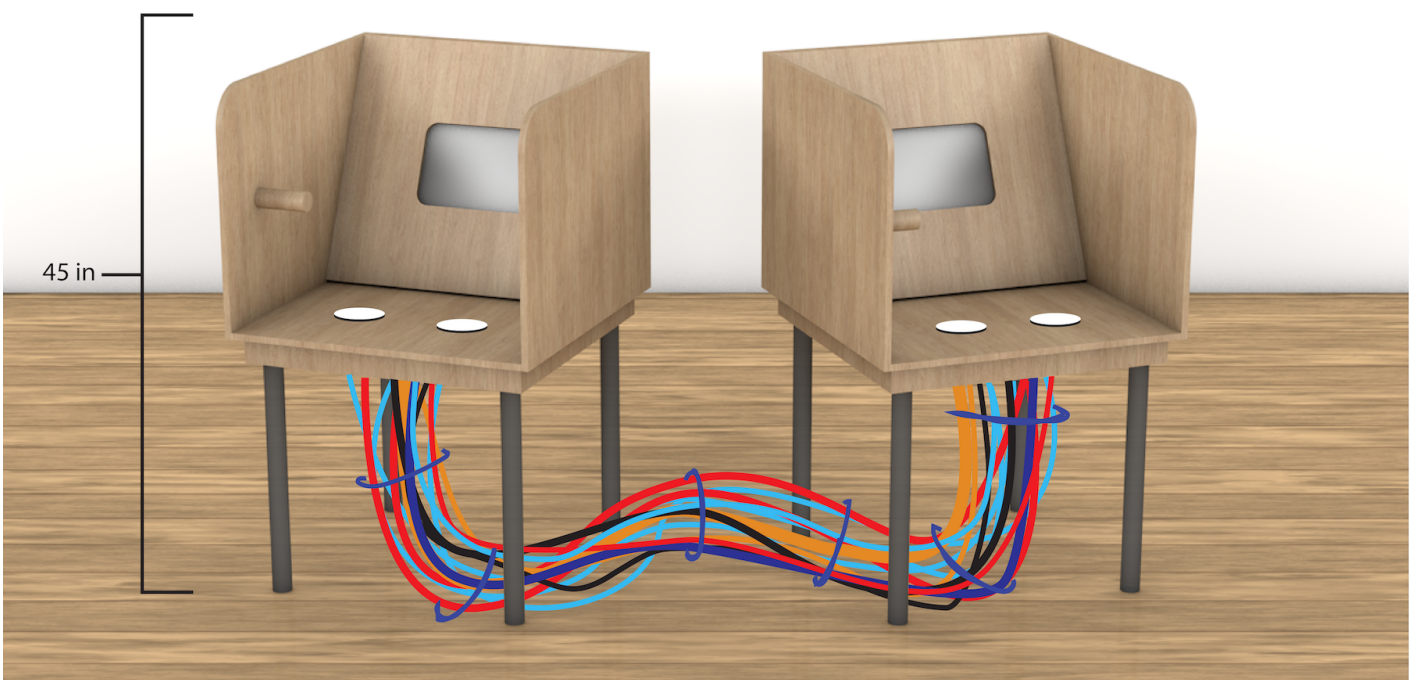


MARIA VANDYKEN LI

2020 ART & ART HISTORY MFA THESIS EXHIBITION



Cantonese for Midwestern Wives, 2017-present, 3D Rendering of Desk Design

DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

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2020 ART & ART HISTORY MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

The *2020 Art and Art History MFA Thesis Exhibition* features the works of MFA candidates in Columbia's Interdisciplinary Arts and Media and Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts programs. The exhibition, which includes artists' books, prints, drawings, textiles, sculptures, photography, sound, projections, and installation works, represents the culmination of three plus years' worth of development of a cohesive body of work for each artist. This exhibition, taking place at the Glass Curtain Gallery has been postponed to a later date due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This edition of the DEPS Artist Profile Series intends to give you an in-depth look at the work to come as well as a deep glimpse into the artists process.

Participating Artists: Julia Arredondo, Mary Gring, Rebecca Grace Hill, Selena Ingram, Maria VanDyken Li, Skye Murie, and Andrew Shoemaker

The *2020 Art and Art History MFA Thesis Exhibition* is presented in conjunction with the Art and Art History department and Paul Catanese, Director of Graduate Studies for Art & Art History and Professor at Columbia College Chicago.

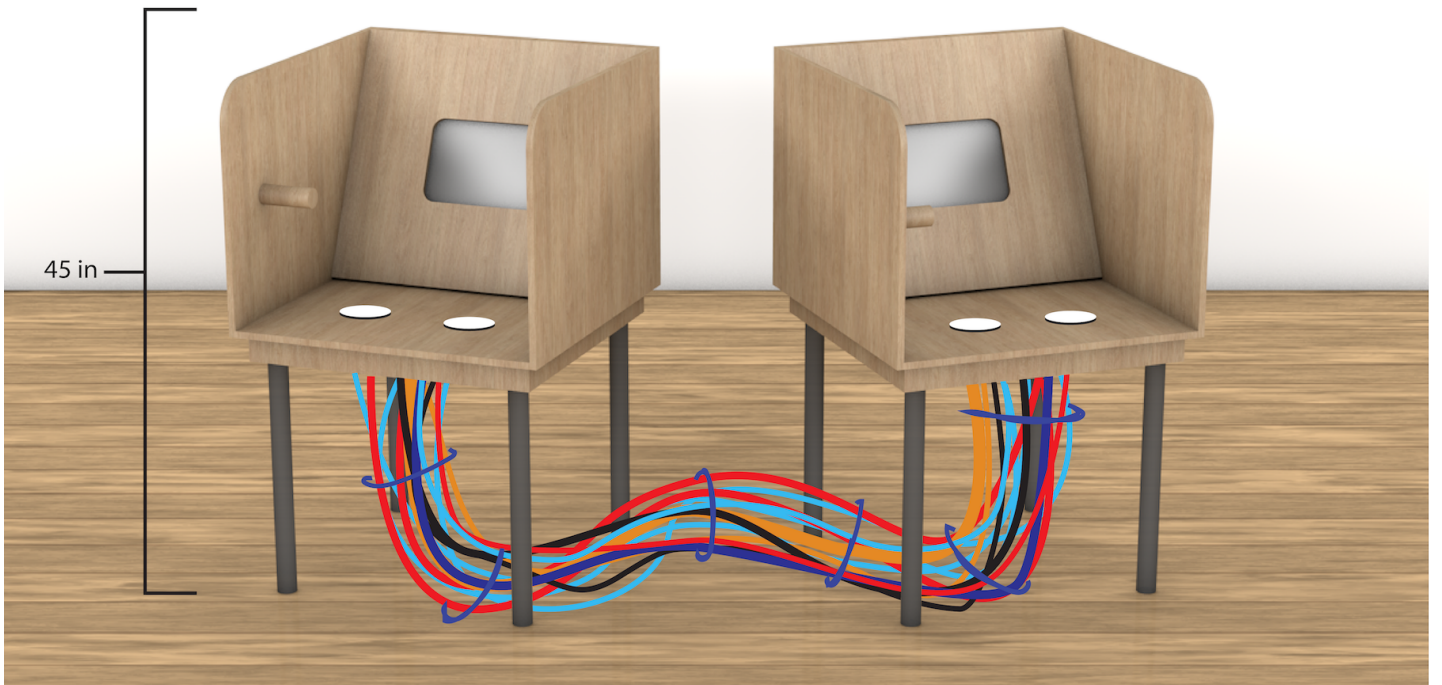
CANTONESE FOR MIDWESTERN WIVES

Maria VanDyken Li is influenced by playful cinematic storytelling and her favorite children's literature. She observes and reflects on the complexities of her family's simultaneous regional and global identities. For the 2020 MFA Thesis Exhibition, VanDyken Li presents *Cantonese for Midwestern Wives*, an illustrated dialogue between her and her husband presented as an interactive multimedia sculpture. This work is a story about the joys, humor, and challenges of combining their two lives into one. The ongoing dialogue offers a contemporary representation of companionship, and in their particular case, an intercultural marriage. VanDyken Li from the Midwest, and her husband from Hong Kong.

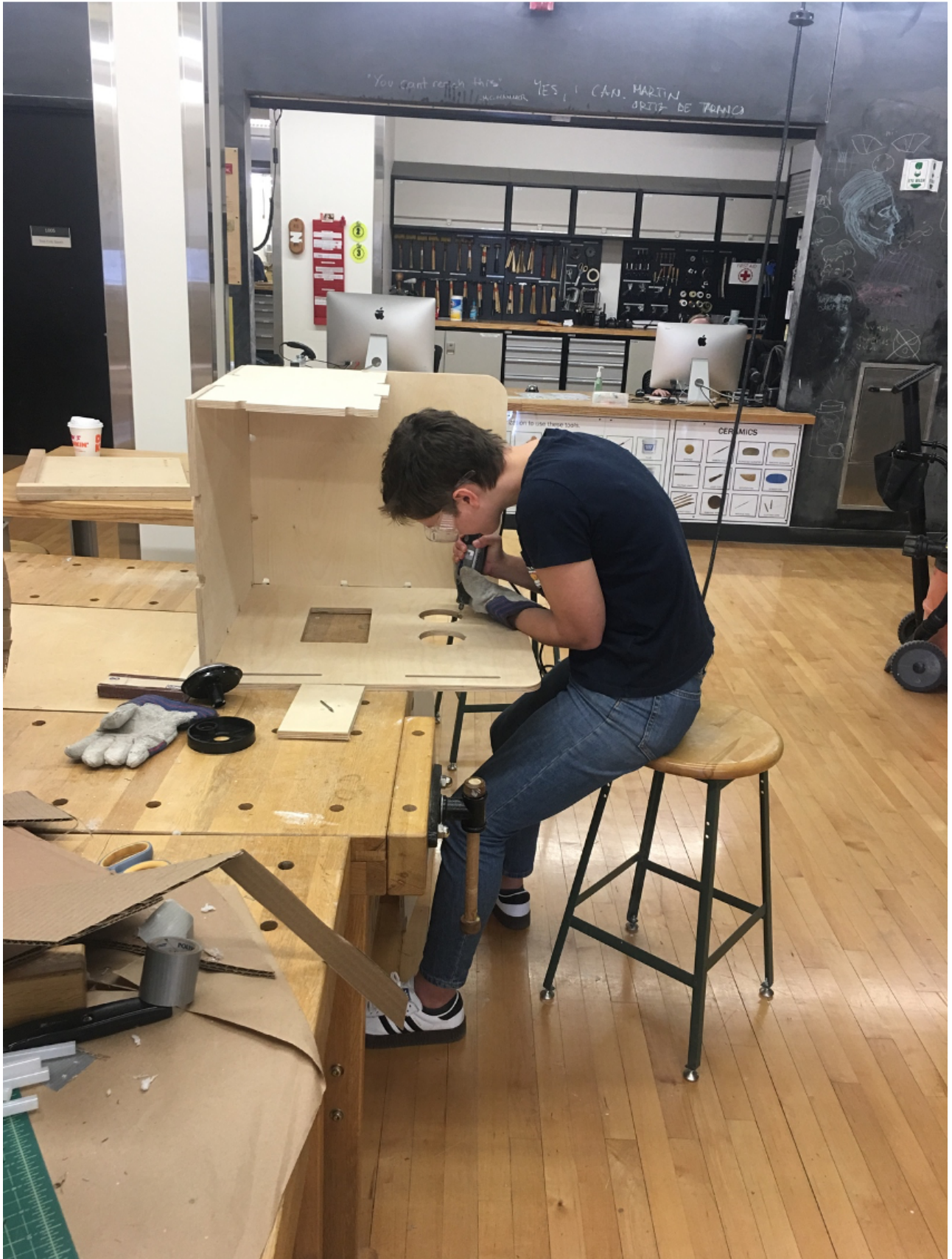
To tell their story, VanDyken Li adopts a classroom aesthetic installing two study desks stand a few paces from one another connected by a long rope made of bundled wire. As a viewer sits at the desk, a push of a button triggers the corresponding stack of digital flashcards to shuffle at random and a new moving image to play. As the animation loops, the couple's voices speak the written phrases in Cantonese and English, the languages of their families. Through everyday observation and language translation, the nuances of regional and global identity are revealed.

Maria VanDyken Li is a Midwestern artist, writer, and filmmaker whose works ranges from digital illustration to multimedia installation. She is currently pursuing an Interdisciplinary Art and Media MFA from Columbia College Chicago and is a recipient of the 2020 Albert P. Weisman Award.

For more information on Maria VanDyken Li:
cantoneseformidwesternwives.com



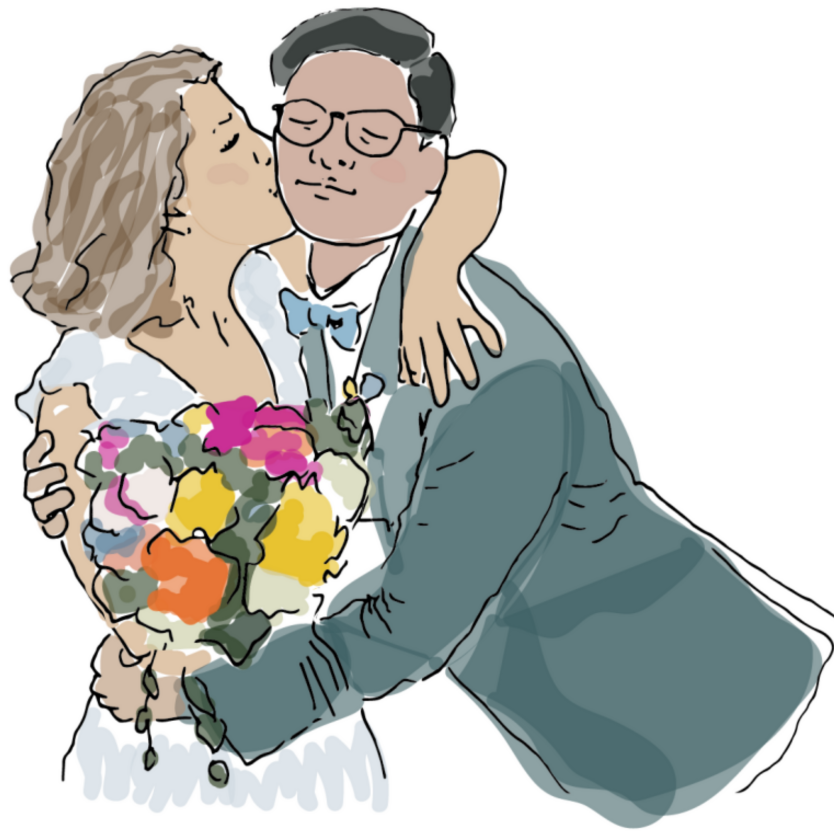
Cantonese for Midwestern Wives, 2017-present, 3D Rendering of Desk Design




In-progress shot of VanDyken Li building electronic components into study desks for *Cantonese for Midwestern Wives*, 2019

I'm sorry I'm keeping him so far from home...

對唔住 我搶走咗佢



Cantonese for Midwestern Wives (select image from collection), 2017-present (ongoing), digital drawing



If we have kids how will they talk with my parents?

如果我哋有小朋友，佢哋會點同我父母溝通呢？



I tell people I'm from Michigan. Fewer questions.

我話比人聽我由密芝根嚟
咁我唔需要解釋咁多野



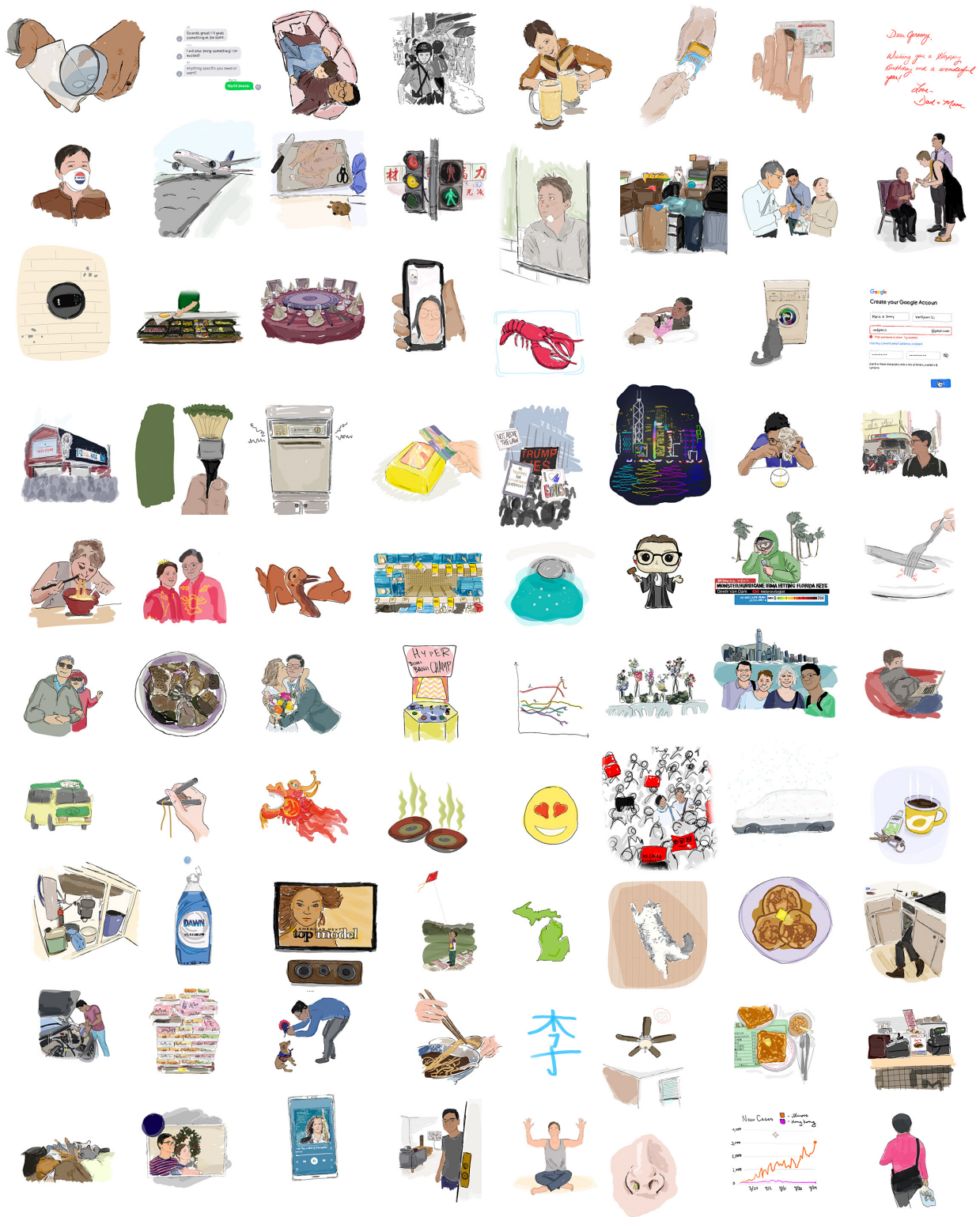
Cantonese for Midwestern Wives (select image from collection), 2017-present (ongoing), digital drawing

Where is the bus to To Kwa Wan?

邊度有去土瓜灣嘅巴士啊？



Cantonese for Midwestern Wives (select image from collection), 2017-present (ongoing), digital drawing



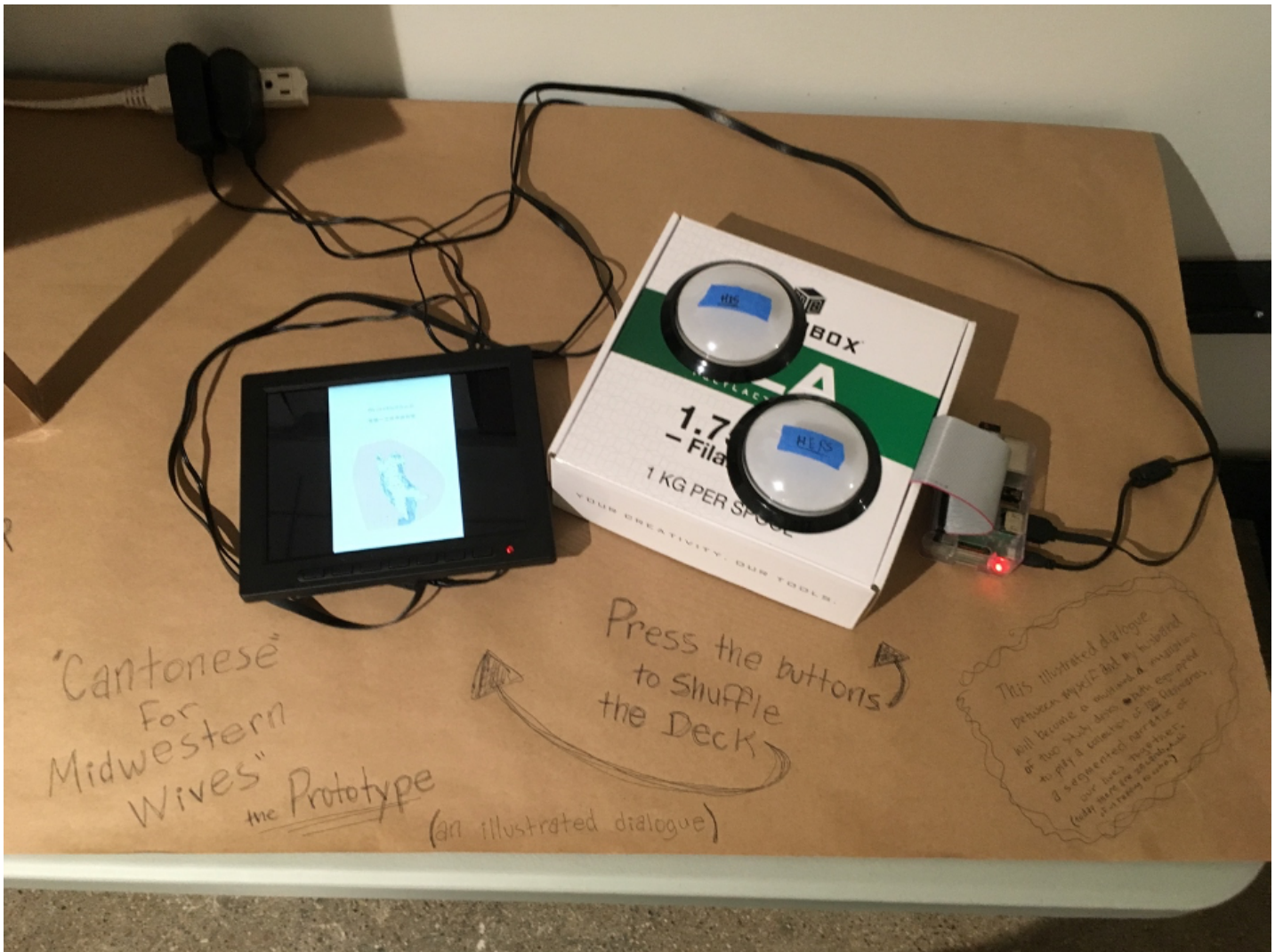
Cantonese for Midwestern Wives, 2017-present (ongoing), digital drawings



Progress shot of desk building for *Cantonese for Midwestern Wives*, 2019



Progress shot of VanDyken Li working on CNC Mill making study desks for *Cantonese for Midwestern Wives*, 2019



Electronics prototype for *Cantonese for Midwestern Wives*, in-progress, 2019

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA VANDYKEN LI

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: Can you talk about how you created this work?

Maria VanDyken Li: This work is first and foremost very literary, so the big challenge for me was translating the idea of a flat, digital viewing experience into something that's more engaging for a gallery audience. I wanted to make an installation where the sculptural object possesses a significance all its own, something that adds to the work rather than just being a thing that I just stuck in the white cube so that I could play my videos on it. That's why I chose to make study desks. They tell the reader what to expect when they sit down to engage with the work.

I designed based on a general idea of what a high-sided study desk is, and then added to my design so that the furniture now holds a computer, monitor, and working buttons that the reader can press to interact with the piece. I did the woodworking on the CNC mill in the fabrication facility—it's important to me that this piece be able to disassemble for ease of transportation and storage. My husband has helped a lot with the electronics portion of the work, programming the computers the project runs on and helping my vision come to life. Part of my decision to make the electronics and wires a visual component of this piece was as a nod to him and all his contributions in that area.

My husband gives me a lot of help, but by far the most important collaborative aspect of the work is the writing and translating of the segmented dialogue. I would say in our collaborative relationship I act as the illustrator and editor—I gather images and phrases from our day-to-day life and select parts to be added to the story, and then draw and animate the image. Jeremy carefully translates each phrase, weighing the meaning of every word choice. Afterwards, we sit together at a microphone and record ourselves speaking each card aloud, with the added challenge of him coaching me through the Cantonese phrases. I then add the audio to the corresponding illustration.

KF: What motivated you to take parts of you and your husband's lives and translate that into art?

MVL: Three years ago, I was in the very beginning of a new phase in life, just married and in a new city to start school. New kinds of thoughts and anxieties in need of articulation were floating through my mind.

I began to imagine a curriculum to help me with the learning curve. The first stage of the project was a single set of fifteen flashcards written from my perspective, in English and Cantonese to represent the branches of our family in the American Midwest and Hong Kong. Phrases ranged from lighthearted quips about unfamiliar foods to anxious confessions about disappointing my in-laws. After completing the first portion, I asked Jeremy to add some phrases of his own. His were mostly lighthearted as well, like poking fun of Midwestern winters or the way we spoil the cat, but also introduced thoughtful questions about living a life across two continents, and beginning to identify more as American than Chinese. His cards have both a sense of loss and a sense of discovery. Studying Jeremy's work, I began to think about paths I had imagined for my own life. I thought about the title of the project, "Midwestern Wives," and my somewhat sardonic usage of the term. I looked to my mom, my aunts, my grandmas, and didn't see myself leading the same kind of life as them. Like Jeremy, I am discovering a new future. The scope of my motivation grew—it wasn't just about me dealing with my new circumstances, it was also about creating a representation of contemporary companionship using our two voices in dialogue with one another.

KF: How was working with your husband on this project? Have you collaborated on works with family before?

MVL: Working with Jeremy has been amazing. We met in the same undergraduate program studying media production, but we gravitate towards different areas. Where I focus more on story and style, he focuses more on technology and problem solving. We're collaborating on the writing and translation, but he's also the perfect person to give me feedback on an animation or help me build out the computer components of the interactive installation. In fact, it was after working with him for a while on the electronics that I decided to incorporate the wires and tech as an aesthetic element in the sculpture. I wanted to acknowledge Jeremy and his skills in that way.

KF: How did you determine what aspects of your combined story you were going to share in this piece, and was there any hesitation in sharing your personal experiences with an anonymous audience?

MVL: I actually think sharing personal stuff about myself with anonymous strangers is way easier for me than sharing personal stuff with people I'm close with—a bit backwards, I know. I feel a sort of comfort in the anonymity. I think a lot about my relationship with my grandpa, who passed away a little over a year ago. We had a good relationship, but always kept each other at arm's length. He didn't know about what I was interested in, or my political views, or really anything specific about what made me "me." I kept it from him so that I could give him the version of myself that I knew he wanted, an attempt to avoid any feelings of discomfort I may cause by disappointing or disagreeing with him. The irreversible consequence was that he died without either of us knowing who the other really was. How ironic, for the nonfiction writer and documentarian so concerned with the truth to give a false version of myself to someone I was supposed to be close with. I'm really fighting against that tendency in myself with this project. The anonymous audience doesn't frighten me, but the thought of my family seeing it does put some butterflies in my stomach.

As far as determining what aspects of my relationship to include or not include, the guidelines I have for myself are very loose. I keep a running list of phrases I jot down as we're going through the day-to-day. I try not to edit too hard at this stage. When I sit down to make a new drawing, I go through the list and see what pops out at me in the moment. I keep in mind a few things as I'm choosing, like is the phrase something unique to us and our situation, negotiating regional and global identity? Does it contrast with our previous notions of companionship? Does it call out generational differences, gender norms/ differences, strange expectations? Is it just downright silly? Does it hit on a cultural moment? The stack is consistently growing, shifting the balance between the serious, silly, and the mundane. Pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and Ruth Bader Ginsburg Funko Pop dolls get the same amount of screen time. Something I might not want to include today may be the thing I add tomorrow.

KF: With the use of the study desks as part of the installation, do you hope that viewers will walk away from this as a sort of educational experience?

MVL: Before deciding on how to make my installation, I had already started this project as a sort of curriculum for myself. By making my installation an educational space, I wanted to share my mindset with the viewer. Study means learning, it means adaptability and change, it means growth. The same can be said about being in a partnership with someone. I don't expect anyone to walk away actually picking up new language skills, and if they do, I'll be very impressed!

KF: The idea of something being lost in translation comes up very literally when translating dialogue between languages; is the potential for an idea or thought being lost on viewers who might not be able to understand portions of this work significant to the personal experiences in your lives, and in trying to communicate the specifics of your particular story to others?

MVL: It's probably important to mention that I myself don't understand significant portions of this work, because I don't understand Cantonese! I'm right there with the viewer in that sense. There are nuances and details of Jeremy's translation I will never fully understand. The same is somewhat true for Jeremy, too. We've already run into mix ups where he thought I meant something other than what I intended, and a translation got derailed. I fully expect certain details to go completely over some people's heads, but hopefully different details will resonate for that same person. I've tried really hard to stop worrying about whether people will "get it," and instead tried to write out what feels honest and significant to us—that's the only way we'll write a true representation of ourselves.

KF: With the world in such a different place than it was just a few months ago, and our collective experience of sharing spaces and our lives with others viewed so differently now, is there anything you would add to this piece coming out of this time that you wouldn't have before?

MVL: I'm still writing down new phrases every day in the midst of our quarantine. Nothing has really changed about my process... the story just reflects where we are right now in our lives, and that's self-isolated in our

apartment with our cat and dog. Some days it feels as though nothing has changed, and some days the tiniest thing can set one of us off. Writing a contemporary representation of companionship includes nods to face masks, hand sanitizer, and emotional freak-outs over video conferencing software.

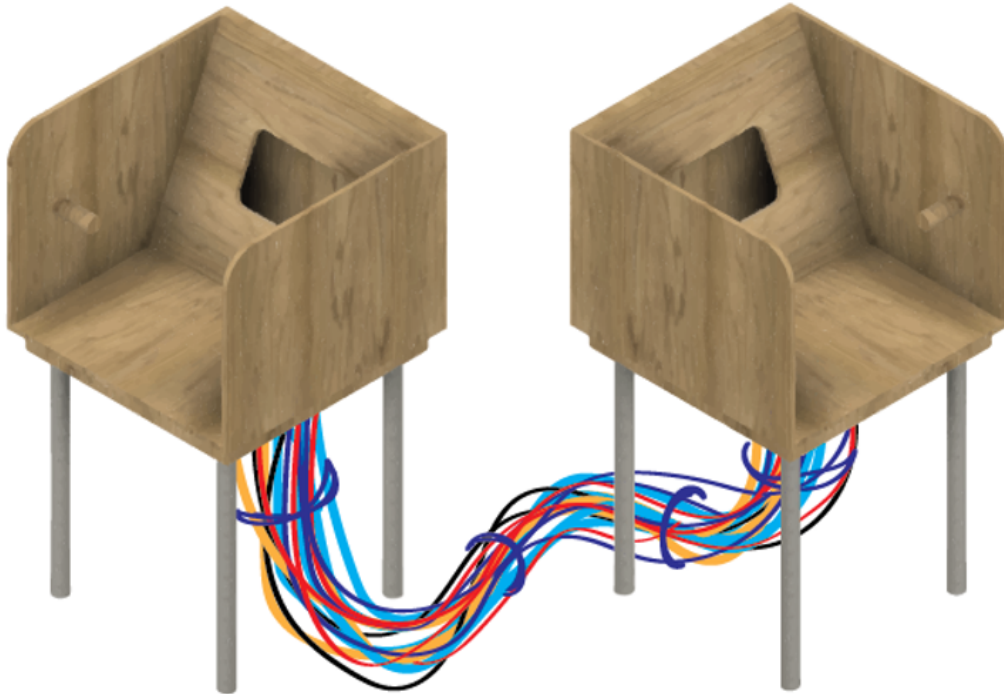
KF: How has your feelings of regional and global identity strengthened or shifted in these past couple of weeks?

MVL: Overall I'd say my views of regional and global identity have solidified over the last couple of weeks. Jeremy's whole family is in Hong Kong, and while the outbreak was still just in China we were in that strange emotional space where something physically very far away from us and our immediate community felt very close and very personal. We kept getting the updates from family over the WhatsApp group chat—the photos of the Hong Kong stores running out of supplies the snapshots of family members in face masks, and the sanitation stations by the front door. We had a sense of helplessness and maybe a bit of survivor's guilt... and then suddenly the U.S. has it and we have it worse. And now his parents are texting us asking if we're ok and telling us to stay safe. We're a part of the same pandemic, and in that way feel a solidarity and closeness with them, and yet for the first time ever we are not allowed go to Hong Kong to see them face-to-face if we wish. The same goes for my parents in Michigan—the space between Chicago and Hong Kong equals the space between Chicago and Grand Rapids. Distance is elastic.

KF: How does this work tie into your overall body of work?

MVL: In a lot of ways this work is a marriage between my documentary film/photography and writing practices. Both are very rooted in space and place, and reflect on the connections people have with one another and their environments. I have come to see this project as a form of illustrated documentary, which is how illustrator Wendy Macnaughton describes her work. Part of my process relies on my own photo archives as a source for images to base my drawings. For me, using the photograph as source material makes me feel as though I have a solid evidence of an event, a photographic trace that I can then take and draw my final image to add my own point of view.

DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES



Cantonese for Midwestern Wives, 2017-present, 3D Rendering of Desk Design

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. Design, animation and illustration by Graphic Design major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gianella Goan.

For more information, please contact Mark Porter, mporter@colum.edu / 312.369.6643
<https://students/colum.edu/deps>

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