



*Western Edition*

“Memorializing the West: 1871 Memorial”

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(MUSIC – MUSICA LENTA)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I’m Bill Deverell. Welcome to *Western Edition*, Season Three: “Memorializing the West”. A year ago, our second season focused on the past, present, and future of Los Angeles Chinatown. And as part of that fascinating exploration, we investigated the horrific 1871 massacre of Chinese and Chinese Americans in Downtown Los Angeles. In October of that year, a mixed-race mob of approximately ten percent of the resident population of Los Angeles killed 18 Chinese men and boys, or about ten percent of that ethnic and national group’s population at the time. Though the event has burned in the memory of the Chinese and Chinese American community for over 150 years, the rest of Los Angeles - people who live or who visit here - generally know nothing about it. But thanks to the collaborative efforts of grassroots organizations and institutions, working in concert with the city of Los Angeles, a fitting and powerful memorial to the victims of the massacre is now well underway. It made sense to us at *Western Edition* to add this final episode to our “Memorializing the West” season, as it offers a coda to what we’ve done and where we’ve gone this season and, we think as well, a bridge to last season’s Chinatown investigation. Following a summer 2022 public call for ideas and a competition, artist and photographer Nicolás Leong and writer Judy Chung were selected from nearly 200 submissions and, eventually, five other finalists, all of whose thoughtful work sought to redress our city’s amnesia about this event. I spoke

with Nicolás and Judy about their design and their process, beginning with how they became a team.

JUDY CHUNG: We met back in graduate school, actually, so we knew each other as friends first. And then because we worked together in school, we appreciated each other's aesthetics, and then it just naturally became a partnership. We do have our own work and our own projects, and Nicolás's is with photography and painting, and mine is in editing and writing. And we've also worked together for a while, mostly on book projects at first and then more recently in the last few years on collaborative art works with visual art and prose.

DEVERELL: So, Nicolás, given what Judy's just described about the range of skills and the different disciplinary skills that you bring to this, can you tell us a little bit about where the overlaps in aesthetics or practice happen and where the two of you bring different skills in?

NICOLÁS LEONG: So, I think that the overlaps perhaps have to do with an interest both in history and also environments and how history impacts environments. So, I think those two skills kind of naturally overlaps in this interest or this focus with the memorial, because there's really kind of interesting but also tragic overlap between how history impacted the environment. So, in my previous work in photography and also in painting, I have been looking in how history both impacts the environment and also how it's erased from it.

DEVERELL: Nicolás first learned about the massacre while researching his father's family history. As he shared what he had learned with Judy, they realized their childhood schooling in Asian American history did not include critically and tragically important events such as what happened in Los Angeles in the Fall of 1871.

LEONG: And I think it was stunning to both of us how unknown this history is. I think for both of us, because we relatively recently found out about these events and I found out about it sort of doing some research and looking into my grandfather's history because he was from the same region from where many of the immigrants came from in Taishan and Seiyap near Hong Kong, which experienced a huge amount of immigration throughout the world. And so, this history is part of this larger history of immigration. And so, when I found out about the massacre, it was in the context of tremendous amount of tragedies that the Cantonese population experienced throughout the world. So, such as massacres in Torreón, in Rock Springs, in Hells Canyon, but also the legislative efforts to prevent immigrants from settling in the country. And to find out

that this history, which was about erasure of population, was itself also erased was a very powerful starting point for both of us.

DEVERELL: The call for ideas for the memorial offered the pair the opportunity to conduct further research and to translate that research into a meaningful memorial design.

LEONG: It was a very natural decision that we should propose a design for this memorial. But actually for us, it was more important to be able to have an opportunity to research more into these events because they already were very important to us in terms of finding out this history and doing the reading for knowing our own histories better. We actually didn't really have the intention so much of having a goal to win it. It was more that we really wanted to find out about these events and to translate it in a way that could be meaningful. So, we had already been doing a lot of research into immigration, into these histories and had already been thinking about it when the call was announced. And so when it was announced, it was sort of a very natural decision for us to decide to do something.

DEVERELL: Throughout Season 3, we used our research skills to try to understand plaques and memorials across several hundred years. We made our best guesses as to the intentions of the artists and committees that chose words and forms to mark or remember the past. Speaking with Nicolás and Judy, we had an opportunity to have a clearer sense of intention with regard to this memorial. They shared that they had three main goals. The first involved telling the history of this massacre, grounded in historical context and attuned, at the same time, to contemporary issues.

CHUNG: It was important to us to be able to represent the tragedy of the massacre and how to do it in a contemporary way. And then that, it was important that the memorial should be an experience rather than a single large monument to be looked at. And it was important to us to be able to be able to represent each of the people that were killed, to acknowledge them and represent them somehow. And so from the start, I had this idea that there should be 18 pillars standing for each person that had been killed. And then, as we discussed the idea more, Nicholas thought that the form should probably be more organic. And so that's when he suggested the banyan trees that he'd photographed in his grandfather's village in Taishan, Guangdong. So then, when we agreed on this imagery of trees and roots that had lived for hundreds of years, and it allowed us to be specific with a cultural reference, yet also universal at the same time because to many cultures around the globe, trees represent life, longevity, and growth. And eventually, as we kept discussing and talking about this proposal and our concept, we realized that the three goals I had mentioned, that the first one should be about how

to help people understand this tragic event, both in itself and through the context of Asian American history.

LEONG: In 2018, I had made a trip to Seiyap, particularly to the area where my grandfather emigrated to Liverpool in 1911. And I went because my father had been looking into the history of his father. So, I went to look at the villages and I initially went both to find out about my grandfather's history, but also to look into these very interesting buildings that are there. And when I was photographing in the villages, I noticed that in front of every village was a banyan tree, a beautiful, tremendous banyan tree. And they were used in very particular ways that I hadn't seen before. They were places of social gathering. There were benches underneath the trees. There were places for people to exchange news. But also, there was a very interesting use of markers and of altars to pray to the gods and so on. So, one could tell that they were revered. And the more I found out about them, I found out that they had a very important part in Seiyap culture insofar as the trees represented these guardian spirits that would guard over the villages. They represented life, genealogy, having roots in the land. And I photographed them, and this stayed with me. And when Judy and I were speaking about possible directions for the memorial, and she was talking about having individual pillars for each of the people who were killed, we then started talking about the banyans and how the imagery of trees could be something that is universally understood in the sense of what they represent to humanity in general as far as representing life, our surroundings, but also about the cruelty that can be inflicted on trees and on people. And also, what's attracted us to using the banyans as an influence is that they're also very culturally specific to Seiyap culture. And that was a very potent imagery for us to follow.

(MUSIC – REFLECTIONS)

DEVERELL: The team's second goal was to have their installation aptly represent the diversity of Los Angeles.

CHUNG: There's a wide mixture of people within Los Angeles, even at this very early time. And that the cultures of the early Chinese quarter were largely formed by this Cantonese population that came over from Taishan and Seiyap and, and that this culture also became intertwined with every other culture in early Los Angeles. And so that was a way for us to show that there was, you know, diversity and also solidarity among the various cultures in Los Angeles.

DEVERELL: The third goal seems perhaps the most challenging, to balance history and contemporary aesthetics.

CHUNG: The memorial itself should be open and inclusive and that it should be both culturally specific and then also speak to shared experiences of all these various cultures. And that the memorial itself can be both abstract and representational so that it can be both traditional and contemporary at the same time. And the idea that it should be contemporary was very important to us too, because sometimes imagery for cultural references are perhaps stereotyped or maybe too archaic and doesn't actually represent how Asian Americans see themselves these days. And we felt that there should be a balance of the history and then the contemporary at the same time.

DEVERELL: I find this commitment to a memorial like this to be an experience, to not be a static, you know, plaque or the tried-and-true bronze horseback rider. But the notion that this is expected to be an experience that people experience this design. They become aware of this tragedy and then they're changed by their movement through the trees on the site where some of the most horrific actions of the massacre took place. I find that very powerful and moving. When you came up with the design and then things took their way, and you were chosen, can you tell us a little bit about your imagination of how people will eventually encounter and experience what you've produced?

CHUNG: Yeah. So, we hope that there will be a whole range of experiences. So, we did imagine that the memorial itself could just be a sculpture park for sitting beside and underneath trees and also for cultural events and commemorations such as the annual commemoration of the massacre. And then it could also serve as a place for school kids and adults to learn about the massacre and the early history of Asian Americans. And the experience could also range from people who don't know about the massacre and then stumble across the memorial to those who do know about the massacre and come to pay their respects. And we also did imagine that perhaps some people don't want to know too much about the history and then they just use the memorial as another park, while others would be inspired to explore more on their own or by looking at the memorial website and listening to and taking the audio tour and taking advantage of the supplementary materials. But our primary hope is that people will want to learn more and will experience the history and then the massacre itself by going to the site and visiting it and also feel that it is something that that they would want to learn about more, and that it is something that an event that they could actually sit with and contemplate and perhaps not feel threatened by it, but actually learn from it.

LEONG: We found it very important to have a strong emotional impact when people encounter the memorial. So upon encountering this grove of trunks to really feel the impact of individual lives being cut short and that one doesn't really have to know very much about the history to feel this, the emotional impact of the tragedy itself,

represented through the trunks. At the same time, we also wanted for, if people wanted to know more, to be able to find out different layers of the complexity of this history. And so, to do this through the timeline and also the relationship to all of the other sites and even the trees, because the trees themselves - both the existing trees and the trees that we want to propose - have their own very interesting histories, both as native trees and also as immigrant trees that form kind of a parallel to the histories that we're looking into. So in that sense, the research was very important to us because we acknowledge that this is a very complex history of many different groups of people coming together. And we wanted the memorial itself to reflect this complexity while not simplifying it or brushing over it in a way that would lessen the emotional impact.

DEVERELL: Yeah, it's that multi-layered approach that is so utterly fascinating because unlike, let's say a plaque nailed to a wall, which is a static single experience, I would expect the notion that people will find their way to your design again and again and again for different reasons, or to look through and past and inside those multiple multi-layers. It just is so exciting in a very powerful and emotional way, but exciting to think how this will become textured in the lives and experiences of, we would hope, the millions and millions of people either who live here or who visit here, who find their way on purpose or by accident into that grove of banyans.

(MUSIC – WHEN ALL OF THIS IS OVER)

DEVERELL: There is a sort of tragic coincidence or overlap of the massacre taking place in the very heart of what was then Downtown Los Angeles, the very heart of the origin story of Los Angeles from the late 18th century forward. Anti-Asian violence or racist violence in general is woven into American history and culture in ways that people would rather forget. Memorials such as this one makes space for people to encounter that and try to understand that this is part of Los Angeles history, this is part of Southern California history, and it can no longer or should no longer be erased or forgotten. Memorials like this will serve as really lasting reminders and give us a hopefulness, I think, in terms of grappling with that history. Our guests offered us final thoughts on the impact of their work.

CHUNG: I hope that it will achieve everything that we intended for it and that it will become an important part of people's understanding of the history of Los Angeles and also of California and also of the United States. I actually found it interesting that when we were looking into the history and recognizing that there's a connection to the current anti-Asian violence, that other Asian-Americans of different backgrounds also made that same connection. And I hope that this memorial can be a place for all of us to

come to and learn more about, and not just Asian Americans in general, but everyone, the larger population.

LEONG: We really do want the memorial experience to be a cumulative one in the sense that it will make people find out more not only about the specific history, but also the related histories in the United States. And these issues are so complex and ingrained in American society that I hope it will encourage people to see how this history relates to the many other histories in the States.

DEVERELL: I'm Bill Deverell. Thank you to our guests in this episode, Nicolás Leong and Judy Chung. And thank you for joining us for Season 3 of *Western Edition*. *Western Edition's* team includes Avishay [ah-vee-shy] Artsy, Katie Dunham, Jessica Kim, Elizabeth Logan, and Stephanie Yi. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Thank you for listening and be well.