given much consideration at all to the activity taking place in their neighbour's space — or why that storefront came to be littered with objects that look as much like trash as like anything that might be of value to anyone. The world of the art gallery, though not ten metres from the front door of the Yee Fung Toy Society common-room, is utterly exotic to them. For all the proximity, they and the gallery exist at a generational and cultural distance. This is one of the central issues "Eight Ounces Half a Pound" raises. Phillips and Kim are obviously not as comfortable with that disassociation as these Chinatown elders are; but the curators and singers are looking at things from opposite ends of the historical arrow of change. Perhaps memory of things-past and curiosity about things-present carry different moral priorities. That is a difficult question — and not one Eight Ounces Half a Pound would presume to answer for us.

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Upcoming Event: Artists in Conversation

On Saturday, 26 July 2014, Martinez, Soucie, and Ting will give a collective artists' talk (http://accessgallery.ca/events/in-conversation-brendan-fernandes-on-eight-ounces-half-a-pound-2/) in conversation with visiting artist Brendan Fernandez (http://www.brendanfernandes.ca/). The discussion will touch upon the ways in which issues of race, labour, and the body inform their art practices.

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Eight Ounces Half a Pound
Access Gallery
222 East Georgia Street, Vancouver
27 June 2014 – 8 August 2014



by **Mark Jacobs (http://vandocument.com/author/mjacobs/)**

Website (http://memestream.org/)

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