

FRAMING DUNDEE: AN INTERVIEW WITH HUA JIN

Hua Jin and Brit Bachmann

Hua Jin has the eye of a photographer, the detail of an archivist, and the curiosity of an explorer. Her practice is lens-based, though her photographs show a preoccupation with natural forms, her images bordering on the sculptural. Jin is a collector—of places, people, and sentiments—captured on medium-format film.

Her current series is *Dundee* (2017–), a project anchored in the research of Scottish settlers who founded Dundee, Quebec, around 1800 and named the township after their hometown. Jin's work traces historical connections between the two Dundees, specifically through the Fraser family archive. The series is a visual essay about immigration and history.

Jin received the City of Vancouver Mayor's Arts Award for Visual Art in 2012, in the same year she completed a BFA at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She holds an MFA from Concordia University in Montreal, where she continues to live. In December 2018, the Conseil des arts de Montréal awarded Jin with the inaugural Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts Award.

Brit Bachmann is a writer and artist based in Vancouver.

BB

What has your experience been as an artist in Montreal?

HJ

To be honest, it's tough because I don't speak French. If you don't speak the language, it's not easy to get into the community. When I received the Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts Award, it was a big surprise because I haven't gotten enough exposure in Montreal. I feel that may start to change after this award.

BB

The Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts Award seems to be a bold admission that there isn't as much diversity in the Montreal art scene as there should be.

HJ

Yes, it's a first step in a new direction. In 2017, the Conseil released a report and there was a conference to talk about how artists from diverse backgrounds don't often have shows or get exposure. That's why they created this award, to promote artists from what they call "invisible" minorities.

The main struggle here in Quebec is still between English-speaking and French-speaking communities. For artists from other cultural backgrounds, it's not easy.

BB

Your project for Capture 2019 is based on an immigrant experience, that of Scottish settlers in Dundee, Quebec. It intimately documents one family in a very specific place. How did you become aware of the Frasers and Dundee?

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HJ

One of my friends is from there. He talked about the history, and then I discovered a very interesting historical archive—there's a book about Dundee written by a local resident and Scottish dissident. I can relate to it because I myself moved to Canada, but from China. Before this, I had another project documenting family, *My Big Family* (2010–). *Dundee* is my second long-term project, this one about immigration, identity, and family. I'm interested because there's a chance for me to dig deep.

BB

As an artist, you are inserting yourself into a family history that you are also documenting. How have you approached the subject matter?

HJ

What made me begin this project was that I had access to this place, to this story, to the people who live there. Of course, the scenery is very beautiful—that was a starting point. I am always interested in nature and landscape, but I'm also interested in the stories. This project is one part photodocumentation and another part research. It's still ongoing. I don't know when I'm going to finish it.

BB

Aesthetically, *Dundee* seems to be in dialogue with the romanticization of the Canadian landscape and early settlers, especially the fixation on cabin structures.

HJ

Actually, in this series I include a picture of a painting of Scottish settlers in North America, and you can see that they're going through a hard time. The beautiful land in my pictures was originally forest, and they cut all the trees and moved all the rocks. It's hard to photograph the hard times in history. That's why I include historical archives, to tell the stories of all the work that went into it.

Dundee runs from April 6 to May 11 at Viridian Gallery as part of *Capture 2019* (p. 99).

This interview has been edited for clarity.

