

Bockley Gallery



Pao Houa Her: Nim ye

Exhibition: May 16 through June 22, 2024

Artist conversation: 4 PM Thursday, May 16, 2024

Bockley Gallery welcomes you to *Nim ye*, our fourth solo presentation with Pao Houa Her.

Pao Houa Her's artistic practice engages legacies and potentials of images and their technologies and aesthetics in relation to identity, desire, belonging and resilience in Hmong diasporic communities. Marking Her's first video installation, and focusing on a single aspect of *kwv txhiaj*, or Hmong song poetry, the five-channel *Nim ye* immerses audiences in a score of continuous beginnings.

Kwv txhiaj (pronounced kue-tsia) is a Hmong oral tradition and storytelling technology. Extemporaneous and originally performed in pairs as a call and response, kwv txhiaj requires close listening between performers and by audiences. Mixing language registers, performers combine vernacular vocabulary with the rarely used *Paj Lug* (pah-lue), or flowery words. This complexity is applied to rhyming couplets and refrains that invoke tonal play as well as semantically coded messaging that inflects Hmong's mono-syllabic words and combined melodic lines with multiple meanings that must be deciphered in relation to social context to respond accordingly.

Rooted in ancient courtship rites, kwv txhiaj can be performed for any occasion, such as commemoration, healing, moral teaching, or other ritual acknowledgments. While the occasion

often dictates the kwv txhiaj theme, prompts can also be made by audiences. The improvisational, diaristic and self-governing nature of kwv txhiaj means each performance is unique.¹ Requiring a minimum of two verses – one by each song poet – the duration of each is determined contextually. If the initiating song poet decides to continue, kwv txhiaj can last for hours. Even for those who may no longer understand Paj Lug or Hmong language, listeners across generations share an appreciation of this core expression of Hmong identity, which is also central to Hmong music theory and instrumental composition.²

While most song poets arrive to kwv txhiaj by natural or socialized talents within a family of gifted practitioners, it is an art form that is increasingly formally taught and individually performed within Hmong diasporic communities, especially amongst Gen Z since the COVID pandemic. COVID's period of isolation and great loss, particularly of knowledge-keeping elders, prompted a proliferation of kwv txhiaj on social media and YouTube, including from artists of spoken word, rap, and classical voice training. Following the sudden death of her husband, Ya Yang, Her began to consider kwv txhiaj as more than the background sounds and visuals of her childhood. She turned to kwv txhiaj as a step in her grieving process by commissioning and documenting the entirety of a call (by a man in Laos) and response (by a woman in Minnesota), which became the two-channel video, *Kun nco koj, rov gab los (I miss you, come back)* (2022).

The title of Her's solo exhibition and subsequent study of kwv txhiaj is *Nim ye* (pronounced nih-yay). It is borrowed from and honors the expansive meaning of a single kwv txhiaj element: its beginning(s). Her remembers (and still uses) the drawn-out “Nim ye” as her navigational tool to re-engage with the complexity of kwv txhiaj when its verses and meaning have morphed into sound. She notes, “While ‘Nim ye’ indicates a starting point, we have no indicator for an ending. In kwv txhiaj, there is no ending without a beginning, and beginnings can be made over and over.” Offering profound metaphorical agency in her grieving process, Her has created an audiovisual arrangement of these continuous beginnings.

The five-channel video installation *Nim ye* encompasses a large singular plinth designed as a riser, atop which various models of cathode-ray tube (CRT) televisions form a choir. The five pairs of song poets in Her's *Nim ye* choir were cast from her parents' vast 1990s kwv txhiaj VHS archive, post-2000 YouTube videos, as well as from the artist's second kwv txhiaj video – a form of self-portraiture – filmed in 2023 in the Valley of Widows in Laos. The source and time of their making remains indecipherable unless you care to look for clues. Her has said, “I think as much as I'm interested in the performance itself, I'm also interested in the stage that people are performing on, both in a literal sense and in a metaphorical sense...I think about the staging apparatus, the costume, the enacting of borrowed or learned rituals. But I'm also interested in the dust, for example, on fake flowers, as a kind of giveaway.”³

Arranged into discordant and harmonious moments of audiovisual appearance and disappearance, *Nim ye* – like Her's serial practice in photography – puts her ambivalence to veracity and commitment to anti-linear narratology on full display. Presented anti-hierarchically, the varying sources repeat, double, and glitch. Monophonic texture becomes polyphonic. And Her allows us, in her words, to “hear glimpses” of phrases immediately following “Nim ye” that hint at (for Hmong speakers) the vast range of human experiences and emotional worlds kwv txhiaj offers.

As kwv txhiaj nourishes Her's continuous inquiry into the performance of Hmong identity, and specifically the genres and relationships between landscape and portraiture, it furthers her

commitment to technologies that both fix and expand time and place. Like photographs, audio and video have long been relational technologies between homeland and diasporic communities. While photography and moving image were initially a colonial technology in Laos, broadly canonical early video art calls to mind the physical properties of cathode ray technology. For Her, CRT televisions are simultaneously diaristic and nostalgic resolutions that can historicize key Hmong and kwv txhiaj migrations and relationships to image.

Following immeasurable loss during the Secret War in Laos, in which Hmong males were conscripted to defend the United States' manifestation of the Cold War against communism in Vietnam, a thriving kwv txhiaj audio cassette industry developed amongst survivors in the mid-1980s. From Thai-border refugee camps to the newly forming diasporic communities in the US, French Guiana, and elsewhere, kwv txhiaj photographs and mixed tapes were an essential tool for maintaining knowledge, memories and connection to homeland, or *teb chaw* (tay-chaw), which translates as land-place.⁴ With greater access to digital video technology amongst diaspora traveling to Laos in the 1990s, a travel documentary genre and industry emerged, offering guided tours of *teb chaw*. Her remembers these VHS tours playing in her family's St. Paul, Minnesota living room: a collage of landscapes, both sacred and secular, were narrated by an offscreen voice. Between commentary, kwv txhiaj played as a soundtrack. At some point, Her remembers, the kwv txhiaj soundtrack was made visual: portrait (song poets) and landscape (*teb chaw*) merged to become subject, and essentially the Hmong music video was born. Her grew up with both kwv txhiaj and MTV on her family's CRT TVs.

Along with honoring the kwv txhiaj art form and its abundant aforementioned resonances, Nim ye also importantly points to its literal meaning. "Nim ye" is a personal introduction that specifies communal affiliation, and poignantly furthers Her's commitment to multiple, complex relations and realities of *teb chaw*. As with many Indigenous languages, introducing oneself can encompass geocultural belonging, including land, dialect, gender, kinship, and more. In this case, "Nim ye" is a gender-neutral phrase that announces the song poet's people and dialect as White Hmong with ancestral connections to the highlands of the Luang Prabang region, Laos – one of many Hmong *teb chaw* after forced exile from ancestral homelands of mountainous southern China in the late eighteenth century. Other Hmong *teb chaw* and dialects have markedly different introductions to kwv txhiaj. In Her's family, "Nim ye" and kwv txhiaj are used interchangeably.

Her's installation *Nim Ye* caringly abstracts kwv txhiaj's form to amplify its practice of multiple beginnings. As the choir sings, the polyphonous sound and transpositional nature of video seem to re-call "Nim ye" as time-space as much as land-place. Her's song poetry speaks to embodied homeland, through which one can repeatedly sing beginnings into existence in and through language and relations.

Exhibition text by Erin Robideaux Gleeson

1 Amy Catlin. "From Singing Voices to Talking Reeds." *Asia Music in North America (Reports on Ethnomusicology)*. Vol. 5. 1985.

2 Kao Kalia Yang. *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father*. New York, Metropolitan Books, 2016.

3 Pao Houa Her. *My grandfather turned into a tiger...and other illusions*. Aperture, 2024. p. 112.

4 Nicolas Poss. "Reharmonizing' the Generations. Rap, Poetry and Hmong Oral Tradition." *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Hawaii Press, 2013. p. 233.

Pao Houa Her is a Hmong American artist. Her solo exhibitions include *And Other Illusions*, Camera Club at Baxter Street, NYC (2024); *Paj quam ntuj / Flowers of the Sky* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN (2022–2023); *Pao Houa Her, Paris Photo* (2023); and *My grandfather turned into a tiger* at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, MN (2018). Recently exhibited in the Whitney Biennial (2022), her work has been included in group exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC; the Milwaukee Art Museum; MAMM Contemporary Art Museum in Chiang Mai; the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; among many others. The recipient of the John R. Solomon Guggenheim Fellowship (2023), winner of the Aperture/Next Step Award (2023) and prizewinner in the 2022 Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition (2022), Her was a McKnight Visual Artists Fellow (2022 and 2016). Her's first monograph was published by Aperture/Next Step (2023). Notable public collections include the Whitney Museum of American Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Singapore Art Museum and Walker Art Center. Her is an assistant professor in Photography and Moving Images at the University Minnesota. She holds an MFA in Photography from the Yale University School of Art (2012) and a BFA in Photography from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (2009). Born in Laos in 1982, Her was raised in Minnesota and is based in Blaine.

Bockley Gallery is a contemporary art venue and curatorial practice based in Minneapolis. Since its founding in 1984, the gallery has focused on artists living and working in Mni Sota Makoce and the Great Lakes region as well as Indigenous artists across Turtle Island. The gallery offers an intimate experience with art through a calendar of on-site programming, while its collaboration with local, national and international partners expands the dialogue around what it believes to be the most relevant ideas in art today.

Please contact Bockley Gallery at 612.377.4669 for more information or press.

Image: *Nim ye*, 2024, five-channel video, color, sound, looped, 13 minutes