

MAY 2, 2025

# THE STORIES THEY CARRY

## ARTISTS ON ASIAN CANADIAN HISTORIES

*Working across diverse media—from digital collage and embroidery to painting, ceramics, and photography—these artists remember and carry the past while looking towards the future.*



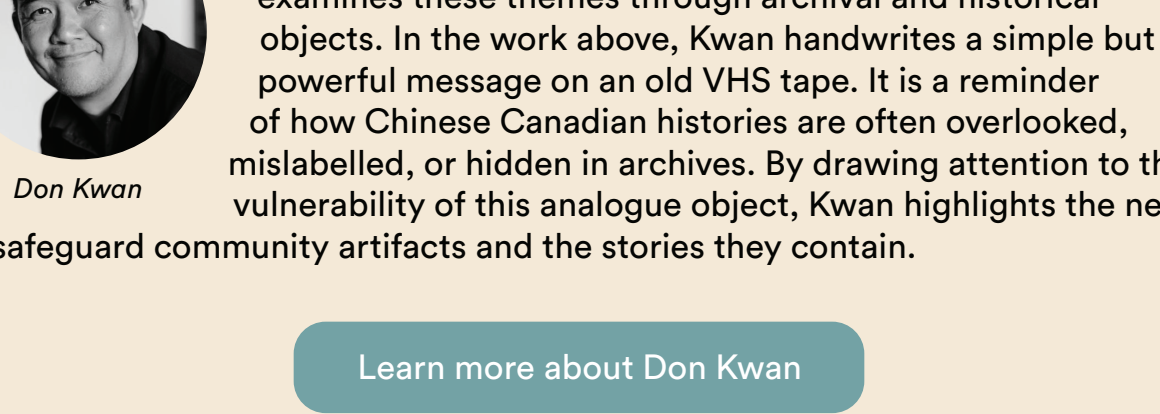
Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, *Namazu*, 2023, courtesy of the artist.



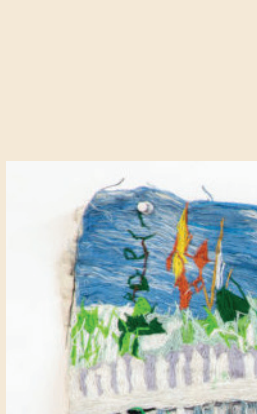
**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

In 2001, Senator Vivienne Poy put forth a motion to designate May as Asian Heritage Month in Canada. It marks a period of recognition for people from East Asia, South Asia, and Western, Central, and Southeast Asia living in this country and the rich cultural traditions they have brought here. To celebrate, we're spotlighting Asian Canadian visual artists and examining how their work engages with their heritage.

From Norman Takeuchi's multi-generational reflections on the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War to Patrick Cruz's exploration of the Tagalog language and Linh VH Nguyen's monumental collage inspired by their Vietnamese heritage, each creator featured below reminds us of the power of art to preserve stories, spark dialogue, and forge connections.



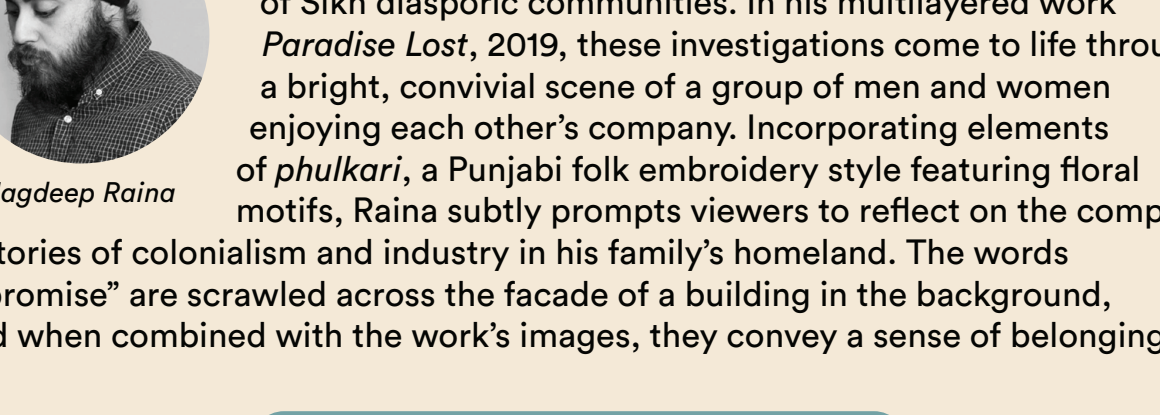
Don Kwan, *Chinese Canadian History, Please Do Not Erase*. VHS, 2017, courtesy of the artist.



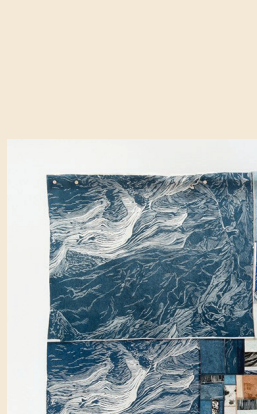
Don Kwan

Belonging and memory are central to the career of third-generation Chinese Canadian artist Don Kwan, who often examines these themes through archival and historical objects. In the work above, Kwan handwrites a simple but powerful message on an old VHS tape. It is a reminder of how Chinese Canadian histories are often overlooked, mislabelled, or hidden in archives. By drawing attention to the vulnerability of this analogue object, Kwan highlights the need to safeguard community artifacts and the stories they contain.

[Learn more about Don Kwan](#)



Jagdeep Raina, *Paradise Lost*, 2019, courtesy of the artist.



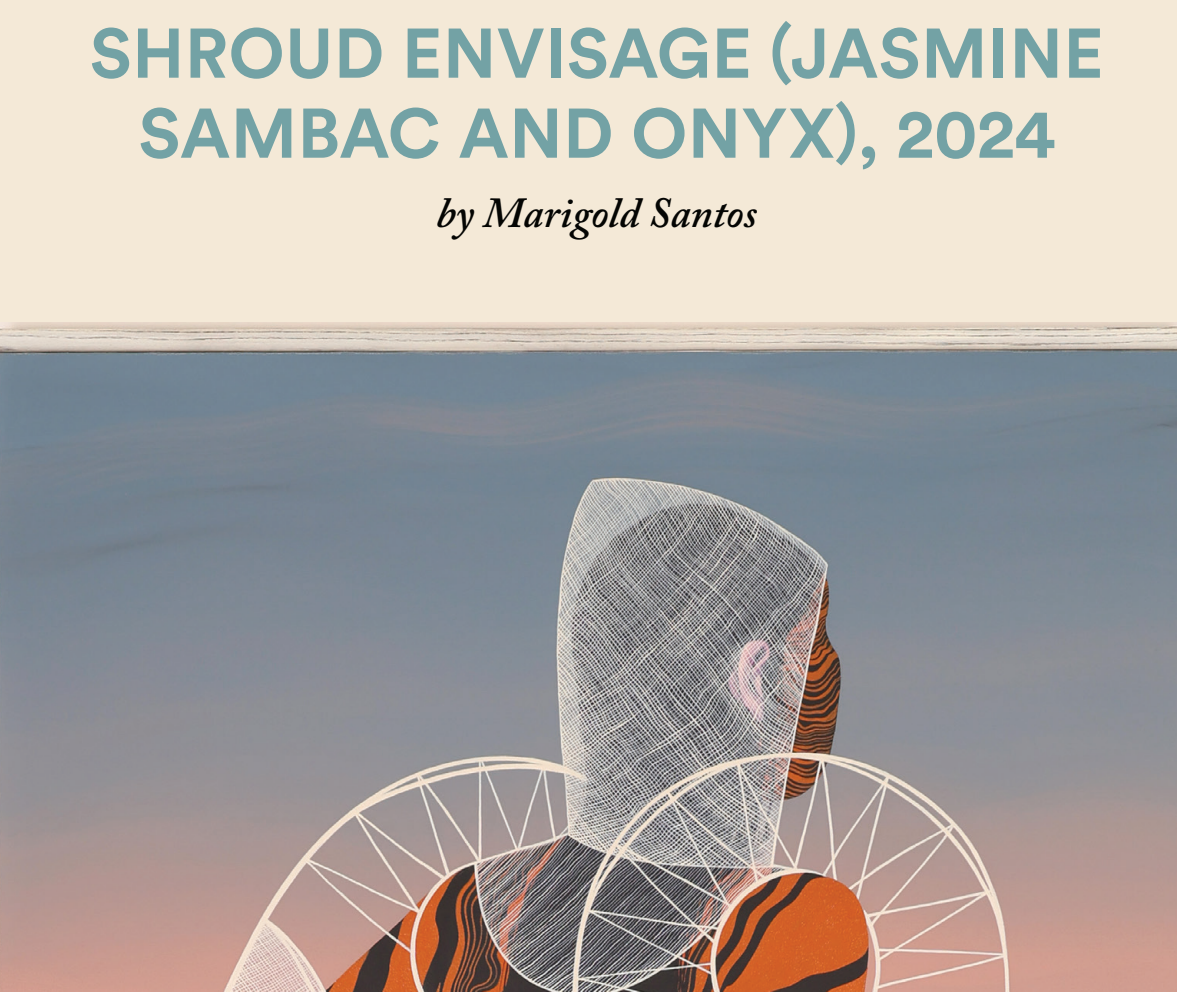
Jagdeep Raina

Jagdeep Raina (b.1991) is a Guelph-based artist who explores how archival materials illuminate the memories and histories of Sikh diasporic communities. In his multilayered work *Paradise Lost*, 2019, these investigations come to life through a bright, convivial scene of a group of men and women enjoying each other's company. Incorporating elements of *phulkari*, a Punjabi folk embroidery style featuring floral motifs, Raina subtly prompts viewers to reflect on the complex histories of colonialism and industry in his family's homeland. The words "I promise" are scrawled across the facade of a building in the background, and when combined with the work's images, they convey a sense of belonging.

[Learn more about Jagdeep Raina](#)

## NAMAZU, 2023

by Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka



Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, *Namazu*, 2023, courtesy of the artist.



Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka

In *Namazu*, 2023, Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka (b.1988) presents a giant catfish that causes earthquakes with movements of its tail, a subject that has been depicted in Japanese art since the fifteenth century. Recent work by the Toronto-based Japanese Canadian artist explores the generational impacts of actual earthquakes, aftermaths, and relocations. Hatanaka, who in June 2024 undertook an artist residency in the historic Tom Thomson Shack at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, says, "I am interested in the tension between the human will to try and mitigate disaster (including personal events) and the Japanese expression *shikata-ganai*, meaning that we cannot control negative events but only our response to them, an acceptance of instability." To create *Namazu*, Hatanaka hand-carved and hand-printed lino blocks and used traditional paper and papermaking techniques from East and Southeast Asia.

[Learn more about Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka](#)



Marigold Santos, *shroud envisage (jasmine sambac and onyx)*, 2024, courtesy of the artist.



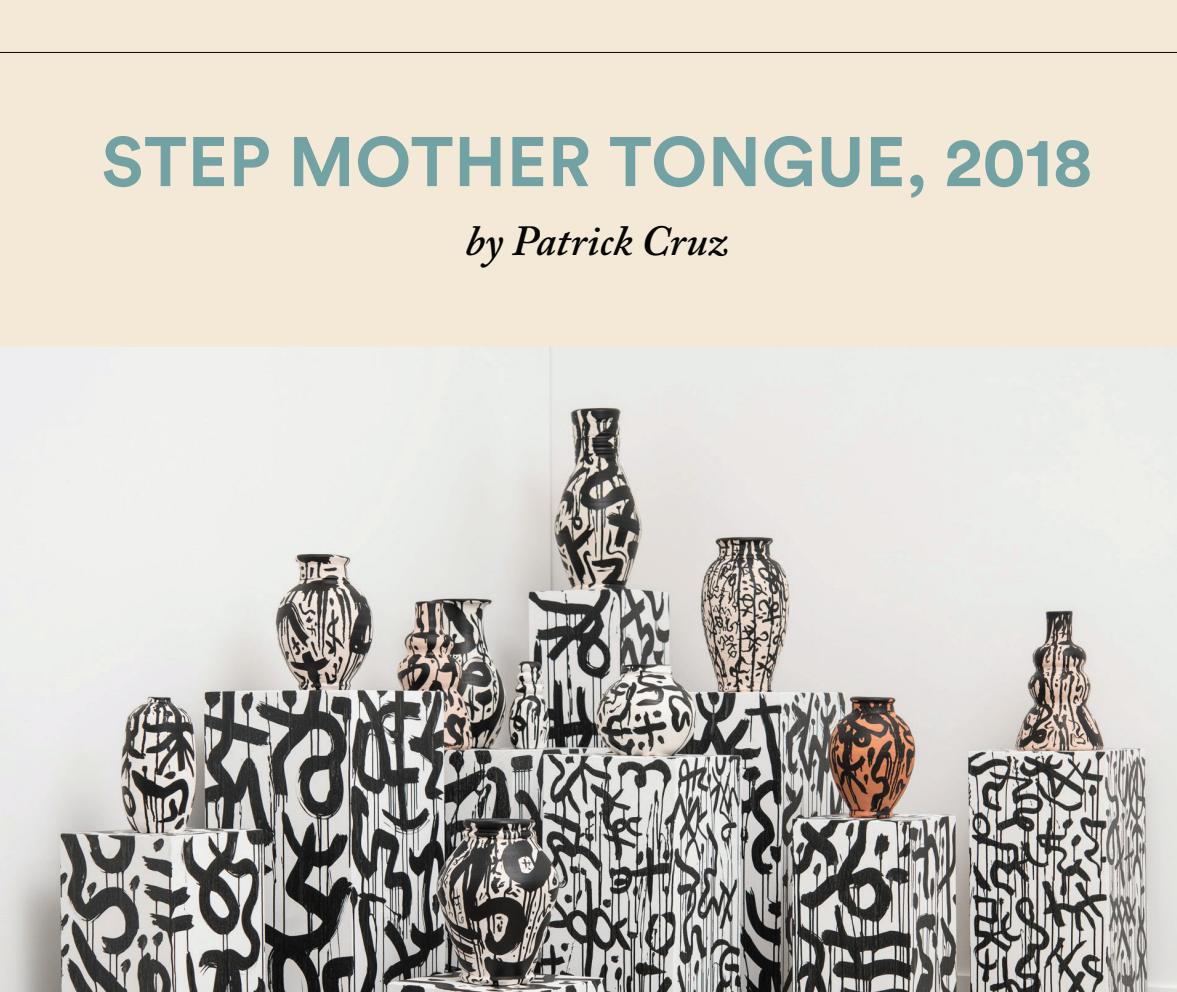
Marigold Santos

In this work by interdisciplinary artist Marigold Santos (b.1981), a traditional Filipino *banig*, a geometric woven floor mat, transforms into a ghostly figure. Santos frequently draws upon Filipino materials and cultural motifs in her bold paintings. In *shroud envisage (jasmine sambac and onyx)*, 2024, her figure explores an abstract landscape, its shoulders covered in puffy terno sleeves as it clutches jasmine plants and allusions to onyx beads. For Santos, who was born in the Philippines and is now based in Montreal and Calgary, these objects are imbued with memories of her ancestral home.

[Learn more about Marigold Santos](#)

## HASTINGS PARK, 2006

by Norman Takeuchi



Norman Takeuchi, *Hastings Park*, 2006, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, courtesy of the artist and de Montigny Contemporary, Ottawa.



Norman Takeuchi

To create *Hastings Park*, 2006, Ottawa-based artist Norman Takeuchi (b.1937) meticulously combined layers of text and archival photographs with abstract shapes to create a life-size kimono-like form. The historical images speak to the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, a traumatic event that deeply affected Takeuchi during his childhood. This fusion of photographs and allusions to Japanese traditions is a hallmark of Takeuchi's work, which explores themes relating to multi-generational healing and resilience.

[Read more in ACI's Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History by Jim Burant](#)

## STEP MOTHER TONGUE, 2018

by Patrick Cruz



Patrick Cruz, *Step Mother Tongue*, 2018, courtesy of the artist and Nanaimo Art Gallery.



Patrick Cruz

In this elaborate installation by Philippine-born artist Patrick Cruz (b.1987), vessels and display pedestals are covered in a dynamic web of graffiti-like symbols. The script draws on the ancient Tagalog writing system called Baybayin, while the ceramic forms allude to traditional Filipino pottery practices. For the Vancouver-based Cruz, the fusion of language and material culture is an opportunity to reflect on how both transform over time. Through this installation, he considers new forms of communication and the connections among language, history, and diaspora.

[Learn more about Patrick Cruz](#)

## CÂY ĐÀ | BANYAN TREE, 2023

by Linh VH Nguyen



Linh VH Nguyen, *Cây Đà | Banyan Tree*, 2023, courtesy of the artist.

Linh VH Nguyen, detail of *Cây Đà | Banyan Tree*, 2023, courtesy of the artist.



Linh VH Nguyen

This mesmerizing ten-foot digital collage by Linh VH Nguyen is made up of more than three hundred photographs—all mined from the artist's family collection. The Ottawa-based Nguyen carefully layers, blends, and overlaps historical documents and contemporary images into the shape of a banyan tree, an emblematic and sacred plant found in their village in Vietnam. Deeply informed by their heritage, Nguyen's creative practice explores themes of memory within the Vietnamese diaspora.

[Read more about Linh VH Nguyen](#)

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**Image Credits:** [1, 4] Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, *Namazu*, 2023, washi patchwork (scraps collected over three years), printmaking, natural dye, ink, paper rice bags, 177.8 x 325.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Patel Printmaking Gallery. [2] Don Kwan, *Chinese Canadian History, Please Do Not Erase*. VHS, 2017, archival inkjet print, 91.4 x 81.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist. [3] Jagdeep Raina, *Paradise Lost*, 2019, embroidered tapestry and Punjabi *phulkari* border on muslin, 45.7 x 76.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist. [5] Marigold Santos, *shroud envisage (jasmine sambac and onyx)*, 2024, acrylic and gesso on canvas, 203.2 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist. [6] Norman Takeuchi, *Hastings Park*, 2006, acrylic, Conté crayon, photo transfer on shaped paper support, 148 x 132 cm. Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. Courtesy of the artist and de Montigny Contemporary, Ottawa. [7] Patrick Cruz, *Step Mother Tongue*, 2018, installation. Courtesy of the artist and Nanaimo Art Gallery. [8] Linh VH Nguyen, *Cây Đà | Banyan Tree*, 2023, digital collage printed on vinyl, 91.4 x 304.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist. [9] Linh VH Nguyen, detail of *Cây Đà | Banyan Tree*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.