

Christine Wong Yap's
Recognitions / 认·知：
An invitation to reflect
on our feelings of
belonging

By Paulina
Felix Cunille

Recognitions / 认·知: a solo exhibition by Christine Wong Yap (2022 Creative Citizenship Fellow and CCA alumna) opened and inaugurated the new CCA Campus Gallery on January 25th, 2023. Wong Yap is a visual artist and social practitioner who explores belonging, resilience, and other dimensions of psychological well-being by engaging communities in participatory research. *Recognitions* is a vibrant articulation of these interests. The exhibition is the result of a collaborative social practice initiative with the Edwin and Anita Lee Newcomer School, a one-year public elementary school for Chinese-speaking, newly-arrived immigrant students supporting language development and social-emotional learning. Wong Yap worked with the students to create a space where their voices could be heard and shared with the community.

As one entered the gallery, the exhibition design created a welcoming feeling and invited interaction. Divided into three projects based in drawing, sewing, and calligraphy, the exhibition brought out the child inside all of us and fostered a sense of belonging; the latter a recurring trope in Wong Yap's practice. To achieve this, each section of the exhibition introduced visitors to the projects through open-ended questions located on accompanying signage designed by Wong Yap, such as: *How did you get where you are today? What do you miss about a place from your past? or What makes a place feel like home?*

In all the projects, the artist created physical visualizations of the students' stories. The first was a selection of 13 *Airplane Plushies* (2022-2023) based on drawings made by the students. Three plushies were located on top of pedestals, whereas the rest hung from the ceiling. The inspiration behind them were the students' journey stories, printed in both English and Simplified Chinese on the wall behind the installation of plushies. The wall was painted a soft blue color that referenced the sky and produced a sense of calmness and melancholy. The stories range from happy to nostalgic, to uncomfortable, and were displayed alongside the students' visual interpretations of the airplanes they boarded, hence the unique traits on each plushie. Wong Yap explained that the soft toys are an analogy for the sense of agency and control that could be given to a child during difficult moments. Yet, no matter their age, visitors were invited to hold the plushies.



Installation view
Photo by Paulina Felix Cunille

As a second visualization, sixteen portraits hung on a white wall, on the left side of the gallery. The self-portraits were drawn by the students in 2022, with hand lettering added by Wong Yap. These works in particular highlighted the artist's drawing and calligraphy practices. Calligraphy is a self-taught practice for Wong Yap, who shared that even when trying to change her typographic style, she continually returns to calligraphy.



Hand lettering by Christine Wong Yap incorporating self-portraits by students at Edwin and Anita Lee Newcomer School in San Francisco's Chinatown, 2022.
Photo by Paulina Felix Cunille

This same style was also used to hand-paint the exhibition title and the signs arranged around the gallery. To the left of the portraits, for example, the exhibition's title was hand-painted in red against a contrasting salmon-pink wall. The portraits were divided between responses on what the children miss from home (demarcated by a blue background) and what they love about California (demarcated by a salmon-pink background). Before even reading the text on the portraits, the colors hinted at these

distinct feelings. By including two sides of the migratory experience (the missing and the loving) Wong Yap addressed the complexity of these life events. Moreover, the language used for these pieces adds to this complexity. For example, the artist selected the word "love," as opposed to just "like," to help students make positive connections to their new lives and verbalize their feelings. The specificity of this language positions simple affective feelings as central to these new experiences of belonging.

The third and final visualization, located on the right side of the gallery, was the *Map of Young Newcomers' Feelings of Home and Positive Qualities* (2022). This piece was presented in two formats. The most eye-catching was the large-scale puzzle version lying on the floor. The second one was the printed version, displayed on a wall painted the same salmon-pink found throughout the gallery. The piece visually articulates physical belonging by matching the portraits of the students and their families to their new homes located around San Francisco. Even though kids gravitated toward the puzzle due to its playful color



Installation view
Photo by Paulina Felix Cunille

and cute design, the artist designed a soft space for people of all ages to gather.

Color plays a significant factor in evoking feelings of belonging and longing throughout the exhibition. Although, surprisingly, the psychological impact of the colors was unintended by the artist. While walking around the gallery, the blue and salmon pink colors' neutrality provided a peaceful atmosphere. The salmon pink connoted closeness and belonging. The blue, although selected by the artist mainly as a reference to the sky, elicited feelings of sadness and referenced the melancholic process of moving out and leaving home. Together, the two colors expressed the different, often conflicting, feelings associated with migratory experiences.

Comfort was an underlying atmosphere in *Recognitions*, as the exhibition conversed subtly with issues of belonging within the California College of the Arts. In conversation with Jamie Austin, CCA Director of Exhibitions and Public Programming, Wong Yap noted a communal distance between CCA's Chinese students (40% of the student body) and the rest of the school's population, underscored by the mandatory quarantine forced on worldwide educational life. Asian and Asian Americans have been especially targeted for violent acts due to racial stereotypes related to disease propagation. In response to this alienated environment, the artist planned a homey and thought-provoking space where visitors, especially students, could rest and reflect. The puzzle was surrounded by cushions, for instance. Additionally, the signage throughout worked as a tool through which visitors could ponder what *home* meant to them or reflect on their most memorable moments as they moved through the space. Wong Yap also included a participatory drawing activity which invited visitors to share what they love and miss about a place of their choosing. These gestures were an invitation for CCA students

to contemplate their spaces of belonging and as such, to participate in *Recognitions* in a collaborative way. Through this exhibition, Wong Yap declared that she hears the needs of those lacking spaces of identification and responded to that need.



Installation view
Photo by Paulina Felix Cunille



Installation view
Photo by Josef Jacques

Paulina Félix Cunillé (Mexico, 1997) is finishing her first year of the VCS graduate program. Félix Cunillé is interested in creating critical works centered in sound studies and community engagement with special focus on the work of emerging women and queer artists.