



# Project Space



Xpace Cultural Centre  
2-303 Lansdowne Ave  
Toronto ON M6K 2W5  
416 849 2864  
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6  
[www.xpace.info](http://www.xpace.info)

## **Marli Davis**

Familiar Ghosts – Archiving Genetic Domesticity

September 24 – November 6, 2021

In South Korea's traditional funeral culture, the dead in the family are buried side by side. Graves are generally placed underneath the earth in a dome-shaped mound. In the countryside, as I now remember my childhood memories spent in South Korea, it was common to find these types of graves without tombstones, which would have otherwise told me what lineage the buried person had carried. Graves placed next to one another among kins without a border draw an image of a collective, massive community in the afterlife. Souvenirs are gathered and stored together in the grave, as the living reminisce about segments of the deceased. The objects would be neatly cleaned and finally settled in the final juncture where the bodies now silently rest.

Dead bodies and their belongings are granted an eternal home. All the memories of the deceased passed down through genealogy have become more ephemeral at the loss of the person. Nonetheless, the history of the disappearing memories is still shared with living family members. From there on, the collective area of graves embraces the connectedness between the dead and the living--*“The stack of memories with my loved person lying underneath the earth will last through my*

*life*". It is this commemorative consensus between the living and the dead in which histories and legacies of the dead will continue to be present, surrounding the inner and external fabric of the living's life. Home does not only mean physical occupancy but also emotional and perceptual interactions with it as memories. When part of the dead's memories sustain in the living person, the home in which the person lives becomes a gateway to the memories than a mere house. Through the gateway weaving the actual home and graves, the living person becomes a living home that stores the memories. Therein, the idea of home is transformed into two entities—a private contemplation lingering in the living and public territory that evokes their remembrance.

In Marli Davis' new work *Familiar Ghosts - Archiving Genetic Domesticity*, the idea of the split-but-shared home recurs throughout ritualistic conversations with ancestors and perpetual research on their histories. The residency first took place in her home, long owned by her ancestors, first-generation Japanese-Canadian immigrants. It begins, upon the domesticity gently offered by its spatiality, with the archive that the artist found in cabinets, traditional display cases, and Butsudan altars. The household objects summon tranquil times that awaken their owners' memories, dispositions, characteristics and physical and psychological footprints—the person themselves. In Davis' work, the personal hospitality that such domesticity offers to the viewers, inviting them into the artist's familial vestige, is escalated by the well-preserved documentation of her lost ancestral memories.

Starting in 1942 during WWII, the Canadian government segregated people of Japanese descent to enforce their deportation. Several Japanese-Canadian "homes" were built in British Columbia to detain Japanese Canadians forcefully separated from other family members. Those who had been the first-generation immigrants in Canada were labelled as specimens stamped on their immigrant document, while the other Japanese-Canadians born and raised in Canada were

stigmatized as “unqualified” Canadians who failed to be neutralized into western society. Their actual homes were sabotaged, and it caused more than 21,000 Japanese-Canadians were left with no home but encampment shelters that were neither shelter nor home but prisons.

The history of the displaced home and lineage had long remained in peripheral gaps that were involuntarily disconnected before the artist discovered remnants of the ancestors’ lives. The forgotten spirituality contained in domestic dwelling sealed within wardrobes and cabinets has been revisited, researched and reactivated by the artist’s hauntological investigation. Within her work, every corner of the furniture is fully cast by water-soaked edible rice paper that metamorphoses between temporal states of malleability and solidity by their circumstantial reactivity. Selected documents, including photos and letters passed down over decades, become part of the three white-ish, transparent sculptures of countless stacked rice papers, as if settling in their new home. The archive fills in bleak gaps and cracks between tangible layers of rice papers, speaking to non-linearity to the lineage deeply embedded in the archive through material illumination.

During the artist residency, every cast had to be done at the artist's home due to the fragility of the material involved. In this intimate, vulnerable apparatus, each cast is inevitably compounded with the artist's hair, nails, saliva and dust from clothing—infinitesimal DNA strands marked by the lineage. They join the interior of the domestic objects and home handed down her ancestors. The entire sculptures, installed in the Project Space, are surrounded by rice grains, resembling a bowl of rice on a funeral table as an offering to summon fragmented connectivity between the living and dead in East Asian culture. The audience is asked to remove their shoes and put on slippers as if entering a home. In this way, the artist's DNA segments entangled in/outside of the varying components compound with other DNA segments parted from bodies of the audience are

merged into the space where the artist's Japanese heritage attempts to *settle in* as sacred objects and the interconnectedness of the piece. If looking at the piece as a new home in which the archived memories of the ancestors are relocated, nurturing the representation of the history, your trait as an audience and attendee will further fulfill the foundation of the home.

If you think time flows from the past to the present, horizontally like the flow from a life to a death, Marli's action of haunting backwards through the historical genealogy in her family subverts this by configuring a circle of general temporality where the dead reincarnate as living memories and objects reified by the memories continue to be recalled by the living. The new *home* Davis Marli is creating in the public space reclaims statically lost narratives by animating a circulatory in one's genealogical system, physical manifested to sit amongst fragmented heritage. It is the ceremony which we all are attending to evoke internal commemoration into a public narrative, for all deaths sparse underneath unknown graves carrying unresuscitated histories, like the deceased in monument-less graves in South Korea.

-Ivetta Sunyoung Kang

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, James H.. "Japanese Canadian Internment: Prisoners in their own Country". The Canadian Encyclopedia, 17 September 2020, Historica Canada. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-internment-banished-and-beyond-tears-feature>. Accessed 10 September 2021.