

ART

# Artist lights up Chinatown with ‘a wonderful canopy’ of lanterns

By **Diti Kohli** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 22, 2020, 1:04 p.m.



Yu-Wen Wu's installation was designed to remind the neighborhood of its "longer history of resiliency and hope." JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

A new installation has brought dozens of meticulously decorated lanterns to illuminate Auntie Kay and Uncle Frank Chin Park in Boston's Chinatown neighborhood. Shaped like circles and ovals that float above the heads of passersby, the pieces are red, gold, black, and white. And each is imprinted with a photograph, collage, or symbol that reflects a single aspect of Asian-American history.

Titled “Lantern Stories,” the project is the brainchild of Yu-Wen Wu, a longtime Boston resident and artist who works “at the crossroads of art, science, politics, culture, and migration issues,” as she put it. Wu’s installation lights up daily from 4 to 7 p.m. The Globe caught up with the artist via phone recently to talk about her project.

**Q.** How did “Lantern Stories” come together? What inspired you?

**A.** I’m an immigrant. I came here from Taiwan when I was fairly young at the age of 7. So a great deal of my work is informed by my immigrant experience.

“Lantern Stories” was specifically commissioned by the [Rose Kennedy] Greenway Conservancy. I held a listening session back in February in which I engaged residents, businesses, community leaders, and organizations who gave me feedback on a series of questions. I asked things like “What does Chinatown mean to you?” After that, I started to think about how I could capture the history of Chinese immigration, its culture, and the community of Chinatown. So on each of these lanterns, I chose an image that involved Chinese history, a celebration of art, or something that grasped the community’s resiliency and strong commitment to education, entrepreneurship, and social justice.

I also grew up with lanterns in Taiwan. And when you launch a lantern there, this iconic symbol, you’re also launching a wish. You’re also launching a memory. You’re launching something that’s meaningful to you.



A walker passed under Yu-Wen Wu's "Lantern Stories." JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

**Q.** This installation is different from what you originally imagined. How?

**A.** Originally, I thought of something in which the lanterns were much more abstract. And although there would still be stories, it wouldn't be as didactic in many ways. But later, I felt it was very important to tell the specifics of Chinese history, and also to relate how the civil rights movement informed Asian-American immigration and its history.

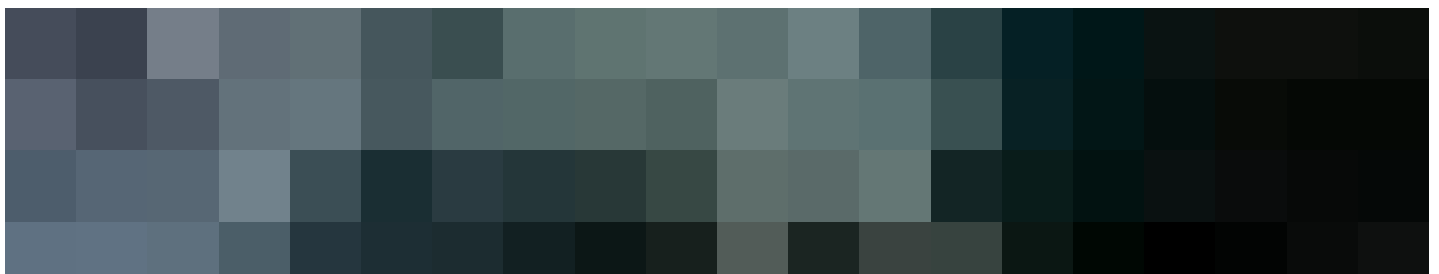
This installation evolved mostly during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and as events were unfolding across the country that fueled the Black Lives Matter movement. I hope it offers an opportunity for civic dialogue, as well as just the simple enjoyment of seeing lanterns lit from within during these challenging times.

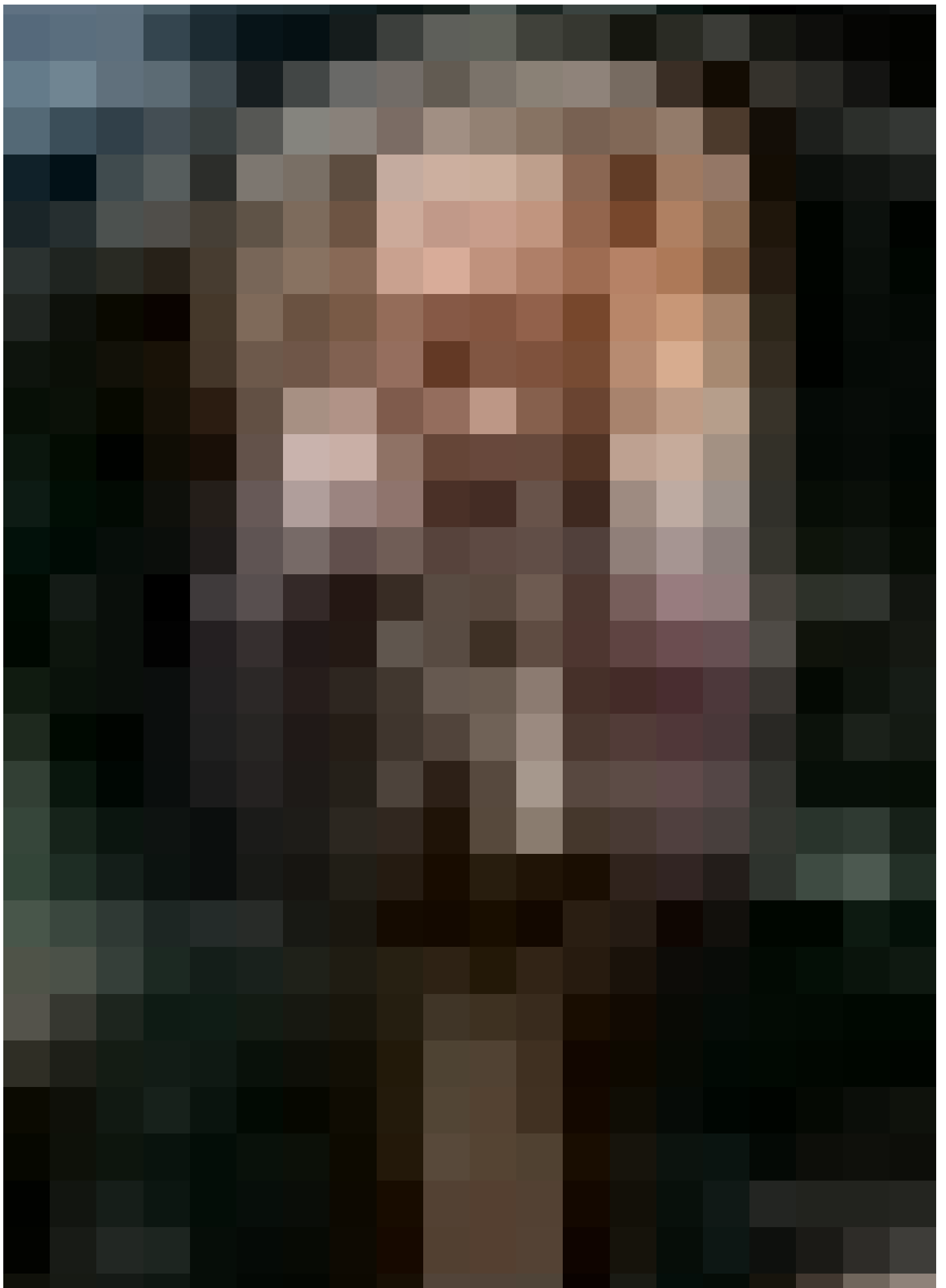


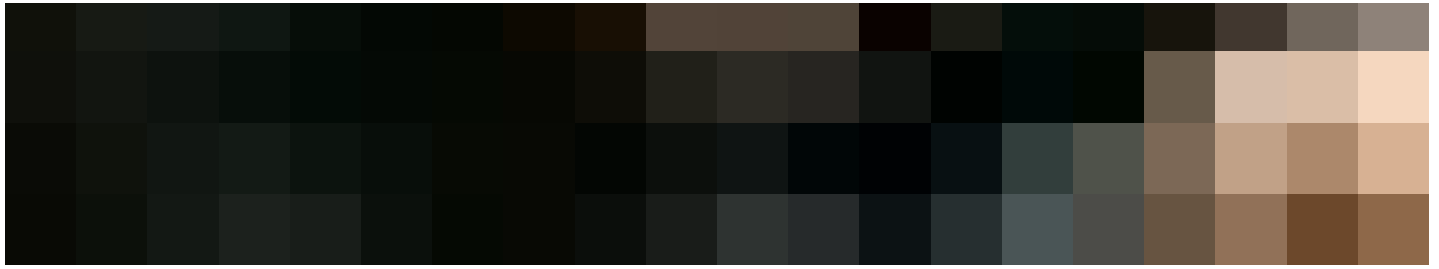
One of the lanterns is printed with the hashtag #IAmNotAVirus. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

**Q.** How is the piece physically put together?

**A.** There are 30 lanterns. There's so much more to say than 30 lanterns, but that is about the right amount in terms of engineering and design for this particular space. They had to be a certain scale, of course, so that you could see the images. And they're connected by cables that form a wonderful canopy you walk under. When you're looking at a lantern, you're looking at a sky. And there's a cloud that appears or a bird that flies by. All of that offers a calm place to be in your mind in this very, very urban space.







The artist gathered images from residents and the Chinese Historical Society. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

**Q.** This pandemic has taken a toll on everyone. But we all know how severely Chinatown was impacted by COVID-19 early on. What do you hope this installation brings to this specific neighborhood in this moment?

**A.** It's important the neighborhood and this community sees not only its current history, but its longer history of resiliency and hope. This neighborhood has survived so many difficulties — socially, economically, racially.

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