



Jessica Wee, Phuong Nguyen, & Hidenori Ishii

A Familiar Distance

In *A Familiar Distance* at TIAN Contemporain, artists Jessica Wee, Phuong Nguyen, and Hidenori Ishii, each from a different Asian cultural background (Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese, respectively), offered distinct but interconnected approaches to still life and sculpture. In their works, they meditate on movement and stillness, dislocation and presence, fantasy and reality. Rather than asserting a fixed narrative, the exhibition invited a tender, open-ended reflection on diasporic stories and subjectivity in today's increasingly globalized context.

On a carefully balanced tea table draped with a vibrant yellow cloth, tea pours itself from a glass beaker beside macarons and oranges, while Mudan flowers bloom vividly in the background. For a moment, I found myself wondering how much of this scene was pure fabrication. Korean-American-Canadian artist Jessica Wee's works incorporate movement into dreamlike still life vignettes: bunnies pounding rice mochi, a figure mid-flight with legs in the air. Her culturally and geographically coded arrangements of fruit, flowers, sweets, and household objects invite the viewer to investigate and decode the layered stories behind these ambiguous scenes. My mind harkened back to moments such as sharing laughter with Dad at a tea table or picking out fruits in a farmer's market back in China, details around which have since blurred. Analogous to the memories of diasporic subjects, these scenes feel familiar yet fantastical, distant yet tangible.

While also focusing on still life, Toronto-based artist Phuong Nguyen's paintings spotlighted singular objects, such as porcelain jars and lotus-shaped candles, rendered with care and detail. Installed against hand-carved wood panels, bound with red plastic twine and beaded charms, the works evoked something intimate—an offering or a gift. Though visually still, movement lingers: the faint smoke of a burning candle or a breath escaping a painted jar. These moments stirred the imagination. Where would the smoke lead if we followed it? Where were these objects found, and

how did we arrive here with them? The paradoxical tension of movement in the still image makes visible the ephemeral fragility of experience—like the fleeting smoke of a candle—while also emphasizing the power of personal archives by painting the smoke as if “frozen” in time. Japan-born, New York-based artist Hidenori Ishii's mixed-media sculptures deepened this sense of curiosity. Copper pipes curve and twist around resin-coated panels, dried lemons attached like ornaments in motion. Fragmented plant imagery peeks through textured fields of deep, nearly Klein blue. The juxtaposition of organic elements, like dried lemons and oranges, with synthetic resin is at once ironic and evocative. Ishii's geometric compositions and forms evoke both playfulness and rigidity. These dichotomies recall the complexities that movements and migrations layer onto already multifaceted human experiences. The materials seem to carry personal significance, especially as the fragmented imagery obstructs a full view. I was left wondering, what is the story behind the obscured plants? What is being withheld?

In the midst of a thorny global political climate in 2025, *A Familiar Distance* drew our attention back to the personal: how objects carry memory, how stillness can imply motion, and how fragmentation can speak to both separation and care. Set against an increasingly interconnected yet fractured cultural landscape, the exhibition offered a poetic, quietly resonant space for contemplating belonging.

Sherry Chunqing Liu

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A Familiar Distance, exhibition views, 2025.

Photos : courtesy of TIAN Contemporain, Montréal