



Yo Soy/I Am Chinatown, Salinas engages the power of community through histories, storytelling, and first-hand accounts of Chinatown as home, cultural landmark, and complex socio-cultural microcosm. This exhibition is part of a two-year-long community public art and exhibition project in partnership with the Visual and Public Art Dept. at CSUMB and made possible in part by a grant from The Creative Work Fund, a program of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund that is also generously supported by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Yo Soy/ I Am Chinatown, Salinas features a series of daguerreotype portraits that bring us face-to-face with the socio-cultural concerns, histories, and stories of Chinatown. Binh Danh's new body of work includes a public art installation, collaborative community engagement, and an art exhibition that displays a complex 19th Century photographic process as a tool for empowerment and a medium for examining socio-cultural and political issues that affect marginalized communities. Danh's work explores the historical context of Chinatown, Salinas through community-sensitive work that employs first-hand perspectives to identify the complexities of revitalization and cultural preservation efforts alongside issues of racial disparities, exclusionary ordinances, and the criminalization of neighborhoods, communities, and public space.

Why/how this project began:

Can Salinas' Chinatown Design Its Way Out of Violence? News headlines like this frame a community's identity in dim light, and do little to foster community pride and a sense of belonging. The reality is that Salinas' Chinatown has an important 125-year history—a history frequently reduced to homelessness and various health and wellness issues (isolation, violence, drug dealing, and prostitution). Chinatown, Salinas and its population of Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and later, Mexican and African Americans has often been portrayed negatively—from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* to contemporary news headlines and misinformed visitors that uphold the post-urban renewal status of Chinatown as a locus of drug-dealing, murder, and homelessness.

Everyone who visits Chinatown, Salinas should be cognizant of the complexities of this community. Before its current renown, Chinatown was home to families and hardworking people who built up produce markets, dry-goods stores, restaurants, hotels, and community-specific services, which included a school, photography studio, barbershop, gas station, Filipino Community Hall, and a labor union hall. It



was a thriving neighborhood with labor contractors, lawyers, and a newspaper, The Philippines Mail, which became the longest-running Filipino newspaper in the U.S.

About the artist: Binh Danh emerged as an artist of national importance with work that investigates his Vietnamese heritage and our collective memory of war. His techniques incorporate his invention of the chlorophyll printing process, in which photographic images appear embedded in leaves through the action of photosynthesis. Danh's artwork is in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The DeYoung Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Center for Creative Photography, the George Eastman Museum, and many others. He received the 2010 Eureka Fellowship from the Fleishhacker Foundation and is represented by Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA, and Lisa Sette Gallery in Phoenix, AZ. Danh is an Associate Professor of Photography at San Jose State University.

For the *Yo Soy/I Am Chinatown, Salinas* project, Danh focuses on a 19th-century photographic process known as the daguerreotype. The daguerreotype is a negative image, but the mirrored surface of the metal plate reflects the image and makes it appear positive in the proper light. The daguerreotype is an early direct photographic process without the capacity for duplication. But with contemporary equipment, Danh has perfected the process of exposing daguerreotypes in the darkroom--allowing him more creative control. Danh's choice of medium is uncanny and deliberate--due to the challenging and expensive medium, daguerreotypes were often reserved for persons and occasions of historic import. Here, Danh's use of the traditional daguerreotype process to allow viewers to see their reflections in the artwork. This merging of the self with the photographed subject encourages viewers to reflect on the challenges of socio-cultural assimilation.

Danh excels in his ability to convey legacies that most viewers are only now confronting. Additional community projects include, Viet Nam, Nebraska, a portrait of Lincoln, Nebraska's Vietnamese community where Danh explores how the Asian body has fit into the landscape of Nebraska after the Vietnam War, as well as the desire to preserve the heritage and traditions of one's homeland.

The *Yo Soy/I Am Chinatown, Salinas* project is the first to commission an artist of national renown to work specifically in Salinas' Chinatown. Within this work, the participatory element is key, and Danh hopes to foster community pride and a sense of belonging for both Chinatown residents and visitors by challenging new audiences to reflect on the complexities of the Chinatown eco-system, and encouraging



conversations that move us towards the improvement of both physical and psychological conditions.

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