There are many missing parts, viewpoints, and truths in our history.

For me, that is where art comes in.

The recovery of the history of the Chinese railroad workers who transformed the American West inspired my exhibition *Zhi LIN: In Search of the Lost History of Chinese Migrants and the Transcontinental Railroads*, currently on view at Tacoma Art Museum.

I am grateful for the partnership with TAM to share these stories and reconsider the legacy of our history.

Please join me in supporting Tacoma Art Museum with a year-end gift.

Stand at the front doors of Tacoma Art Museum and crane your neck to the right. You can see the Prairie Line Trail, the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Close your eyes, and remember the 19th-century Chinese laborers hammering spikes into the rails on the site that has now become the Prairie Line Trail.

The iconic transcontinental railway system in the U.S. was completed only through the hard labor and skill of Chinese workers who carved the railway through the western mountain ranges and across deserts.

The thousands of miles of track connecting a young and prosperous nation has inspired the world’s collective imagination for generations, from Jules Verne’s 1873 classic novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* to the 1962 film *How the West was Won*.

In the symbolic “champagne photo” (right) taken by A.J. Russell, men celebrated the joining of the Union Pacific and Central lines at Promontory Summit, Utah.

Despite the fact Chinese workers laid the final ties and rails the day Russell made this photograph, not
one of the Chinese workers were included in the photograph.

Not one.

This celebration erased the contributions of the workers who built the most difficult portions of the transcontinental railroad—surviving extreme temperatures in the perilous Sierra Nevada range and drilling tunnels in mountains up to 40 feet deep in snow.

I struggle with the question of how to represent this erasure.

How do you depict absence?

I do not want to fill the void left by John Does—unidentifiable persons with untold stories, never written about or recorded in history—by substituting them with an imagined portrait.

My piece “Chinaman’s Chance” (front, top) references A.J. Russell’s iconic photograph. In the installation, I tried to envision myself as a worker who has been fired on the spot: “You’re done here, now you can leave.”

I want the audience to look at the scene as though from a Chinese worker’s perspective. That is, excluded from the celebration and watching the festivities from the back. This disrupts the perspective of the dominant historical narrative, and presents the viewer with an alternative reading of the event.

This exhibition is concurrent with nationwide discussions about what it is to be American, the values of America, and the future of America. We have been making this American journey for so long, and we must ask ourselves whether we are walking forward to a much more open, inclusive society, or backward toward past mistakes.

By listening to each other, and putting ourselves in each other’s shoes, we understand each other. Isn’t that what the museum’s mission is really all about? Connecting people through art.

Please join me in making a year-end gift to the Tacoma Art Museum. Your support enables the museum to sustain its role as a community leader, share missing and historically suppressed points of view, challenge us to think—and more importantly, to feel—and bring us together.

Sincerely,

Zhi LIN

P.S. This is your last chance to support TAM in 2017 by making a 100% tax-deductible gift by Dec. 31st!