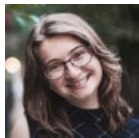


ARTS & CULTURE

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'Lantern Stories' brings Chinatown history to light



Celina Colby

Celina Colby is an arts and travel reporter with a fondness for Russian novels... [VIEW BIO](#)



Strings of brightly colored lanterns hang delicately over the public gathering space in front of the Chinatown Gate. The 30 lanterns are part of a temporary public art installation on the Rose Kennedy Greenway called “[Lantern Stories](#)” by artist Yu-Wen Wu. UV-printed with historical images, calligraphy and drawings from local students, the lanterns reflect on Chinatown’s past and envision a brighter future.



PHOTO: Celina Colby

The idea of using lanterns as an artistic vehicle sprang from Wu’s childhood memories of sending lanterns into the sky in Taiwan. Each lantern held a wish and filled the sky with light and promise. “With the pandemic and the anti-Asian sentiments, it was important to fight biases and inequities that are part of a long and fraught history for Asian communities,” says Wu.

“Lantern Stories” was molded in part by community listening sessions Wu

held with Chinatown residents. In these group talks, residents shared their own immigration stories and discussed their hopes for Chinatown’s future and how they interpreted light as a medium.

After these conversations, Wu dove into the archives, putting together a timeline of images and stories from the mid-19th-century Gold Rush and the transcontinental railroad all the way up to the current pandemic. The lanterns illustrate not just the historical moments but the activism, entrepreneurship, art and fortitude of Asian American people. In many cases, the stories are specific to Boston-area Chinese history, such as the inclusion of the Pemberton Mill Disaster, a shoe factory fire in Lowell in 1860 that killed many immigrant workers.

PHOTO: Celina Colby



At a Chinatown event last week, Wu got to watch some of the residents interact with her installation. She said one woman identified her brother and father in the images on the lanterns. “It was really amazing,” says Wu. “It’s a very deep history, and there are so many families involved.

I’m so appreciative to hear each individual story and the struggles and the resiliency and the many contributions immigrants have made to make Chinatown what it is today.”

Wu is working with the Greenway to set up a virtual discussion about the exhibition in October. “Lantern Stories” is also primed for socially distanced viewing, as it’s installed outdoors in a large community space. Conversation is the primary goal of the show. “I think art can give hope. I think art is a remarkable language that we can all respond to immediately,” says Wu. “I hope ‘Lantern Stories’ will encourage dialogue and create new memories, giving joy in these challenging times.”

On first glance, the brightly colored lanterns look like they’ve always been a part of this vibrant urban landscape. It’s only on closer inspection that viewers see that the history of Chinatown, the hopes and dreams of its immigrant population, are hanging above the domino games and chatting neighbors below.

arts, Chinatown, visual arts

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