

WILLIAM YANG

CLAIMING

HER

AGE



20 February -
05 May
2023

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Institute for
Australian and Chinese
Arts and Culture

澳華藝術文化研究院

Gallery Opening Hours: Monday – Friday (9.30 am – 5.00 pm)
Building E.A.G.03, Parramatta South Campus

ABOUT THE ARTIST

William Yang is one of Australia's most celebrated photographers and internationally renowned performance artists. His five decades of extraordinary works make him an iconic chronicler of our time. His art is both intensely personal and universally relatable. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from the University of Queensland, William moved from Brisbane to Sydney in 1969 and worked as a freelance photographer documenting Sydney's social life, offering a unique view into the glamorous, celebrity set, subcultures, marginalised groups and gay community. From early on, he adopted the tradition of photographic documentary known as photojournalism. His first solo exhibition in 1977, 'Sydneyphiles', caused a sensation because of its frank depiction of the Sydney gay scene. He has since held over twenty individual exhibitions across Asia, Australia, Europe and North America, the latest being the major retrospective show, 'Seeing and Being Seen' (2021) at QAGOMA in Brisbane.

William was born as William Young on the Atherton Tableland in north Queensland to Australian-Chinese parents. His grandparents migrated from Guangdong, China to Northern Australia in the 1880s. William was brought up as an assimilated Australian with little knowledge of his Chinese heritage, because under the White Australia policy, his mother believed that, in William's words, "being Chinese was a complete liability" and wanted William and his siblings "to be more Australian than the Australians". It was not until his mid-thirties and through his engagement with Chinese philosophy, Taoism, that William began to explore and embrace his Chinese heritage. In 1983, William changed his name to William Yang. He made his first trip to China in 1989 and has since been back to China many times.

In 1989 William Yang integrated his skills as a writer and a visual artist and he began to perform monologues with slide projections in the theatre. His performances tell personal stories and explore issues that touch all human beings such as identity, grief, death, family, friendship, home, and so on. He has done twelve full length performances, many of which have toured the world. These slide shows were recognised as a unique form of performance theatre and have since become his favourite way of presenting his work and a signature part of his practice. His famed monologue performances include 'Sadness', 'Friends of Dorothy', 'The North',

'Blood Links', 'China' and 'Shadows'. He has converted three of his theatre performances into film and these have been broadcast on ABC1. The film 'Sadness', directed by Tony Ayres, has received a string of awards. It was broadcast on SBS and screened internationally.

William Yang has received many awards throughout his artistic career. In 1989, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Queensland. He has been recognised as Rainbow Champion by Sydney WorldPride, one of the 45 Rainbow Champions, representing 45 years since the first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on 24 June 1978. He also recently received a Sydney Theatre Award for Lifetime Achievement.

William Yang's work is held in the collections of many institutions including the National Gallery of Australia; National Library of Australia; National Portrait Gallery; Art Gallery of New South Wales; Museum of Contemporary Arts, Sydney; Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art; State Library of New South Wales; National Gallery of Victoria; State Library of Victoria; Art Gallery of Western Australia; Art Gallery of South Australia; University of Queensland Art Museum; Cairns Regional Art Gallery, Queensland; Higashikawa-cho Municipal Gallery, Hokkaido, Japan; and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan.

The Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture (IAC) at Western Sydney University is honoured and privileged to present William Yang's solo exhibition 'Claiming Heritage'.



Copy of Hand Coloured Publicity Photo for 'The North'
1996

ARTIST STATEMENT



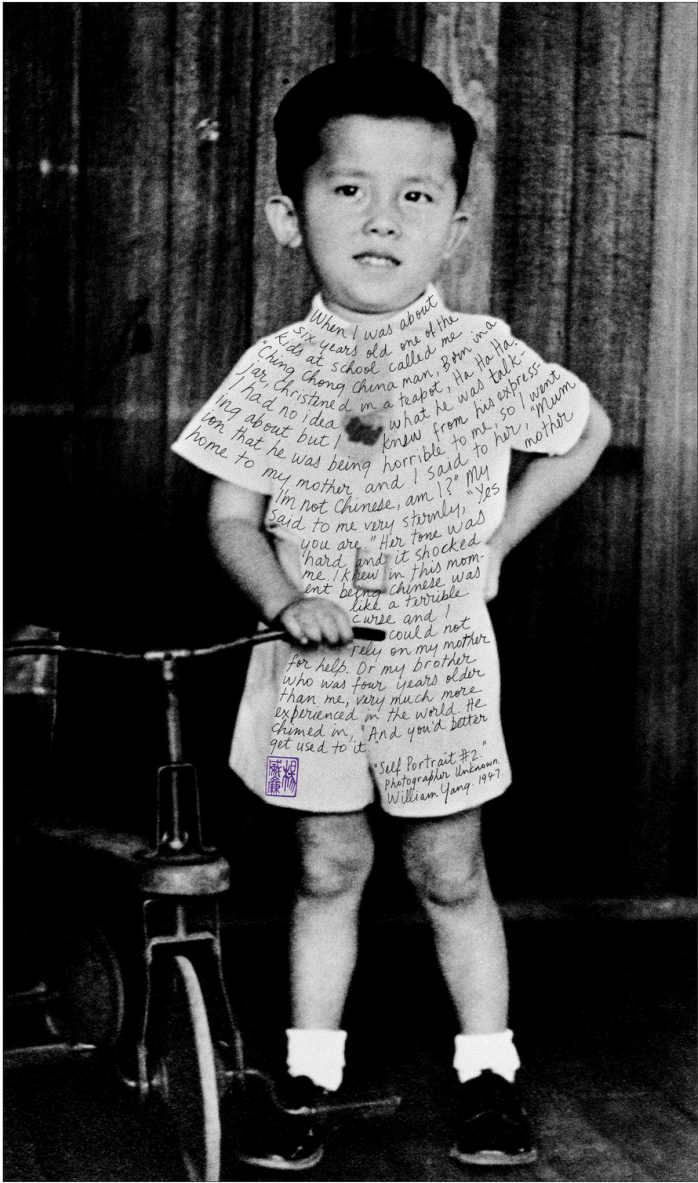
I was brought up as an assimilated Chinese Australian, partly because of the way my mother brought me up, she had wanted my siblings and I to be more Australian than the Australians, but it was cultural as well, migrants or new Australians as they were called were expected to assimilate and to speak English.

I knew I was gay from a very early age, and I came out as a gay man in the early seventies, during that exciting time of change, the Gay liberation movement. It politicised me, as I had to take on all the baggage of public opinion which had a very negative view of homosexuality. Strangely I never quite realised I was Chinese until my mid-thirties. I identified as being Australian and I was in a state of denial about my Chinese heritage. In the eighties I learned Taoism, a Chinese philosophy, and this led me to embrace my Chinese heritage which hitherto had been unacknowledged. Now I see this as a liberation from racial suppression and I prefer to say I came out as a Chinese.

The last step in claiming my heritage was a trip to China in 1989. I was able to embrace China and the Chinese I met welcomed me back, but the complexities of being bicultural became apparent. I've been back to China many times. Now I call myself mainly Australian, and claim my Chinese heritage as part of my identity. This exhibition is about my journey to make that claim.

William Yang

William Yang is represented by Art Atrium



When I was about six years old one of the kids at school called me "Ching chong China man, Pohn in a teapot, He Ho Ha Ha." Yes, Christened in a teapot, He Ho Ha Ha. I had no idea what he was talking about but I knew from his expression that he was being horrible to me, so I went home to my mother and I said to her, "Mum, I'm not Chinese, am I?" "Yes," she said to me very sternly, "Yes you are." Her tone was hard and it shocked me. I knew in this moment being Chinese was like a horrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother who was four years older than me, very much more experienced in the world. He chimed in, "And you'd better get used to it."

"Self Portrait #2"
Photographer Unknown
William Yang 1997

Self Portrait#2
1947/2008



I was born at
Mareeba on the
Atherton Table land and
grew up in Dimbulah a nearby
town. Dimbulah did not have a
hospital. My father had a general
store and later a tobacco farm.

"Self Portrait #3." William Yang. Circa 1948. 1/20. Photographer Charlie Young.

Self Portrait#3
circa 1948/2008

My mother had a dignity that
came, I think, from a position of
humility. I never noticed this
when she was alive, (heavens!
there was the whole relationship
between me and my mother to
obscure it), but eleven years
after she died, as I print up these
photos in the dark room, I notice it.



"Mother, Graceville, 1949"

"And My Mother," William Jay 1960

Mother, Graceville
1989



"Family at Dimbulah," circa 1957. Photographer Charlie Young. William Young, Sr.

Family at Dimbulah
circa 1957



Christmas Day
Irvine
2010



Regard As If Present
Chinese Cemetery, Cooktown
1990



Self-Portrait at Blackguard Gully, William Yang 2011

In 1941, the Henderson Diggers, marching under the Roll up Roll up 500 Chinese flag, drove some 2000 Chinese diggers from various sites of the Barragans Goldfields in 1939. The incident became known as the Lanking Flat Riot.

Self Portrait at Blackguard Gully
2011

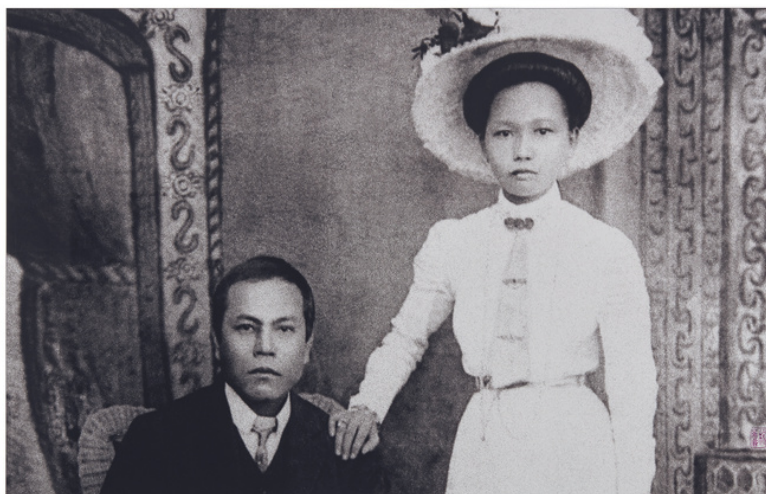


The Country Around Dimbulah#6
1990



"Mother in Car." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang, 2018. The Photograph Unknown
My mother, Emma Wing, was thirteen years younger than her eldest sister, my Aunt Bessie Fang Yuen, and they were close. My mother told me, "Your Aunt Bessie was always sick. I brought up her children. If ever there was a decision to be made, this'd come to me. I was the practical one. I ran the household, I learned to drive a car, Bessie never learned to drive a car, she never wanted to."

My Uncle's Murder – Mother Driving 2008



"William Fang Yuen and Aunt Bessie." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang, 2018. The Photograph Unknown
Aunt Bessie had married Fang Yuen when she was sixteen and he was about forty. She came from Yam Creek in the Northern Territory to Moreuilgan in North Queensland to live with him. The whole family, her mother and her three siblings, came too, to live under Fang Yuen's roof, Chinese style, including Emma who was three years old.

My Uncle's Murder – Fang Yuen and Aunt Bessie 2008



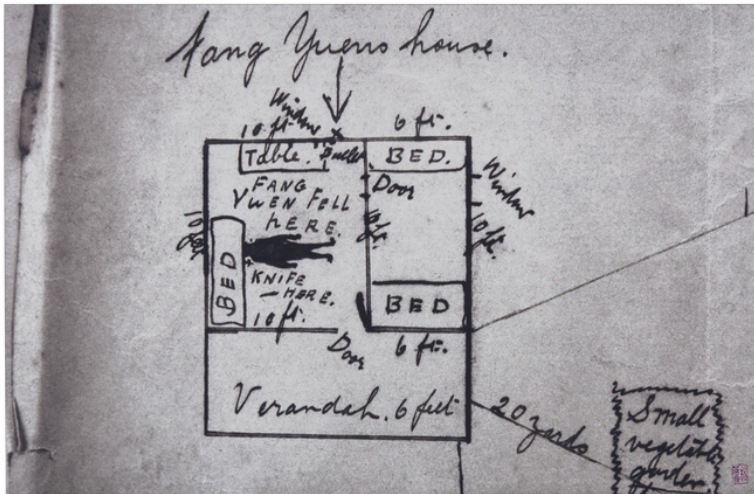
"William Fang Yuen and Business Partners." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang 2008. Yin. Photographed by the author.
 Fang Yuen was a rich man and some say arrogant as well, he owned cane fields and a shop at Mowatuan. He had a company called Yuen Kee. He was murdered in 1922, by a white Russian called Peter Danilchenko who was a manager on one of his cane farms. At a trial Danilchenko was acquitted of first degree murder.

My Uncle's Murder – Fang Yuen and Business Partners
 2008



"William in Cane Fields." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang 2008. Yin.
 Sixty-eight years later, I talked to many of my relatives about Fang Yuen's death. Everyone had a different version of the murder. I stood in the place where my uncle had been shot and I tried to put all the stories together. They didn't make sense. But there was one thing they all agreed on and it was this – the chance at the time were very slight about the outcome of the trial. They thought it was a great miscarriage of justice.

My Uncle's Murder – William in Cane Fields
 2008



"Police Sketch of the Murder."

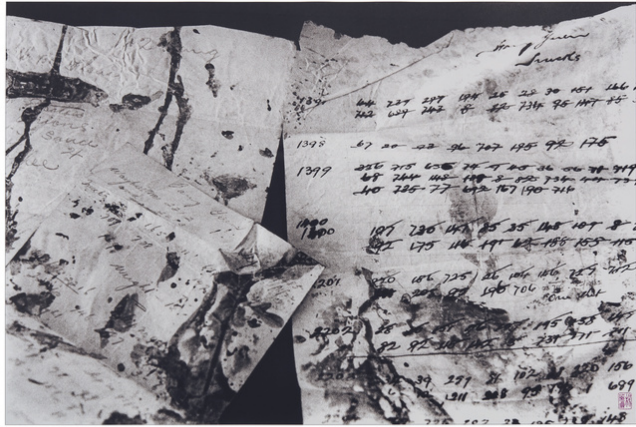
From the series, "My Murdered Uncle."

William Yang, 2008. 76.

I found documents in the Innisfail Court House of how Fang Yuen died. They shed light on the stories I'd been told. All the stories had a grain of truth but over time they had become wildly exaggerated and distorted. The knife in one story had become a spear. The sketch was interesting to me because today they would have used a camera. It was like a photograph.

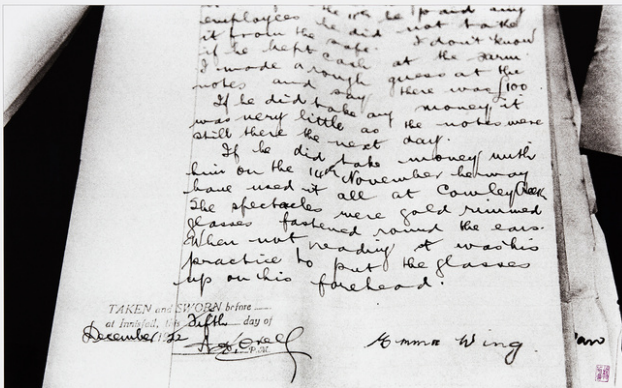
My Uncle's Murder – Police Sketch of the Murder

2008



"Blood Spattered Documents." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang 2008. 36.
 Oh my god! His blood was still on the documents, a kind of brown, crystallized stain. What the two men argued about was the receipt of cane that went on the railway tracks to the mill. I guess Fang Yun accused Danielenko of cooking the books, they had an argument and Danielenko shot him. Fang Yun was holding these papers when he died.

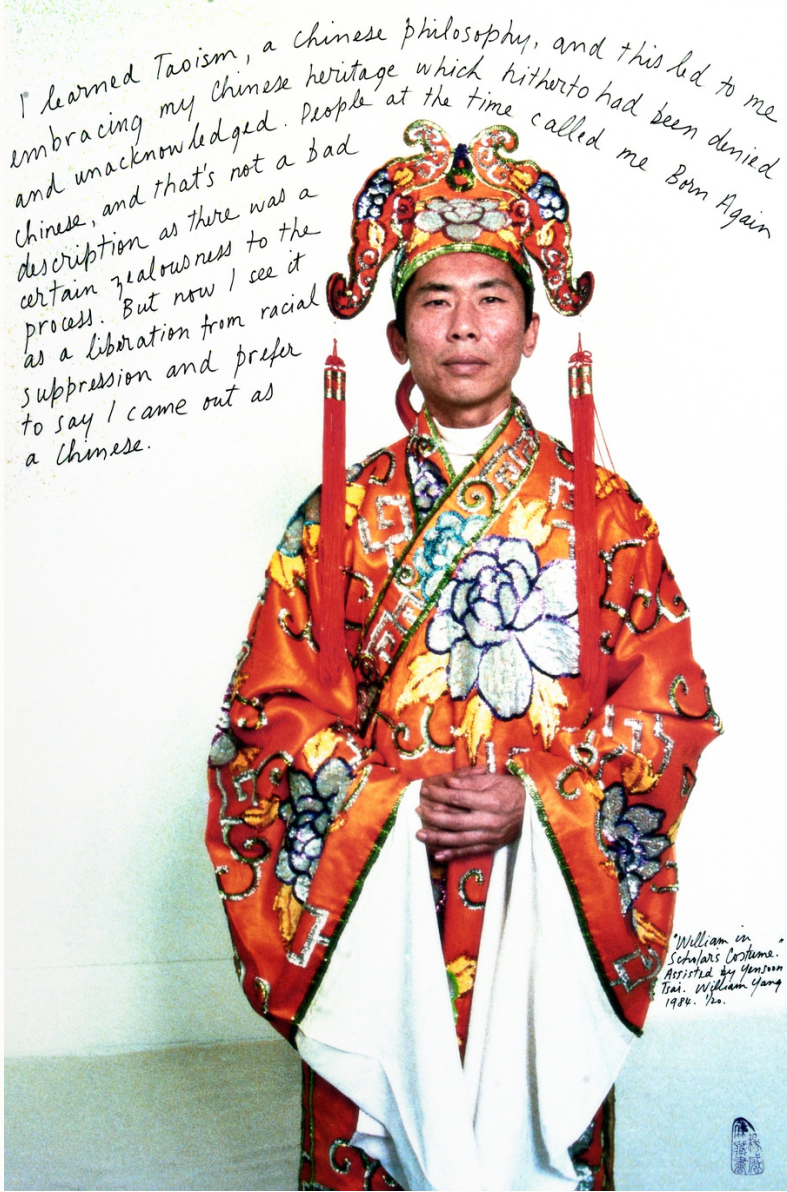
My Uncle's Murder – Blood Spattered Documents 2008



"My Mother's Signature." From the series, "My Uncle's Murder." William Yang 2008. 36.
 My mother gave evidence at the trial and it shocked me to see my mother's signature on the transcript because she'd never told me. I think this event was very traumatic for my mother, and she put it out of her mind completely. She literally blotted it out. I feel the legacy of this murder came down to me in that, while I was growing up, my ethnicity was suppressed.

My Uncle's Murder – My Mother's Signature 2008

I learned Taoism, a Chinese philosophy, and this led to me embracing my Chinese heritage which hitherto had been denied and unacknowledged. People at the time called me Born Again Chinese, and that's not a bad description as there was a certain zealotry to the process. But now I see it as a liberation from racial suppression and prefer to say I came out as a Chinese.

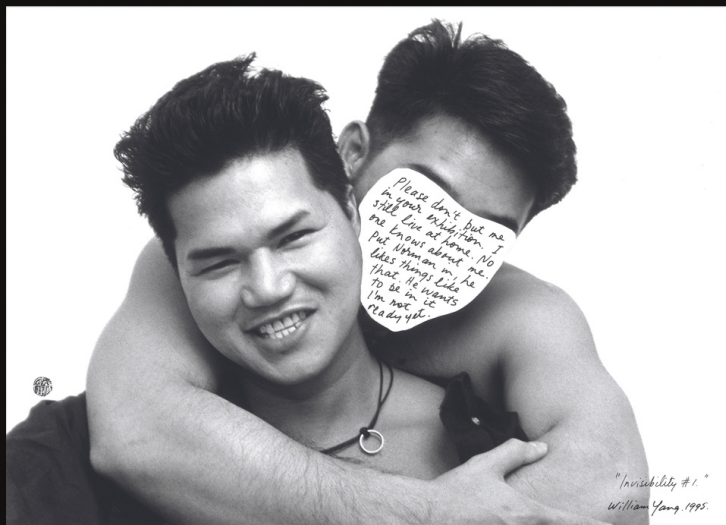


William in Scholars Costume. Assisted by Genston Tsai. William Yang 1984. 'ho.

William in Scholars Costume
1984/2009



Alter Ego
2000



"Invisibility #1"
William Yang, 1995



Stories East and West
 Belvoir St Theatre
 2011



I've Been Loved
 State Library of NSW
 1999



Year of the Snake
2001



Ben Law Hair Envy
2011



Performance at Katana Club
Newtown
1998





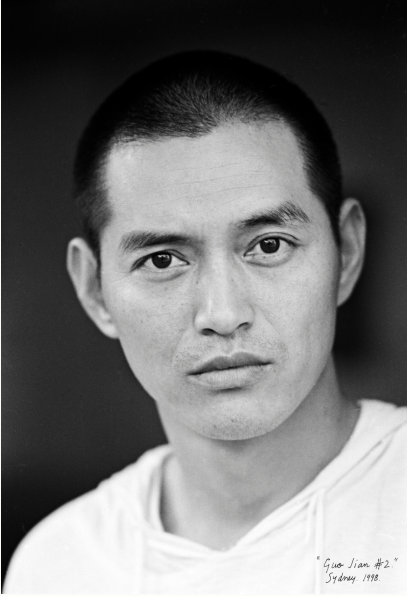
Floor Talk #1
Art Gallery of NSW
1992



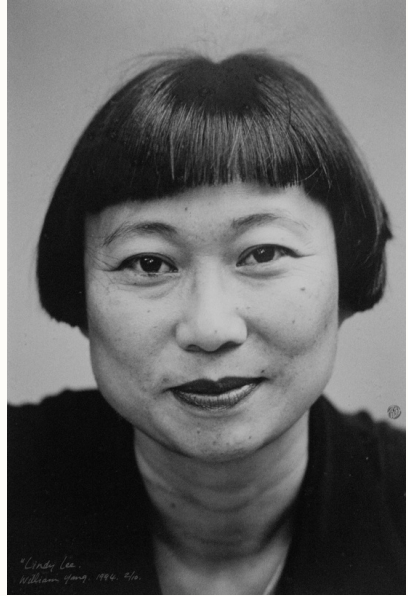
Shen Jia Wei
Bundeena
1999



Ah Xian, Liu Xiao Xian and Guan Wei
1991



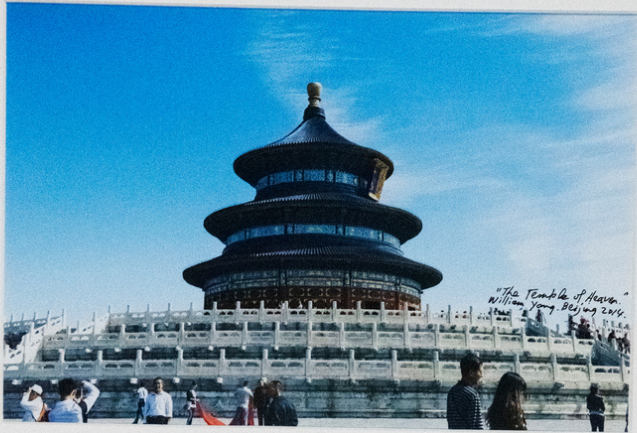
Guo Jian #2
1998



Lindy Lee
1994

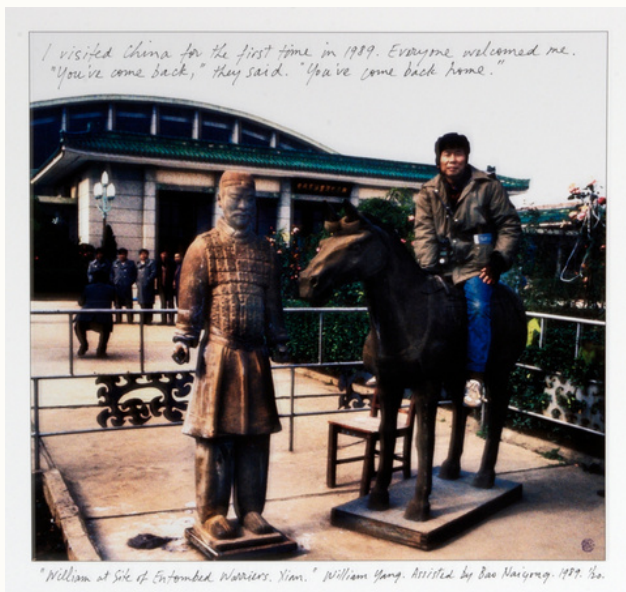


Diasporic Dialogues - William and Mai
2022



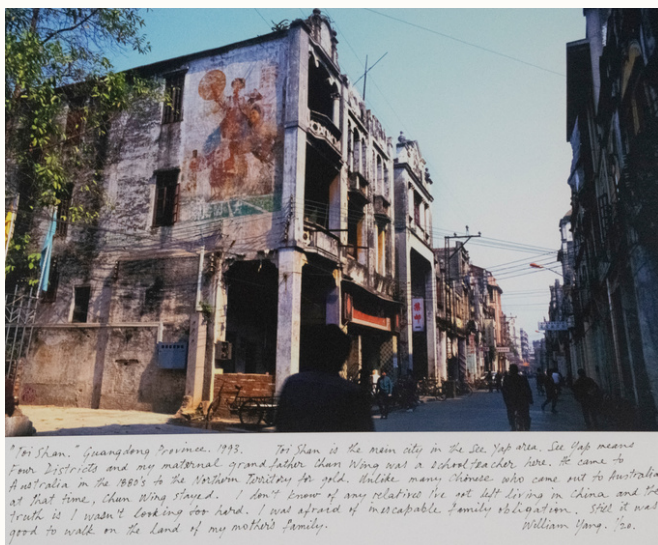
On my first trip to China in 1989 I was greatly impressed by the Temple of Heaven, for its cultural and spiritual significance and its sheer beauty. Then there weren't many tourists and I could freely walk around in the main hall, (you can't now.) There were patches of ground that weren't paved and I found a piece of blue tile in the sand. I greatly treasure this fragment of heaven. William Yang.

The Temple of Heaven
2014



William at the Site of the Entombed Warriors

Xi'an
1989



Toi Shan
Guangdong Province
1993



The Workers Common Room of the Baotou Steelworks." Innae Mmngofia. "I'd signed the visitors' book and the girl who's throbbed from the left said to me, "What you've written's verry inbuilding I said, "Why's that?" "You've communicated you're feelings to the workers and they like you very much." "I think they like me because I look likeable." She replied, "I'd like to be the boss of China, want in your view. When she said these words to me, I was overcome by a fierce emotion, which I'll call kamsarsungung. "I'd come back to my second home.

William-gyng 1989



The Workers Common Room of the Baotou Steelworks
Inner Mongolia
1989



Seals, Beijing, William Yang, 1989.

Seals
Beijing
1989



Panjiayuan Markets
Beijing
2008

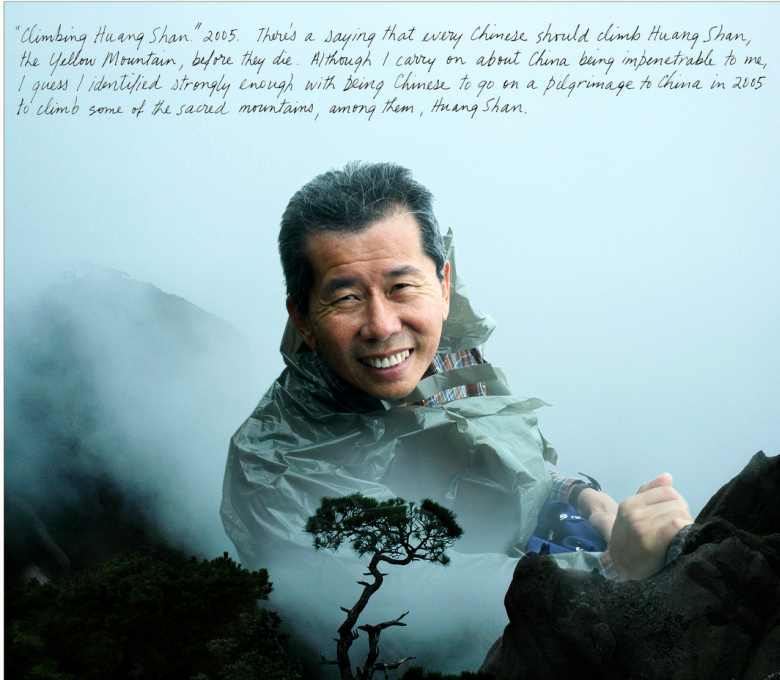


"The Disguise." I travelled through China in an imperfect disguise. Although I looked the part whenever I opened my mouth to speak I betrayed the fact I couldn't speak the language.

William Yang. Beijing. 1989.

The Disguise
1989

"Climbing Huang Shan" 2005. There's a saying that every Chinese should climb Huang Shan, the Yellow Mountain, before they die. Although I carry on about China being impenetrable to me, I guess I identified strongly enough with being Chinese to go on a pilgrimage to China in 2005 to climb some of the sacred mountains, among them, Huang Shan.



Climbing Huang Shan
2005



"Erasure." Dengfeng. 2005. The calligraphy on the tablet had been ground away. As a photographer and given China's tendency to revise history, I found the image of the erasure in stone, evocative.

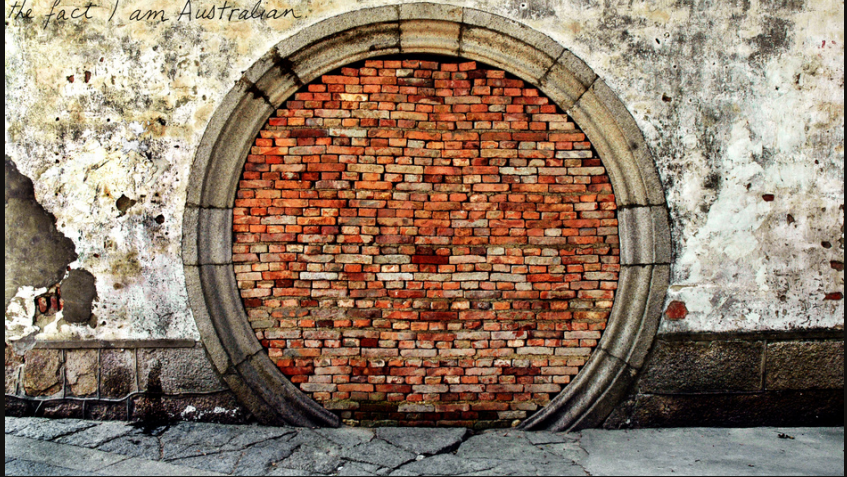
Erasure
Dengfeng
2005



*"Shaolin Acolytes"
Shaolin Temple,
China. 2005.
William Vance.*

Shaolin Acolytes
Shaolin Temple
2005

Because I can't speak the language, there's only a certain penetration I can make into China, and even my best experiences tend to reinforce the fact I am Australian.



Blocked Moongate
2005

WILLIAM YANG CLAIMING HERITAGE

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