

# **The Lives of Celestials: John Young Zerunge**

**31 August – 20 October**

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In 2018, Australia marked 200 years since the first officially recorded arrivals of Chinese communities to its shores. This migration from China has significantly shaped Australia's identity and policies since pre-Federation<sup>1</sup> and yet, is notably missing from the dominant narrative of Australian history. For the past ten years, artist John Young Zerunge has dedicated much of his practice to intensive research-led investigations into the Chinese diaspora in Australia, in an effort to highlight and redress the historic invisibility of non-Western stories within Australia's public memory. *The Lives of Celestials* at the Town Hall Gallery is the largest presentation to date of Young's *History Projects*, a significant body of work that constructs a nuanced and cross-cultural perspective of the stories of migration, success, misfortune, trauma, and transcultural humanitarianism that have shaped Chinese-Australian history over the past 150 years, and continue to influence the contemporary social context of Australia.

*1866: The Worlds of Lowe Kong Meng and Jong Ah Siug* (2015) presents the lives of two Chinese migrants who arrived in the colony of Victoria in the mid-1800s to seek their fortunes in the gold rush. Lowe Kong Meng was a multi-lingual, educated merchant from Penang, Malaysia with a fleet of trading ships. In contrast, Jong Ah Siug was an illiterate miner from Zhongshan, Southern China. By 1866, Lowe Kong Meng had risen in Australian society to become an influential merchant, philanthropist and political activist; a member of the colony's powerful elite. Meanwhile Jong Ah Siug was condemned to a 33-year sentence in the Yarra Bend and Sunbury lunatic asylums, where he remained until his death in 1900. Young presents these two unique and opposing human experiences of 19th century Australia, to complicate

a dominant narrative that often reduces Australia's historic Chinese migrants into the role of non-descript Chinese miner or market gardener.

Sitting opposite these works is *Modernity's End: Half The Sky* (2016), which brings to light the lives of Alice Lim Kee and Daisy Kwok, two Australian-born Chinese women who migrated to Shanghai at the height of interwar modernity. Both Alice and Daisy rose to prominent positions in Shanghai society prior to the Japanese invasion and occupation, which marked the effective end to an era of cosmopolitan opulence and industry. Alice escaped the occupation and travelled back to Australia and on to America, spending many years advocating for the Chinese nation and Chinese refugees. Daisy remained in Shanghai and was persecuted and imprisoned during the Communist take-over in 1949. At the end of her life, Daisy became an important historian of Chinese-Australians, assisting the Australian consulate when it reopened in Shanghai in 1987. The lives of these two Australian women reflect Young's own dual identity as a Chinese migrant, immigrating to Australia to escape the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1967, and points to the significant role of Australian bi-cultural figures in shaping international histories. In the gallery, Young has used monumental grids of re-worked archival photographic prints together with chalk drawings and text, drawn from his research, to collapse both time and distance to bring the fragmented stories of these four figures into dialogue. Collectively, their lives offer a counterpoint to the prevailing lack of knowledge and understanding of the history of Australia's Chinese population.

Each of Young's *History Projects* is informed by first-hand research, with the artist (and

occasionally collaborators) travelling to communities to conduct interviews, collect oral histories and photographs, and comb through local archives. The final distillation of images and text is a combination of the actual, the counterfactual and the imaginative. Young's use of chalk in the works invites the viewer into a didactic learning experience referencing the classroom. Quotes taken from the writings of historical participants or newspaper clippings of the time are repeatedly smudged or obscured by the artist until they have the correct emotional quality, and are then reduced to brief marks

The depth of this research-based practice comes to the fore in *Lambing Flat* (2018), Young's most recent *History Project*.

This series is the outcome of an 18-month period that the artist spent in and around the New South Wales town of Young. Along with fellow artist Jason Phu, curators Mikala Tai and Micheal Do, and historian Dr Karen Schamberger, Young researched the Lambing Flat riots of 1861, the largest racially motivated riots in Australia's history.<sup>2</sup> Over a 10-month period from November 1860 to September 1861, Chinese miners were subjected to a series of escalating



of line or text. This method is a process of learning for Young; he internalises phrases of the subjects whose lives he is visualising in order to inhabit their experiences of the past in the present. The technique is akin to the artist's younger years spent learning Chinese calligraphy. A practice in which the student redraws a character in water on the ground only for it to evaporate, over and again, until the shape of it is embedded as a bodily memory. This relationship between erasure and inscription mimics the unfixed nature of memory and the negotiation that happens between the past and present when history is retold.

robberies, threats, scalplings and violent clashes caused by disputes with their European, North American and Australian counterparts on the Burrangong Goldfields. These events culminated in the destruction of the Chinese campsite on 30 June 1861, displacing thousands of injured Chinese miners into the night. The anti-Chinese sentiment which followed the riots, was seen as influential in the development and adoption of anti-Chinese immigration policies by the New South Wales government. These laws were similar to those also in place in Victoria and South Australia, foreshadowing the introduction of the White Australia Policy

in 1901. Through his work, Young examines the historical and political impact of these little known yet historic events; their significance in shaping Australia's attitude towards immigration up to the end of the White Australia Policy in 1966 and beyond. The repetition of anti-Chinese slogans captured in Young's work draws attention to more recent anti-immigration sentiment in contemporary national and international political landscapes.

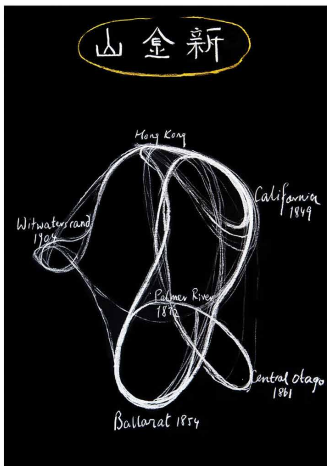
Accompanying *Lambing Flat* is a video work by the artist, *The Field* (2018), in which a woman with deep red hair and dense freckles is tugged backwards by her long braid, an action that imitates the scalping of the Chinese miners in the riots, to remove their traditional queue braids. Her expression wavers between a grimace and a playful smile. The lack of context and conspicuous whiteness of the subject inverts the roles of oppressor and oppressed. This reversal shakes the viewer from the complacency that history can provide to reveal the shifting, and contextually specific nature of identity, and the subjectivity of history. In a later scene, the viewer observes from the perspective of the injured or fallen as a woman approaches to cover them with a blanket, in an act of care. The woman in the video is the wife of a descendant of James Roberts, a farmer who gave refuge to over a thousand Chinese miners who arrived at his farm in Currawong, after fleeing the riot. In this work, and the three photographs, *Action: Covering 1, 2 & 3* (2018), Young centres on this act of benevolence. Rather than conveying only the horror of the event, he also focuses on the humanity and resistance of individual figures. The act of the Australian farmer, crossing the cultural boundary to care for the Chinese miners, resonated with Young, showing how shared humanitarian impulses can work against racial divides.

The inclusion of Young's abstract works within this exhibition brings aspects of the artist's long-standing painting practice into dialogue with the historic investigations. Similar to his *History Projects*, Young creates

the works by mining hundreds of items of reference material, this time sourced not from history, but from arbitrary online image searches. The images are processed digitally and reduced to a flat abstract colour field, and then hand-painted by his assistants in oil. These paintings are an attempt to reveal a visual and ethical apathy the artist perceives in contemporary society, which is indiscriminately oversaturated with news and images of violence and conflict alongside advertising and corporate messaging.<sup>3</sup>

Young describes his practice as grounded in an effort to reinstate a more dutiful and empathetic role for art, uncovering notable absences in Australia's historic and contemporary conscious. His own history and identity as a Chinese-Australian artist is woven throughout the *History Projects*, as are the many lives and histories of Chinese-Australians today. Young's work however, is only an introduction to an aspect of Australian history that is too large for any one person to tell. Presented here are just three histories, selected from over a hundred that Young has unearthed over the course of his research. It is a project that he hopes a younger generation of artists will take up, and re-articulate, such that the presence and rich contribution of the Chinese in Australia, since pre-Federation, will become a recognised thread in Australia's historical memory.

- 1 Nicholas Thomas, 'From Friendship to Fear? Australia-China Relations 1950s-2000s', *China in Australasia: Cultural Diplomacy and Chinese Arts since the Cold War*, Routledge, 2019, p. 38
- 2 *Lambing Flat* (2018) was commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in 2018, and first presented as part of the exhibition *The Burrangong Affray*, curated by Mikala Tai and Micheal Do.
- 3 Thomas J. Berghuis, 'Situational Ethics: John Young', *Art & Australia*, 48, No. 3 Autumn 2011, p. 440



*Cover:*

John YOUNG ZERUNGE, *The Meeting* (2015), single thread hand-sewn embroidery, 41 x 42cm, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

*Above:*

John YOUNG ZERUNGE, clockwise from top left: *Ballarat 1854* (2015); *Jong Ah Siug* (2015); *Haven* (2018); *Tree* (2015), chalk on blackboard-painted archival cotton paper and digital print on photographic paper, 70 x 100cm (each). Image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

*Centre spread:*

John YOUNG ZERUNGE, Installation view of *The Worlds of Lowe Kong Meng* and *Jong Ah Siug* (2015). Image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

*Back cover:*

John YOUNG ZERUNGE, still from *The Field* (2018), looped HD video, 8.05 minutes, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.



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– John Young Zerunge



**Town Hall Gallery**  
Hawthorn Arts Centre  
360 Burwood Road, Hawthorn VIC 3122  
Ph: 03 9278 4770  
[www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/arts](http://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/arts)

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