



Ying Ye

Burn the Midnight Oil
JULY 20 – OCT. 8, 2023

About the Exhibit

Real Art Ways is pleased to present *Burn the Midnight Oil*, a solo exhibition of recent work by Ying Ye. Through her work, Ye links food, labor, and the body to themes of cultural identity, intergenerational trauma, and systemic oppression experienced by many Asian Americans. Throughout *Burn the Midnight Oil*, Ye examines the use of soybeans in the making of tofu (especially in the form of fragile tofu skin), referencing the process as a metaphor for her family's experience as Chinese immigrants and workers in the food industry. Combining elements of performance, sculpture, video, and text, Ye looks toward community building and shared resources as a way to heal from the stresses of life under capitalism.

About the Artist

Ying Ye is an interdisciplinary Chinese artist who incorporates her family's tradition of cooking into her work. Ye's work addresses the "burden that younger generations of Asians and Asian Americans [experience] in American culture." Ye has exhibited at venues including Farmington Valley Arts Center, Five Points Gallery, and the Ely Center of Contemporary Art in New Haven. Ye earned a BFA in Painting and Sculpture from Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford in 2019.

About the Real Art Awards

Ye is a recipient of a 2022 Real Art Award. The Real Art Awards are a juried competition open at no cost to emerging artists from the six New England states, New York and New Jersey. The 2022 Real Art Awards were juried by multidisciplinary artist Carlos Motta, curator and creative strategist Yona Backer, and Real Art Ways Executive Director Will K. Wilkins. In addition to a cash prize and a solo exhibition, each artist receives logistical and curatorial support throughout the exhibition process. This project is supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Edward C. and Ann T. Roberts Foundation.



On the evening of October 5th, 2023, I arrived at Real Art Ways to see Ying Yi's performance piece that accompanied her exhibition, *Burn the Midnight Oil*. In the days leading up to this moment, I had been traveling for work—somewhat tired from the train trips but nonetheless eager to engage with the show and meet Ying, who I had been in correspondence with via email. Once seated, the audience members were handed small clear cups holding ingredients to pass around, each labeled with their contents: "Tofu Skin," "Fermented Chili Bean," "Soft Jellied Bean Curd Tofu Brain Douhua," just to name a few. Soon afterwards, Ying entered the space on her "Tofucle," a three wheeled bike attached to a food cart, and was all smiles as she stepped off the bike and began to scoop individual portions of soft tofu with chili oil and various other toppings. While she focused on the scooping, pouring, peppering, and organizing of cups, a speaker played a recording of her voice. Once I received my cup, a sense of relief washed over me as I realized how much I had been craving Asian food after a few days of eating mostly bread and pasta. I thought back to the familiar and inevitable moments on family trips when my dad would look up the only Korean restaurant in whatever foreign place we were in. Taking us on often-strange roads to have subpar Korean food that was still closer to "real food" and not the "snacks" that *all* other food is categorized as in his mind. I smiled to myself at the memory while shoveling the warm cup of chilled soft tofu into my mouth. It soon became evident that my feelings of relief and experience of nourishment were echoed as major themes in the exhibition's artworks—each piece reflecting on the hyper-specific context of Ying's experience working at her

family's Chinese restaurant and speaking to larger ideas of labor, intergenerational healing, as well as racial and economic justice in diasporic and immigrant communities.

Before even stepping into the exhibition space, viewers encounter a sculptural installation titled, *We Need Each Other To Stay Alive* (2023). The piece is installed and hangs inside the door frame; visitors must walk underneath the work to enter the gallery. A five-gallon plastic bucket for Kikkoman soy sauce is sawed in half and adhered to opposite sides of the door frame.



The two half-buckets are connected by a horizontal black pole that runs the width of the entryway, and twelve large silver meat hooks hang from the pole. It takes a moment for me to realize what I am seeing when looking at these hooks, as my brain questions their placement and my location in an art gallery. They remind me of the hooks that hold roasted duck in restaurant windows of Chinatowns. From each hook dangles a bulbous layering of pale yellow tofu skin. The skin is frozen in time, brittle, and holding a shape similar to that of a cartoon ghost: rounded on top with the edges hanging limp underneath. The artist had laid layers of the skin onto a foam mannequin head to shape them into these jellyfish-like moldings before using a paint adhesive to stabilize them. Every element of this work, from the bulk soy sauce containers, to the hooks and tofu skins, are all items that the artist had become familiar with at home and from working in kitchens. The placement of this work, then, became a statement—that this exhibition will center these common, cheap, and easily accessible objects and the stories they hold. Not only does this piece, *We Need Each Other To Stay Alive* (2023), make this declaration, but it also emphasizes “materials” that are not visible to the eye. Light filters through the thin layers of tofu and illuminates the negative space below once occupied by the head of a mannequin. For as much as the work emphasizes culturally-specific elements of a Chinese kitchen, it also creates room for what is not there—the often overlooked or hidden labor of working class immigrant families, and in this case, of Ying’s own family that immigrated from China to Ellington, Connecticut just over a decade ago.

Having entered the gallery space, the viewer is then made to navigate through a few different works: two of which are interactive. “Want & Resource Soybean Cutting Board Counter” features a wall with dried and cured tofu skin with writing prompts stamped onto them with soy sauce. The questions ask, “What do you want?” “What do you resource?” The provided slips of paper read: “I (WE), [blank] want [blank] and to be resourced by [blank].” Some of the answers left by previous visitors are heartfelt and universal, participants wanting “peace,” “connection,” “to slow down.” Others are more playful, listing



their wants as “wealth, fame, and power,” or “all of the tacos!” The second interactive piece, located opposite of the writing prompt, is titled, “What Do You Want & Empathy Stress Relief Tofu Bags.” Two seat cushions with working microphones are set on the ground near a neon sign that shares the echoing question, “What do you want?”. There is a further prompt on the ground that invites viewers to get comfortable, listen to your body, and breathe. These moments of collaboration and interaction with the visitors of Real Art Ways serve two purposes. First, to reflect on the artist's own journey of feeling anxious, breathless, and unable to express her needs during her own assimilation into American society and second, to create a place for others to reflect on similar feelings of vulnerability. In her book, *Woman, Native, Other*, filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh Ha describes avenues of confronting power structures when stating, “Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion. Please follow



me. Trust me, for deep feeling and understanding require total commitment.”¹ Ying’s insistence on including and centering her interactive models offers a road to healing through communal understanding and communication—one that demands and hinges on a relationship of trust with audience members.

Between the two interactive stations is a video installation titled, *Day to Day Life Inside the Tofu Press* (2023). The video, projected straight onto the ground, was shown on the surface of a large wooden tofu press that the artist had created for the show. The structure was placed atop a large, flat water bubble sealed in clear plastic—acting almost like a doily for the wooden frame. The work itself showed a collection of sixteen frames of video, all playing simultaneously in a four by four grid. Each scene showed frames of the same person and location (all inside a restaurant kitchen) before moving onto the next person. At times this person was Ying’s father flicking a wok, then, her mother cutting onions. In watching the piece, the exhibition visitor becomes an invited, or perhaps intruding, guest inside the more intimate bowels of a working kitchen at a Chinese restaurant. This act of bringing the viewer into the space of labor through the camera lens, to then present the piece in a gallery setting not only warps the embedded power structures but also questions how certain types of labor become seen, acknowledged, or applauded while others remain hidden. These subtle decisions are further evident in the quiet choice of the water bubble at the base of *Day to Day Life Inside the Tofu*

1 Trinh, Thi Minh-Ha, and Thi Minh-Ha Trinh. *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Vol. 503. Indiana University Press, 1989. p.52

2 Ying Ye performance text at Real Art Ways, October 5th, 2023.

Press (2023). The bubble design was inspired by Ying’s father’s process of squeezing water out of cabbage to make egg rolls. While the correlation may not be clear to the viewer, this element becomes a place of further pause and questioning—what is this bubble? What is the liquid? What is the purpose? The work as a whole balances between the hyper-activity presented in the video montage and the weighty, even opaque structures that lay underneath and between the frames.

During the performance piece I attended, Ying’s voice recording shared a long-form piece of writing. The audio began by comparing the life-cycle of a soybean to that of her own and of her loved ones—she compares the different processes of transformation to times of personal change and discovery. The voice describes this process, “...from fresh green soybean, dry soybean, tofu skin, bean curd, soybean oil, and to fermented process like fermented black bean, soy sauce, natto, miso, and sticky tofu...”² She dips in and out of the history of soybean products and her own immigration story, seamlessly weaving between personal narrative and statements of support for immigrant communities. In *Burn the Midnight Oil*, Ying navigates the personal, historical, and political aspects of her upbringing, both allowing for places of rest and fostering moments of nourishment. She guides us into reflection amongst fellow audience members and provides real sustenance—food not just for thought.

-Claire Kim



Claire Kim is a curator and writer based in New York City. She is currently the Director of Curatorial Strategy at the Here and There Collective. Kim previously served as the Special Assistant to the President at BRIC, in Brooklyn, as well as a 2020–21 curatorial fellow at NXTH-VN, in New Haven, CT. She has worked in museum education and programming with arts organizations, including the Asian American Arts Alliance, New Museum, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. She has organized exhibitions at James Cohan Gallery, New York; Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard; Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York; Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, Brooklyn; and BRIC, Brooklyn. Kim completed her MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.



Real Art Ways is a contemporary arts organization with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



56 Arbor Street
Hartford, CT 06106
www.realartways.org



Support for Real Art Ways Visual Arts Programs provided by:

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The New England Foundation for the Arts through the New England Arts Resilience Fund, the Department of Economic and Community Development Office of the Arts, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Travelers Foundation, J. Walton Bissell Foundation, Sandy and Howard Fromson, and Real Art Ways' members.