



What follows is an excerpt from an interview with the Visual Arts Center's fall 2023 artist-in-residence, Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork.

Gork builds immersive installations that combine sound, amorphous sculptures, performance, and architecture. The interview speaks to Gork's first representational work, which takes the form of a Japanese lantern, and is currently on view at the VAC. The interview was conducted by Melissa Fandos in September 2023 with editorial assistance from MacKenzie Stevens. It has been edited and condensed for clarity.

MELISSA
FANDOS

You often build immersive installations combining sound and soft sculptures. We expect a sculpture to be made of stone or bronze—heavy, enduring materials...

JACQUELINE
KIYOMI GORK

And masculine...

MF

And masculine. Instead you use wool, foam, hair, and air blowers. For the installation at the VAC, you model a stone lantern from air and gray vinyl. How do you make material choices for your work?

JKG

This is the first time I'm actually taking an object and playing with it. Also, it's not stone. It's concrete, which is super important because it was cast and not carved. I do not know when it was made, but sometime between WWII and the 1960s. Japanese imports of stone lanterns and stone lamps were just not financially possible for my family. They were all pretty low income farmers and domestic workers outside of Sacramento—where some of the worst discrimination took place. My great uncle bought a kit from Japan that showed him how to make the mold, and then he cast them. Every family member got one. The one I have is the lantern my grandfather got from his brother.



MF **Do you know what your great uncle was doing around that time?**

JKG No idea. A lot of my interest in working with family objects is because I don't know anything about them. I feel like a lot of the Japanese American experience as far as being a *yonsei*, which is fourth generation, has to do with not knowing. And, accepting the not knowing and still trying to engage with it... Returning to the question of materials, it was driven by my desire to spend time with this object, to kind of honor it and also, in a way, play with it. It's sad to me that my relatives and ancestors are so lost.

I had already been doing some research about Japanese lanterns before I came to Austin because I inherited this one last year. I started to go to more Japanese gardens in California to check them out and I discovered how weird they are. A lot of these gardens were created in the 1960s as friendship or peace gardens. They were a cultural gift to the cities in which they are located by Japanese and Japanese Americans, maybe as a way to be accepted. Today many are run down and neglected. Doing this research meant I was traveling to different Japanese gardens around California in small towns—not the nice big ones like those in San Francisco [Golden Gate Park] that are well-maintained.

During my residency at the VAC, I visited the Japanese garden in San Antonio [Japanese Tea Garden]. To me it was the most alive garden I had been to. It was also the least “Japanese.” It was renamed a Chinese Garden during WWII and maintained that name until 1984. It has been cared for by many non-Japanese gardeners and is full of overgrown flower beds and tropical plants, and there is even a large waterfall. The torii gate at the entrance is made out of faux wood cement by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez. It has morphed, but it is alive. Especially compared to the neglected gardens in California. And that's sort of how I feel about being Japanese. Morphed but alive.



The first thing that came to me while thinking about this piece happened while I was sitting in the VAC's courtyard, hearing the natural sound of the water with the combination of the Texas heat. Even the sound of water can cool you down...I learned that the particular shape of the lantern my great uncle cast is called a snow lantern, a *yukimi doro*. And they're usually placed next to water. Sometimes even having one leg in the water. And when those two things clicked together, I thought, okay, that's a connection.

When I sat next to the lantern and the fountain in the courtyard a complex melancholy feeling washed over me. There's a melancholy—a sad, beautiful—kind of thing that I wanted to explore. I hope through the process of creating this piece, working with the sound and being in that environment, I'll get more insights into the object and try to transform that feeling of disconnect that I have with the lantern. Because I still feel very disconnected. I don't know much about my great uncle. I don't know where the other lanterns are. There's so much I don't know.

MF **I think that's a beautiful project to say I'm going sit with the not knowing and I'm going sit with the emotions that I feel toward it. And that can be the end. Maybe you have something on the other side, or you have clarity about something, but also maybe you don't and it's just the time that you sat with it. Thank you for expressing that.**

JKG Yeah. Thank you for asking because I hadn't put that into words before. But this is my process—I work very intuitively and things just sort of come together through various forms of research and desires.

MF **What drew you to making the lantern into an inflatable?**

JKG I think one of the reasons is because I find inflatables to be fairly sad...There's a sort of tiredness that comes with it, a playfulness, goofiness, or sadness as it deflates. It breathes. The audience usually empathizes with that or anthropomorphizes the inflatable.

Something that also interests me is substituting materials in the objects I make. For example, in my silicon and felt works I try to make the material look like marble or fiberglass. This takes the visual cues of a mass produced or sourced architectural material and turns it into something handmade, almost domestic. When I learned that the lantern was cast concrete (growing up I thought it was stone) I wanted to retain the shape but change the original material into something else. I couldn't figure out how to fill it with water in a safe way so filling it with air made sense to me. I wanted to take the material typically used for bouncy castles or advertising balloons and make something more personal, unique.



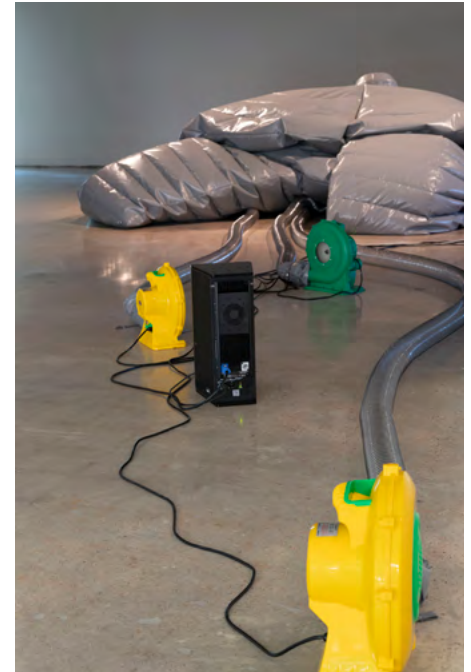
MF **Can you share more about your process to compose the sound for this work?**

JKG During the process of making the piece, and once the inflatable and tech were set up, I spent four days composing the audio and the inflatable choreography. During this time many fears came up. I feared I was making a mockery of the lantern by turning it into a cartoon-looking blow-up toy. I respect this object and what it represents, and did not want to make a joke out of it. I mean, there is humor, but more of the morbid kind, not goofy.

The acoustics of the room overpowered the sound, and I was unsure what the sound would ultimately be in that kind of architecture. Each blower is quite loud and carries a tone. I measured the tone of each blower in their three settings of operation: turning on, fully inflated, and turning off. Once the piece is inflated, the tone gets more pronounced, and as it's slowing down it quiets and gets lower in tone. In the past, all of my inflatables have been abstract shapes with an audio composition that sounds musical. Because this work at the VAC is not an abstract sculpture, I thought the sound could be abstract, which is something I've never done before.

I took the frequency calculations and created audio filters that resonated the dominant tone of each blower with its

upper and lower harmonics. I then ran the water sound through the filters, sometimes multiple times. It ended up being unexpectedly beautiful. I was able to transform something I thought was isolated and melancholy into something connected and beautiful.



MF **After having some space from the installation, can you share your reflections on the work and how you hope someone visiting the space might engage with it?**

JKG I hope the audience spends time with it; sits with it inside the gallery and outside in the courtyard; breathes with it; and shares in the excitement as it finally blows up almost whole, but not fully.

While I'm still not sure how to address the before and after of creating this piece, I now feel connected to the lantern. I have my own connection to it.

I would like to thank the VAC and MacKenzie Stevens for allowing me to experiment in this way and connect to something very personal.





Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork

Like a Breath of Fresh Water

Visual Arts Center

The University of Texas at Austin

Sept 22 – Dec 2, 2023

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork: Like a Breath of Fresh Water is organized by MacKenzie Stevens, former director, and Melissa Fandos, VAC curatorial fellow, 2023–2024.

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