

Rachelle Dang's Meditation on Past and Present

If white often symbolizes innocence and purity, Dang's pervasive use of the color gives her tropical tableau a ghostly, washed-out feel.



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Rachelle Dang, "Under a Constellation of Leaves" (2019), aluminum fence panel, air-dry clay, wire, Aqua-Resin, paint, 72 x 120 x 168 inches, photographs by Etienne Frossard, (images courtesy the artist)

Built from ivory-colored, air-dry clay, affixed to wire armatures and bedecked with foliage handmade from the same materials, the 10-foot-long chain-link fence that bisects Rachelle Dang's installation at mh PROJECT nyc, [*Under a Constellation of Leaves*](#), is the centerpiece of a haptic Proustian meditation on the interplay between past and present, innocence and experience, safety and vulnerability. The fence's floral tangle is a reconstruction from memory of plants found in the backyard of Dang's childhood home in Hawaii.

On the ground beside the fence, an ivory-colored clay sleeping bag is also a mnemonic reconstruction, here of a sleeping bag Dang's mother made. The sleeping bag's wrinkles and folds echo the contours of the clay flower petals strewn on and around it; these fallen stephanotis petals, which evoke sensuous human lips, bespeak overripe loss. Yet the blanket's mostly unadorned surface, as well as the simplistic toy train and "RACHELLE" lettering sculpted in relief on it, suggest youthful innocence.

Dang's ingenious material choices suspend these conceptual tensions in delicate equipoise. At once soft in appearance and hard to the touch, the air-dry clay, a Play-Doh-esque material designed for children, embodies the installation's atmosphere of brittle tenderness. The artist's decision to leave the clay unpainted is equally apt. While the color white often symbolizes innocence and purity, its pervasiveness here gives Dang's baroque tropical tableau a ghostly, washed-out feel.



Rachele Dang, "Under a Constellation of Leaves" detail (2019), aluminum fence panel, air-dry clay, wire, Aqua-Resin, paint, 72 x 120 x 168 inches

It could also be indirect commentary on whiteness as a racial construct, and that construct's role in Hawaii's colonial history. Dang's thoughtful and compelling 2018 solo debut, *Southern Oceans*, installed at Motel Gallery, explored Pacific colonialism's symbolic, material, and ecological legacies, in this case through imaginative reproductions of breadfruits, 18th-century shipping containers, and wallpaper crammed with colonialist iconography (specifically, French

painter Jean-Gabriel Charvet’s “Savages of the Pacific Ocean,” ca. 1805). *Under a Constellation* addresses related themes but from a more intimate, personal standpoint.

However personal or impersonal, Dang’s installations stand out for the way they transmute historical facts into poetic innuendos. Her sculptural reconstructions are most effective when camped out somewhere just shy of the literal. For instance, whereas *Under a Constellation*’s floral forms cogently evoke human body parts, the installation’s direct bodily representations — human ear sculptures embedded among the fence’s vines and flowers — appear overly realistic as forms and heavy-handed as symbols. Dang’s lyric historicism affords her the conceptual space to explore personal and cultural vulnerabilities without feeling entirely vulnerable.

Under a Constellation of Leaves *continues at mh PROJECT nyc (140-142 2nd Avenue, #306, East Village, Manhattan) through July 14.*