

MOUSSE

Doris Guo 'Back', at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Harry Burke



In the early 1990s, artist Weili Wang emigrated from Shanghai to the Pacific Northwest. Although art continued to animate her life in the United States—she and her husband worked as portraitists, started a small art school, and, when the time came, taught their daughter to draw—she left her early artworks with her parents in China. Now also an artist, Wang's daughter Doris Guo has, in the last couple of years, assisted her in moving these to the United States and cataloguing them.

In *Back* at Empty Gallery, Guo's first solo exhibition in Asia, a series of diptychs contemplate this shared endeavor. As they worked, Guo documented her mother's suburban studio with a handmade pinhole camera, creating a series of photographic abstractions of the busy space. In Hong Kong, each print is coupled with one of Wang's paintings or drawings from the 1980s. Guo's *Petrichor* (2023) depicts a stack of drawings, face up, under glassine sheets, surrounded by a throng of brushes, scrunched-up paper, and artworks. The print accompanies one of the sketches pictured in it, *江南小镇 Small Village in Jiangnan* (1984), a charcoal study of a curving village lane that

Wang made while teaching at an architecture school. The precision of Wang's hand is echoed in the care with which Guo records her mother's studio.

Political themes, by and large, appear indirectly. The enchanting 佛祖空灵 *Buddhist Ethereal* (1989), an oil pastel and ink impression of the Buddhist cave paintings at Dunhuang, brings to mind a tradition of Socialist Realists like Dong Xiwen (1914–1973) copying these murals in their search for a nationalist artistic lineage.¹ Next to it is Guo's *Object Medley* (2023), portraying a cluster of packing materials and frames. In different ways, each image foregrounds the work of preservation, of stewarding history.

But in one pairing, displayed in a small side room, the state's influence is more evident. Though the Communist Party's 1978 embrace of a market-oriented economy would go on to elicit new, rebelliously open forms of expression in Chinese contemporary art, Wang's 秋耕 *Autumn Plowing* (1983) indicates the ongoing legacy of Socialist Realism in the early years of economic reform. Its cadre of farm laborers, smudgy and rounded, displays little heroism. Nonetheless, didactic text praising the autumn harvest hovers around the composition, which memorializes collective work. Hanging beside it is a photograph of a cohort of slanting, lemon-yellow binders. The artworks are charged by the ideological gulfs between China and the United States, and between the 1980s and today. Guo is looking at her mother looking at the world, and finding the caesura between their gazes to be profound.

Parent-child relationships can be fraught, especially when there are cultural differences; with Guo's light touch, though, the diptychs harmonize. If there's tension, it's sublimated. Cocooned in the middle of the gallery are *Discarnate* (2023) and *Fallen Jewelry* (2023), two sculptures in which Guo beams the image of an object, found or picked up in a suburban thrift store, onto the wall, recalling a setup sometimes used by artists when drawing. But because she places the actual object into the projector, rather than a transparent film, the image is hazy. *Fallen Jewelry*, with its hues of lavender, sand, and baby blue, projects something like a cosmic cloud, intersected by thin strips of light from a domestic heating vent. In the late 1940s, the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein developed her concept of "projective identification," an unconscious mechanism in which aspects of the self are split off and attached to an external object.² Introjection, a complementary process, is when an external object is internalized by the subject. While maybe heavy-

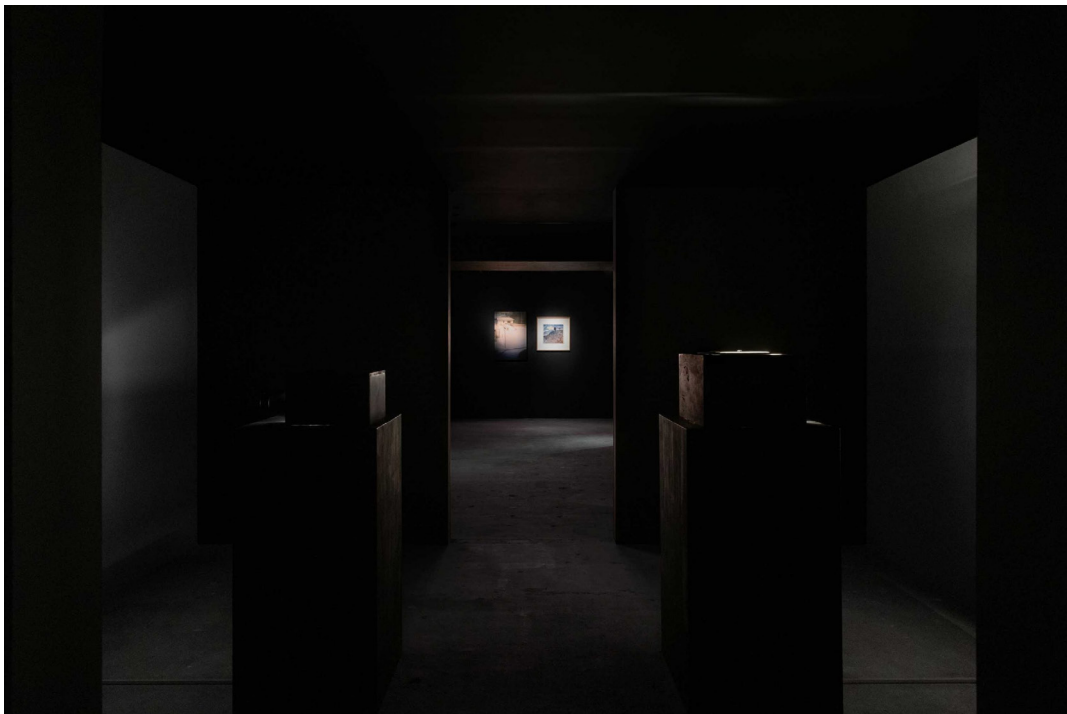
1 Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu, "From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Echoes of Socialist Realism, Part I," *e-flux journal* 55 (May 2014): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/55/60315/from-the-issue-of-art-to-the-issue-of-position-the-echoes-of-socialist-realism-part-i/>.

2 Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 27 (1946): 103.

handed, these terms offer a means of reading these works: Guo's sculptures investigate processes of internalization and externalization, albeit impeded, incomplete. Their power lies in their commentary on the antagonisms within us, and on the aspects of ourselves we conceal, perhaps to protect.

We are, by nature, opaque. For this reason, psychoanalysts turn to objects. But, as Guo shows, objects can be equally impenetrable. Why did Wang leave her artworks in China? What meanings did they hold for Wang's parents as they gathered dust in their Shanghai apartment for three decades? How did Guo feel when she first saw them? This tender, shoe-gazey exhibition offers no answers, for its most pressing inquiries are structural. What objects have we lost or left behind? Is it possible, or desirable, to reunite with them? Such questions might tell us something about why we live our lives at a distance from others.

at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
until February 17, 2024



SPIKE

Doris Guo at Empty Gallery

Jaime Chu



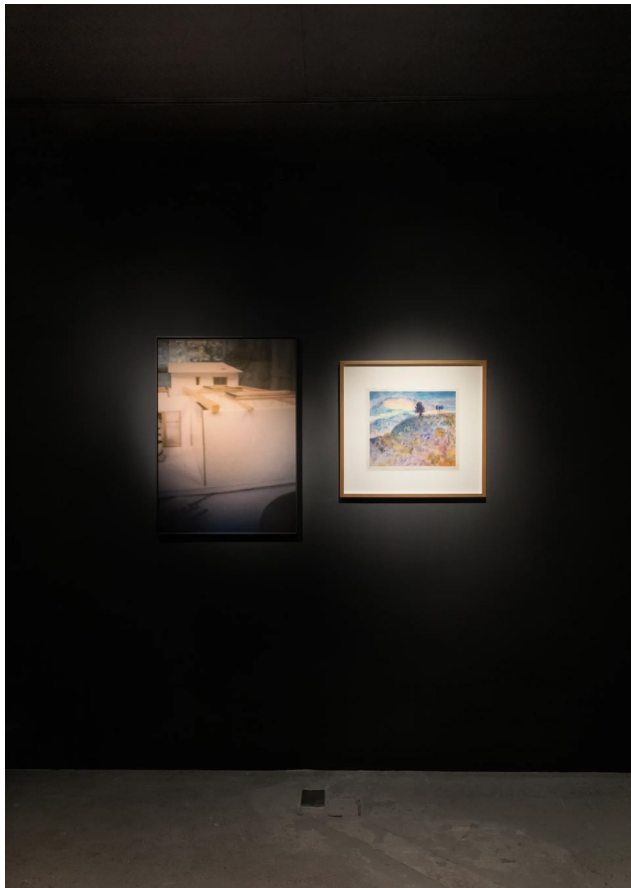
Left: Doris Guo, *Petrichor*, 2023, giclée print on Arches 310 gsm paper; right: Weili Wang, 江南小镇 *Small village in Jiangnan*, 1984, charcoal on paper. All images courtesy: the artists and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photos: Michael Yu

Mounted in Hong Kong in contrapuntal pairs, an exhibition of photographs beside the artist's mother's works finesses the breakages of migration and the limits of familial understanding.

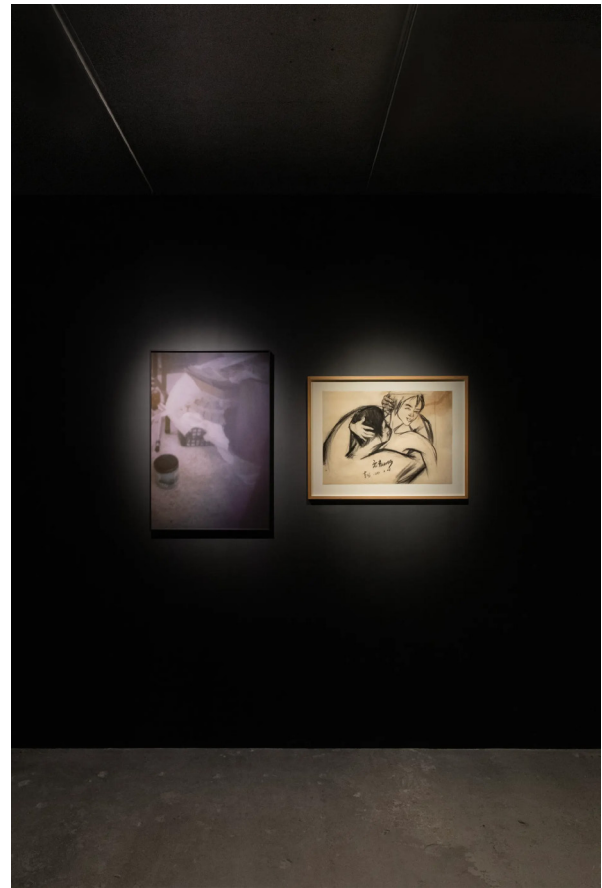
What is a child's duty to a parent's past, and what is the appropriate distance between two lives? During a visit home to Seattle, the artist and erstwhile art handler Doris Guo (*1992) began preparing for storage a haphazard shipment of paintings her mother, Weili Wang (*1956), had made in Shanghai, before emigrating to the US. Guo, who had previously known little of her mother's past life as an artist and art professor, said that materially caring for the paintings, while hesitating to organize them into an archive or to call her own involvement documentation, was the least she could do. After that, "I really don't care what [my mom] does with the paintings," Guo told me.

Her first solo exhibition in Asia, "Back," builds on a series of diptychs begun at the Seattle project space Veronica, which traced a familial migration route from Shanghai to Guo's current residence in Oslo. In Hong Kong, Guo has paired seven of her mother's paintings and works on paper with prints

of pinhole photographs Guo took while sorting through the larger body of works. The selection reflects Wang's wide range of styles, media, and subject matters from throughout the 1980s, from Social Realist depictions of rural life to figurative charcoal drawings and a variety of landscapes of coastal China. Without being mutually representational, the pairings – the two parts constituting one work, following the Chinese literary tradition of *duilian*, or antithetical couplets – reflect family resemblances: Stacks of paper folders slanting from their own weight follow farmers toiling in yellowing fields in *Autumn Plowing* (all works 2023); the boxy pattern in *Storagescape* (*Sunset*) mirrors the grids on Chinese apartment blocks; and in *Petrichor*, the evocation of first rain in a misty Jiangnan village is counterpointed in an unceremonious array of half-covered prints and painter's tools. In the words of Shanghai-born novelist Liu Yichang, famously appropriated by the opening of Wong Kar Wai's 2004 film *2046*, "All memories are traces of tears."



Left: Doris Guo, *Monroe Studio Model*, 2023, giclée print on Arches 310 gsm paper; right: Weili Wang, 风景 *Landscape*, 1987, watercolor and mineral pigment on rice paper



Left: Doris Guo, *Daydream dwelling*, 2023, giclée print on Arches 310 gsm paper; right: Weili Wang, 究竟如何 *How*, 1982, charcoal on paper.

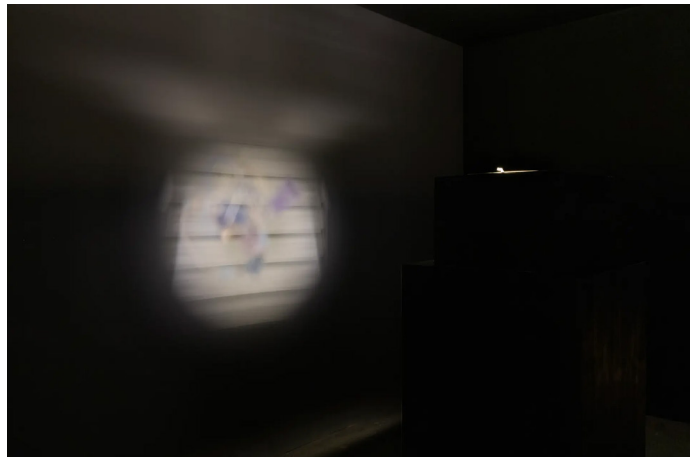
The blackened walls and darkened interior of Empty Gallery characteristically lend its displays a meditative solemnity, here especially pronounced by two custom-built projector-sculptures in the exhibition's anteroom. Static close-ups of the sleek, metallic curvature of a call bell in *Anti Discarnate* and blurry, purple-toned accessories seen through an air vent in *Fallen Jewelry* recast scenes of domestic turmoil as a dry, situational comedy, the way children,

especially immigrant children, distort private jokes to cope with the aporia of living between worlds. The latter image especially summarizes a tragicomic distance: Like memories of the past or unacknowledged family histories, objects seemingly within physical reach can remain emotionally a universe away.

Reading the distance between the vivacity of Wang's self-assured, *en plein air* exercises and Guo's cooler, compositionally erratic, often out-of-focus photographs of messy interiors, unnamed objects, and studio miscellany, the opening of a poem by Ariana Reines sprang to mind: "Trying to see the proportional relation / Of one memory to another / One is so strange, and then / To try and see what looms / And doesn't for the other person." Evading a confrontation with the facts of documentation and the tidiness of an archive, the photos appear rather as portals into a dream state, echoing the sultry impossibility of grasping the reality of the spacetime their referents – her mother's life and work – once occupied. Guo gracefully resolves the incumbent tensions between these multiple identities and their limited perspectives by unburdening their respective artistic languages of the didactics of interpretation. By choosing not to complete Wang's narrative, Guo's formal and material focus deposes her own voice in reckoning with their relationship. Moreover, by maintaining a respectful opacity between her work and her mother's life, Guo asserts an equality of discursive agency in their collaboration as artists.



Doris Guo, *Anti Discarnate*, 2023, call bell, copper drain, opaque projector, painted wood, and hardware



Doris Guo, *Fallen Jewelry*, 2023, jewelry, metal vent, opaque projector, stained wood, and hardware

The discreet humor and formal instincts in "Back" reason that familial decisions at once practical and sentimental need not be saccharine. Nor, for that matter, must viewers always consent to playing the role of psychoanalyst, even when reckonings with filial guilt, generational trauma, and unspoken histories – all common to the Asian-American experience – become artistic subjects. Posing herself in relation to family, and complicated by the multiverse of immigration, Guo proposes an alternative grammar that liberates the viewer and the child-as-artist from the duty of making sense.

We may not always fully understand the choices made in the past, beholden as we are at any given moment to the perspective of any one identity; Guo's clear conceptualization of this limitation shows how the material of the personal can transcend the blind spots of the autobiographical. What if the artist's structuring role is such that two lives may find a common language, in which one is expressly permitted to move as freely as the other? We suffer because we don't know how to lovingly leave each other alone.



View of "Back," Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2023

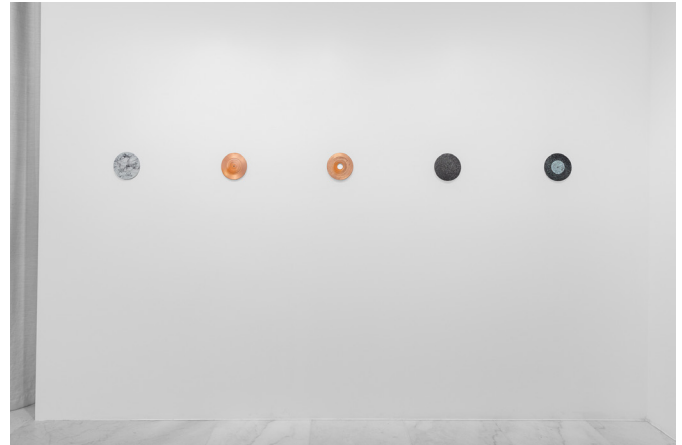


Doris Guo: traces of people, places, and politics

Victoria Durnak

When you are a child, your parents are a fact, something that is just there. Someone to look up to perhaps, or someone to blame. As you grow, you might start to actually see your parents; they are people, with all their attributions and insecurities. The relationship between parent and child is often tangled, and the stories told by the different parts might not always correspond. Incidents look different from the different points of view.

This emotional dissonance lays the ground for Doris Guo's untitled project with her mother's artwork. The artist, American born but currently Oslo-based, considers it an ongoing piece, even if it partly unfolded in the Seattle family home where the two family members looked through and cared for the artwork. It also exists as a new work shown in contemporary art contexts, such as in her solo exhibition *Shanghai San Francisco Richmond Seattle New York Oslo (TRACE)* at Veronica in Seattle earlier this year. Here, Guo pairs her mother's artworks with inkjet prints of pinhole photographs of her mother's studio. The works are titled in pairs, and named such as *A corner of Shanghai (2022 & 1983)*. The choice of photographic technique underlines how the child's reception of the parent is inevitably constrained – initially as an age-appropriate presentation of the world, but then often reenacted into adulthood, merged into the dynamics of the relationship. A parent can never really let the child into their world. Also, a relationship can never be seen clearly; several truths will always coexist.



Doris Guo at VI, VII, Oslo in the show "X Years". Courtesy of VI, VII, Oslo and the artist. Photography: Christian Tunge



Doris Guo, "Shanghai San Francisco Richmond Seattle New York Oslo (TRACE)", Veronica, 2022, installation view. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jueqian Fang



Doris Guo, "Shanghai San Francisco Richmond Seattle New York Oslo (TRACE)", Veronica, 2022, installation view. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jueqian Fang

The artwork of Guo's mother, ranging from oil paintings to charcoal drawings, was made when she still lived in China at the time of the cultural revolution. After moving to the US, she abandoned her practice but made a living by drawing portraits at state fairs and similar events. In this light, Guo's new rendering can also be seen as a metaphor for how immigrants inevitably leave some parts of themselves behind. Moving country makes new identities possible – something is found but something is also lost.

Guo mentions how the project was an opportunity to talk with her mother about her artworks, which were but a silent presence during her childhood. Guo's project also becomes an analogy for the parent-child relationship in general, touching upon the idea of unquestioned family facts. The power of the parent in this regard has often struck me in my own life: the responsibility of drawing up a truthful image of the world. The artist's attempt to get closer to her mother speaks of the distance one can feel in a relationship, evoking a certain melancholia.

The theme of being simultaneously near and distant also seems to occur in Guo's wall hung sculptures *Guestbook I & II*, often part of her exhibitions. The cast of either of two different stones, one golden and the other black, hang on the wall. A wall text or the gallery staff encourage the visitors to "sign in" by touching them. The work is partly about the loneliness we can experience even when we are in touch with other people. There is a sense of being almost there, a tingling sensation still left in the palm after shaking someone's hand. Guo's gesture also opens up the work for the viewer, who participates in the sculpture by slowly editing the surface. Over time the bronze erodes, the material changing by human hands, as is also the case with some of the sculptures and tombs in the Ming tombs in Beijing "where certain spots are more popular for visitors to touch for good luck," says Guo.

A vague sense of recognition occurs when I first view Guo's work. When I write her name in the search field



Doris Guo, "Bronze Guestbook II", 2019. Bronze. 8.5 x 5.5 x 1.5 in (21.6 x 14 x 3.8 cm). Courtesy of Derosia, New York and the artist.



Doris Guo, "A bend...", 2019. Pine, hardware, chair. 41 x 36 x 16 in (104.1 x 91.4 x 40.6 cm). Courtesy of Derosia, New York and the artist.



Doris Guo, "XO", installation view at Derosia, New York, 2019. Courtesy of Derosia, New York and the artist.

of my email inbox, I realize I've seen some of it before. I find a 2018 newsletter from Princess, a documentation-based New York gallery, where artworks were placed in a run-down non-space between two buildings and photographed. The exhibitions then existed online through the mentioned newsletter and a webpage. Five years ago I apparently saw images of Guo's show *Coffee & Tea* there. Only now, the image files are broken, and the memory, alongside the (minimal) text, is what remains. This incident seems to correspond well with her practice at large, which deals with traces in different forms.

Many of Guo's works are influenced by her Chinese-American background. The autobiographical frame makes possible a representation of Asian lives, bodies, and culture far from the caricatures that circulate today. In her 2019 solo exhibition *XO* at Derosia, a series of chairs cut in half hung low on the gallery wall inside wooden structures that resemble coffins. Here, a selection of

seating props from Chinese restaurants are stripped from their function and given new meaning as a work of art. The slightly edited ready-made object goes in dialogue with art historical figures like Joseph Kosuth and his chair piece, adding a new perspective to the Americentric art canon through its cultural significance. Thinking of how the chairs have served a purpose for the many different New Yorkers suggests an intricate intermingling of cultural contexts.

In spite of all of the stories in Guo's work, there is also a strive for something less outspoken. Her series of unique black mezzotint prints (individually titled, 2022) touch upon the theme of artistic labor, being etched out of copper plates that are painstakingly carved with a rocking tool with a row of small v-shaped teeth. Layering cuts to fill in with ink creates rich prints: black surfaces where one struggles to orientate with no apparent visual grip. The eye searches for meaning, for something concrete to build



Doris Guo, installation view at Inge, New York, 2022.
Courtesy of Inge, New York and the artist.



Doris Guo, "Ride with the swirl 1", 2022. Mezzotint on cotton rag. Courtesy of Inge, New York and the artist.

a narrative around, where you might only find darkness.

At the same time, these prints also speak of a subtle communion of our social and physical surroundings. The darker the surface, the more visible the accumulation of dust. And what is dust, if not traces of our concrete environments – skin particles, fabric, the outdoors with all its natural and man-made components? People, places, and politics. In her works, these lines run parallel and even out, no one more important than the other.

ARTFORUM

Critic's Pick: Doris Guo at Derosia, New York

Hiji Nam



Doris Guo, *Momentary Scare & Inconvenience*, 2019, pine, hardware, chair, 22 x 25 x 11".

Doris Guo's exhibition is solemn, as if one has been summoned to a church or a graveyard for prayer. Here, a funeral series of Chinatown restaurant chairs are nestled within wooden, coffin-like receptacles. Though the chairs appear to be upright, the artist has amputated their back legs, giving us only a truncated front view. (They won't be seating anyone for a happy communion anytime soon.) These innocuous objects are meant to, both literally and symbolically, contribute to the circulation and consumption of Asian food, yes, but also bodies, capital, and a certain kind of aesthetic. They are there to offer a seat at the table, so to speak, at every after-party and gallery dinner hosted in a local eatery—familiar rituals undergirding the lifestyle of the city's culture class.

Momentary Scare & Inconvenience (all works 2019), the most elegant of the four chair sculptures, recalls the feeling of being queued up at a crowded restaurant, anxious that an

evening's plans might be derailed, while the vinyl-covered seat of *Cushion Sound* looks like something that would be found at a three-dollar dumpling spot, easily splashed and soiled, but never permanently stained.

Although there's been much discourse in New York about how art businesses are displacing Chinatown's populations, there is no polemic here. Rather, Guo's show feels like a meditation on the ways in which our contradictions, desires, and anxieties can be located in these bits of furniture that underpin vast social systems. *Bronze Guestbook II*, a sculpture cast from a found rock, is the only piece that has not been stripped of function and rendered ornamental. The work is mounted on a wall next to the gallery's reception desk, alluding to how the devout make pilgrimages to holy shrines, sometimes rubbing a special sculpture for good luck. It is meant to be worn down, broken in by communal gatherings and tenderness—in other words, it is an object of faith.

THE NEW YORKER

Doris Guo at Derosia, New York

Johanna Fateman

Dim lighting establishes a quietly theatrical ambience inside this small gallery, evoking the interiors where Guo's materials were once at home. In her new suite, the young sculptor uses sliced sections of chairs, which she has carefully framed with stained wooden boxes and mounted on the wall. One trio of works showcases the front legs and halved seats of three distinctly different styles of mass-produced chair. The effect is unsettling, as if a magician had given up in the midst of a vanishing act. A larger sculpture offers the view in reverse: glossy spindles face out, and a pale cushion ends abruptly at the back of a dark recessed cabinet. Guo's truncated forms have an affinity with Robert Gober's uncanny domestic objects and body parts, but her confined furniture achieves a formally astute effect all its own.