

BALLROOM MARFA

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Kenneth Tam: Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory

On view: October 26, 2022 – May 7, 2023

Opening celebration: Saturday, November 12, 2022, 4–7pm

Marfa, TX— Kenneth Tam’s solo exhibition at Ballroom Marfa *Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory* features a series of commissioned sculptures alongside a two-channel video installation. In his exhibition, Tam unearths forgotten histories in order to reimagine our own identities and question dominant myths that shape and govern our bodies. One of the most enduring myths that still haunts our nation is Manifest Destiny and the conquest of the American West. These ideologies have circulated and remain embedded in popular culture through Westerns and advertising, such as the figure of the Marlboro Man. These images glorified claims to Indigenous land as well as distorted Indigenous histories, while also enforcing stereotypes of Anglo-American masculinity that remain pervasive.

Tam’s examination of American westward expansion is rooted in the unrecorded lives of nameless Chinese laborers, who toiled under the most physically arduous conditions in the late nineteenth century. *Silent Spikes*, the video installation on view at Ballroom, weaves together improvised dialogue and unrehearsed movement sequences from a group of participants, along with semi-fictional and speculative scenes of a Chinese worker from inside the tunnels of the Transcontinental Railroad. During Tam’s site visit to West Texas in 2021, his encounter with artifacts and fragments of objects left at workers’ camps along the railroad led him to consider how physical remnants function as stand-ins for the disappeared histories of laborers. Tam’s sculptures suggest other ways of thinking about these men. His use of archaeological fragments as visual and material language complicate the simple narratives that have been constructed about migrant lives. In their lifetimes, Chinese laborers were reviled for their race but praised for their industriousness, their worth as people always tied to their ability to labor. Bits of dried food, broken jewelry and other personal items are integrated into the sculptures to point to experiences of precarity, but also tenderness and care. Physical traces—and even the sounds of the railroad passing through Marfa still today—can serve as reminders of how this nation was built, and by whom.

Tender is the hand which holds the stone of memory is organized by Daisy Nam, Ballroom Marfa Executive Director and Curator with assistance from Alexann Susholtz, Exhibitions and Curatorial Assistant.

Kenneth Tam (b. 1982) was born in Queens, New York, and lives and works in Queens, New York. Tam received his BFA from Cooper Union in 2004. Tam has held solo exhibitions at MOCA Tucson in 2022, ICA LA in 2021, Times Square Arts, New York in 2021; Queens Museum, New York in 2021; Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in 2021, The Kitchen, New York in 2020; Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York in 2020; Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin in 2019; 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, CA in 2018; the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2018; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, Boston in 2017; and Night Gallery, Los Angeles in 2013.

Tam has participated in group exhibitions at The Shed, New York in 2021, SculptureCenter, New York in 2019; 47 Canal, New York in 2018; Hollybush Gardens, London, UK in 2017; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles in 2016; and Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2016. He is the recipient of a NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Work in 2021, Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant in 2016 and 2019; California Community Foundation Fellowship in 2015; and Art Matters Foundation Grant in 2013 and has participated in residencies including Artist Lab at 18th St. Arts Center in 2018, LMCC Workspace in 2017-18, Pioneer Works in 2019, and the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in 2015. Tam is faculty at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, and beginning in January will be an Assistant Professor at Rice University.

Tam's work is in the collections of Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and Dallas Museum of Art, Texas.

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks to the Queens Museum and Sophie Marisa Lucas, who organized the exhibition *Silent Spikes* in 2021; Young Chung and Kibum Kim; Phuong Nguyen and Audie Tam; Bill Haddad; and Shisanwu.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Press Info & Images

Dropbox [here](#)

For further information about the exhibition or to schedule interviews, please contact Ballroom Marfa at press@ballroommarfa.org.

About Ballroom Marfa

Founded in 2003 by Virginia Lebermann and Fairfax Dorn, Ballroom Marfa is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and a dynamic, contemporary cultural arts space housed in a converted dancehall that dates to 1927. Ballroom Marfa's mission is to serve international, national, regional, and local arts communities and support the work of both emerging and recognized artists working across all media: visual arts, film, music, and performance.

Location, Hours, Admission

Ballroom Marfa is located at 108 E. San Antonio St. / Highway 90 West. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am–6 pm. Admission is free.