

**PRODUCE**

Junyuan Tan

Plan II Honors Program

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2019

---

Chiu-Mi Lai, Ph.D.

Department of Asian Studies

Supervisor

---

Eli Durst

Department of Art and Art History

Second Reader

Copyright © 2019 by Junyuan Tan

All Rights Reserved

## **Abstract**

*Produce* is a photobook exploring aging, culture, and the way that immigration shapes elderly life. My photographs focus on the spaces inhabited by a group of senior Chinese immigrants in Houston, Texas, connected by their homes in an independent living community with a one-acre vegetable farm created and maintained by its residents. Many of the building's Chinese residents are in America through visa sponsorship by their children who have achieved success and citizenship as immigrants to the United States. Once they arrive, however, they find themselves unable to realize a Chinese cultural ideal that is both sanctified and codified—that parents live with, grow old with, and are taken care of by their children. Through photographs of three distinct spaces—home, facility, farm—and the ways they are inhabited and transformed, I create a portrait of those who are disconnected from the traditional ways of aging. In examining the resulting portrayal of their lives, I work outward to comment on the broader immigrant experience, posing the question: after their sacrifices come to fruition, what remains?

## Acknowledgements

I owe so much to the people around me. First and foremost, thank you to Dr. Chiu-Mi Lai and Eli Durst, my supervisor and second reader, for your constant support and patience in the face of my inarticulate topic ramblings. To riel Sturchio, for believing in me from the very beginning and for your guidance throughout the thesis process. To Amber Shields, for being the first person I spoke with in the UT photography department, and for helping to introduce me to the wonderful professors and resources there. Additionally, I'd like to thank the Renee Wolfe Zelman Plan II Excellence Endowment for helping to fund the production of my thesis.

This body of work would be nothing without its subjects—thank you to the residents of Bellerive Senior Living for sharing the beauty of your everyday existence, and for remaining patient in the face of my questions and requests to hold still for a photograph. I have an immense gratitude for Jojo Phillips, who was the first to show me this thesis could be so much more than my initial conception; for Adraint Bereal, whose work and tenacity inspires me every day; for Neesha Vakil, who—in addition to keeping me sane—was crucial to the cover and book design of *Produce*; and for all my friends, who somehow continue to put up with me even after four years.

Finally, I could not have made this work without the help of my grandparents. Thank you for letting me into your lives, and for every home-cooked dinner I'd arrive to after my three-hour drive from Austin. Last, and perhaps most importantly, to my mother, my father, my stepdad, and all my family: thank you for everything. I would be nothing without you all.

## Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Preface: A Single Breath

Academic Treatise

1. Artist Statement 1

2. Process

*Introduction* 3

*Subject* 6

*Sequence* 8

*Execution* 13

*Endnote* 17

References 18

About the Artist 19

*Produce*

## Preface: A Single Breath

In Chinese, *yī gǔ qì* 一股气 refers to the completion of an endeavor with such speed and passion that one can finish it within the drawing of a single breath. To do something in just one breath is to be extraordinarily motivated—all I needed was to act upon the trajectory of my thoughts, trusting them to lead to something tangible. In this state, I am focused on the execution of my craft, and the space between my inhale and exhale stretches out. I am afforded the freedom to think and to create.

In this sense, my thesis is simply the accumulation of motivated breaths. There were the decisions made in a single sprint: drafting the topic, moving the project in a more artistic direction, and finding the correct sequence for my photographs. At the same time, there were days and weeks that felt like the continuation of a single breath—after the sun set and the farm emptied, I'd collect my rolls of exposed film and drive home. On that road, my mind was abuzz with new ideas and concepts waiting to be executed. I could not detach myself until I put down the camera, at which point I began to organize the day's efforts, attempting to locate my photographs within the context of the work I had made—and what was to come.

The broader context is this: *Produce* was created as a way for me, a first-generation Chinese immigrant born in New Zealand, raised in Great Britain, and now living in the United States, to understand the experiences of my grandparents and their generation of Chinese immigrants. It is an answer, however partial, to the questions that I had in my head while watching elderly Chinese women sell fruit and collect recyclables in New York's Chinatown at an age where I believed they would be taken care of by their children. And most of all, it is my

own contention with the inevitability of aging and loss for myself and my loved ones, and an unfinished answer to how I will take care of my own parents as they, too, become older.

My depiction of these spaces, individuals, and narratives are necessarily open-ended. Within the time constraints of the thesis process, the continuous evolution of my project, as well as contending with a semester-long immobility from a broken ankle, the body of work I've created is constrained by and reflective of reality. My photographic sequence does not travel in large temporal leaps, instead taking place within an imagined day, one that slowly shifts into the night-time. Though the photographs cannot cover the long-term events of their existence, it offers a small, empathetic lens onto lives previously unseen.

During the process, I and numerous others have continually questioned the motivations behind this work. I've contended with the personal nature of the topic, as well as the difficulty of connecting with a subject I am far removed from. With the inherent limitations of any young artist, at times I felt like I could never complete the work to the standard or scope which I desired. Even with that in mind, I returned to the community day after day, documenting it with the desire to help others to see a fragment of what I saw: the beauty of their existence and their unique labor and produce. To see and be seen—perhaps that's all I seek from this project.

## Academic Treatise

### 1. *Artist Statement*

My culture mandates that we take care of our elderly parents. When I was an infant, my grandmother lived with us, and my parents looked after her. In the undated family photograph I keep in my wallet, she carries me, sitting in the center of our sofa—flanked by my uncles, my father, and my mother. When my maternal grandparents moved to America, my aunt sponsoring the visa, they end up living apart from their children, in a one-bedroom apartment, alone.

*Produce* explores the spaces of living, inside and out, creating portraits of those who are disconnected from the traditional mandate of aging. Working with my grandparents and other residents of an independent living facility in Houston, I make photographs that focus on the details of their unique habitation—what they accumulate, what they reuse, and what they cherish. Through the sterility of the facility’s corridors, we move outwards and encounter a farm—an acre of land on which residents have grown vegetables for almost a decade.

Using repurposed materials and tools, the farm is a visual cacophony with details and incongruence hidden everywhere. Restaurant-sized buckets, meant for soy sauce, carry fertilizer. Off-cut wooden planks, collected from construction sites, demarcate individual plots. A man tells me that he grows enough vegetables to feed eleven: himself, his wife, his two children, their spouses, and his grandchildren. A woman recounts sneaking kernels of corn—a species unique to her ancestral home in China—through U.S. customs so that she can grow them in America.

On the farm, physical labor and age intersect. Bending down, or sitting in schoolchildren-sized chairs, they rake, weed, and sow. In the winter, they dig pits and spread tarpaulin in anticipation of a sudden freeze. In the summer, their work continues despite the Texas heat. One

man, my grandfather's friend, cannot walk without assistance. He loads his rake and shovel into a baby carriage, leans into it as he takes his first step, and slowly, deliberately, inches forward, waiting to see if—when—his knee will buckle, his foot will miss, and he will cease to labor.

Presented in a 90-page photobook, *Produce* is a narrative work that carries us through the spaces of their existence. Sequenced as a journey that weaves outdoor and indoor, from daylight to dusk, it presents the subtle beauties of habitation, moments in their life as immigrants, and the produce of their work. Engaging beyond the visual, my work presents a story on the endeavors of living outside the cultural mandate and the impact of immigration on the last years of our lives.

## 2. Process

### Introduction

*“There’s this idea of taking a portrait of someone through their space: Not through the space that they want hidden off, but the space they occupy. Not the ballroom, but the bathroom.”*

Hanya Yanagihara, interview with photographer Alec Soth, March 2019

In “Understanding a Photograph,” John Berger—renowned art historian, critic, and novelist—explains what he believes to be the core motivation behind every picture: the decision that “seeing this is worth recording” (Berger). We take photographs because we want to keep a sliver of what we can see. As I created the body of images that would complete this thesis, I wondered whether the things I had recorded were actually worth keeping. Through the editing process, I questioned if I could actually create a coherent body of work, whether my photographs were too artful (or not artful enough), whether my storytelling would make sense, along with a hundred other concerns which weighed on me as they accumulated. What I now understand: though every body of work *begins* with a desire to record, the creative process is far more demanding than the simple act of capture.

At the genesis of this project, my motivations and expectations were simple. By living alone, these seniors went against a teaching engrained into Chinese culture. Through photography, I could explore my background and engage with my grandparents’ generation, looking for a way to articulate my own thoughts and views on how immigration change. With my grandfather’s introduction, I would visit their independent living community, explain myself and the purpose of this thesis, and hopefully begin to document their lives. I thought that my

experience would be enough to create work that was interesting—at least on the merits of my unusual subjects, if not my images.

After discovering the farm alongside their apartments, I thought I had found the perfect focus: Chinese elders hard at work, cultivating their bounty of vegetables, bathed in the golden light of a Texas sunset. With my winter break scheduled around making these photographs, I chose to visit the facility on clear, December afternoons where the eastbound dusk would cover the entire farm. I felt emboldened to create a testament to their labor and a visual record of their effort, hoping to charge each beautiful, colorful image with a sense of pride and community. Along the way, I would better understand my own immigrant upbringing, the lives of my grandparents, and the triumph that came with producing food with their own hands, on their own land.

This plan fell apart almost immediately. By the end of winter break, I felt disillusioned about the entire endeavor; my photographs of the farm were mildly interesting but devoid of substance, the ideas of pride and community I had started out with were, to mildly put it, over-optimistic, and the very nature of my being there was questioned at length. On one of the last days I had spent at the farm, an elderly Chinese man who I had never spoken with or seen before forcefully asked why I wanted to show things that would embarrass the Chinese people, why I had spent so much time photographing the farm's detritus, and why I didn't take pretty photographs of them dancing or going to church.

I tried, in my best Chinese—my grasp on the language worsening in the throes of confrontation—to explain the intention of my thesis, that I felt that the farm was in its own way a thing of beauty, and how I believed that generic pictures of elderly people weren't interesting,

visually or philosophically. My points were not received well. Looking back, I now realize the huge gulf between our conceptions of photography, and how that affected our interaction.

Whereas I wanted my images to show the subtle beauty of habitation and labor, he saw my exposures as exposés—of waste, of accumulation, of something unseemly. In the moment, he did not express such sentiments; he only stated that I was going to embarrass the Chinese in front of my (presumably) American viewers, and that he had seen me walk all around the farm taking pictures of garbage, and that I had already done enough so why keep going? Eventually, he left. I walked to the end of the farm, where the cleared land returned to its original form of tall weeds, and sat on a large, concrete drainage box. I was driven almost to tears. On the way home, I resolved to quit the project once and for all. I'd take whatever photographs I already had, throw them together into something workable, and graduate. Then I could put all of this behind me.

It was unclear to me why I had been so passionate in the defense of my thesis. I could not understand why I cared about it so much, nor why, after that confrontation, I continued to photograph for two more days—as if in defiance of his protest. Out of the month I had spent making photographs there, he was the only one that had shown such outspoken opposition. Though I found support and willingness to participate from so many others, a single, short confrontation caused me to question everything I had assumed to be true about my work—that it was meaningful, that it was artful, that it could have an impact. Yet our interaction was also beneficial; it helped me to think long and hard about my purpose in being there, the inherent power dynamics of photography, what it really was that I was looking for in my photographs—and what kept me going back to make more.

## Subject

Visually, I approach my topic—the lives of those aging independently—through the spaces they inhabit and grow old in, divided into three general categories: the home, the facility, and the farm. This body of work balances environmental portraiture with depictions of the interior and exterior, combining the two into a spatial narrative of elderly life.

From early on, I wanted to avoid becoming trapped by traditional portraiture—tightly cropped, featuring the subject's face, perhaps the top of their shoulders, as they look into the camera and meet the viewer's gaze. These are often the easiest photographs to make, especially with elderly subjects—as the viewer, we are expected to infer the details of their lives from the expression and appearance of their face. Wrinkles, for example, could be extrapolated to mean a long and difficult life. Though these photographs may be beautiful portraits, their narrative role is rather limited; descriptions of physical appearance alone cannot advance a plot.

When I began photographing the seniors, I quickly found myself becoming bored of the traditional portraits I had made. As I met more subjects, however, I became fascinated with the details of their homes, the hospital-like sparseness of corridors and common areas, and the improvisational, reclaimed nature of the farm. Over time, I gained a deeper understanding of these spaces and realized that the experience of their lives could not be explored solely through isolated portraits. Because the independent living building and the accompanying farm are so pivotal to their lives, my preconceptions of subject shifted, and I began to make photographs that combined the human and the spatial.

In an interview with the photographer Alec Soth, American author Hanya Yanagihara presents the "idea of taking a portrait of someone through their space: not through the space that

they want hidden off, but the space they occupy" (Yanagihara). Inside the "small spaces of someone's life," she writes, there exists a sense of raw intimacy that provides a "charge" to the photograph, bringing on more elaborate detail that could not be revealed through a traditional portrait (Yanaghiara). As the portrait photographer moves backwards from their subject, they necessarily include more of the setting. Such context allows for more nuanced observation.

Where is the subject positioned? What is around them? How do they relate to their surroundings? From this we imagine a more nuanced, astute narrative, one that does not rely upon the clichés of how the body reflects life, and the attempts at reading too much into a person's expression at the moment of exposure.

In his introduction to *The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, an exhibition held in 1991 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curator Peter Galassi reminds us that photography "relies...deeply on the narratives we are able to imagine" (Galassi 23). Without assistance from a caption, a photograph reduces to exactly what is captured in its frame.

Interesting photographs, the, provide room for the reader, whose "experience is entirely adequate to fill the gaps [the photographer has]...so carefully left", is able to construct their own story and conclusion. Images that provide too much information, meanwhile, are liable to tell the viewer everything they need to know. Without the mind at work, such photographs fail to hold anything deeper. The presentation of context, then, inherently conflicts with the photographer's desire to portray *just enough* to excite the viewer's mind, and I attempt to strike a balance between the two.

My work composes the human within the spatial, highlighting the aspects of their lives I find most interesting and beautiful. By staying on the premises of their apartment complex, I

make my work during the time they spend alone, either at home or at work on the farm, thus exploring the surroundings of those hours. Within these spaces, I discover contrasting details, quietly provoking visual and intellectual interest: a plate of dried fruit peel, tipped precariously on a stainless steel air conditioning unit; exercise machines surrounded by powder pink walls, artificial plants, a floral painting on the wall, as if enclosed by the decor of a dining room; repurposed plastic sheeting, perhaps from a construction site, protecting young crops from a sudden freeze. Through a gap in its flimsy armor, grass grows, heeding the afternoon sun. These details, along with the rest of the photographs, portray a small, necessary, and ultimately compelling part of their existence.

## Sequence

A single photograph is an inflection point in a story; it could portray the quietness before the entrance of character, action, and conflict. It could also depict consequence, the aftermath of an entirely implied choice that is without visual representation by the artist. But it cannot do both in the same frame. Alfred Stieglitz, one of the world's most influential photographers and proponents for photography as a fine art, stated that "not all photographs need function as individual or summational works," but that "certain images in a defined context could...support others" and provide a "total statement more complex than single works alone" (Bunnell 557).

Stieglitz's ideas are expressed in the photographic sequence, a form that allows the viewer to study each photograph "in relation to its adjacent images" (Bunnell 558). Minor White, a prolific 20th-century American photographer, describes the relationship between sequenced images as "the time between photographs," where the viewer reads into "the implications of design...suggestions springing from treatment...symbolism...grow[ing] from within the work itself" (Bunnell 558). As they move "from picture to picture," the "flow of the sequence eddies in the river of his associations"—the viewer's understanding of the images accumulate and shift because of the way they are sequenced (Bunnell 558).

When photographs are arranged, they become treated with a collective context and greater meaning. Furthermore, the basic structures of narrative storytelling are expressed through the sequence—depictions of people become characters, repeated settings give way to scene, interactions lay groundwork for imagined dialogue. All of these relate to "the river of his associations" as described by Minor White; as we proceed through a sequence of photographs, we carry our assumptions and observations from beginning to end, applying newer ones onto

older ones, reshaping what we previously see in context of the new, and allowing the cumulative effect of the photographs to take precedence over any single, individual work (Bunnell 558).

For me, the photobook was the most logical and accessible way to create a photographic sequence. The assumptions of how we, as Americans, read—linearly, left to right, front to back—allow for a measure of narrative control that cannot be achieved with a print portfolio or a displayed show. Unbound, prints allow for arbitrary rearrangement by its viewer, thus disrupting the relative place of one image to another. The openness of a gallery show, combined with the unpredictable flow of foot traffic around a room, prevent photographs from being reliably seen in a designed order. Thus, the book—and our socialization with regard to its treatment—provides me with the most control over how and where each image is presented. In every sense of the word, it is designed.

Susan Sontag, in her seminal collection of essays titled *On Photography*, stated that a "photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time" (Sontag 17). Because a photograph is reductive to what it portrays in its frame, the "ultimate wisdom" of a photograph tells the viewer to "think...feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what reality must be like if it looks like this" (Sontag 17). Yet Sontag points out a contradiction; in order to understand the subject of a photograph, the small measure of reality it points to, we must know "how it functions" (Sontag 18). Functionality cannot be captured in a single image, as function proceeds through time, and a single photo can only ever portray a tiny, tiny slice of time. Thus a photograph cannot narrate—and we cannot understand.

Sequencing helps to address some part of Sontag's concerns. By presenting images that depict the passage of time, we begin to see functionality and narrative. In *Produce*, my images

are temporally arranged from day to night, and transition fluidly between interior and exterior. This design allows the viewer to see the images as if they were there over the course of a single, imagined day. Moving from indoor to outdoor, and vice versa, relies on visual cues presented in certain images; a large window can be used to move outward, for we expect something to be present on the other side of that window; the implication of exercise, as presented by the elliptical and running machines, leads into a photograph of a dancing woman—the manifestation of action.

Abrupt transitions also play a huge role. The first image of the book's sequence is of a tree bearing red berries, behind it standing wooden planks, wire frames, pallets, a ladder—the materials with which their farm is built. The viewer turns the page and is greeted with the sterile, pale interior of the building's corridors, a pallid fluorescent cast that renders, on purpose, especially poorly in relation to color film emulsion. There is no attempt to conceal the speed, the surprise of our movement indoor—the intent is to jar the viewer, and provide an immediate contrast in terms of the spaces that we expect to see. Even through the small example of just two images, we begin to understand how the sequence is able to manipulate and enhance the impact of certain images.

As a whole, the narrative presented by the sequence is open-ended; part of it reflects the reality I faced while making photographs, as I could not be present and working during all times of the day. At the same time, my interest in their living space meant that I did not follow them outwards for errands and engagements, as those images would have complicated my focus. Thus, the implied plot of my sequence is not sharply defined, nor is there a concrete timeline or narrative arc depicted through my photographs. Instead, my intention during sequencing was to

create spatial and temporal bounds where the viewer's mind would operate—creating the head waters for Minor White's river of associations—as they define, infer, and see while making their way to the ocean.

## Execution

In an article published in the New York Times Magazine's *On Photography* column, Teju Cole writes about the "responsibility towards other people's stories," and the thin line between telling a story and appropriating it (Cole 1). When "we are complicit outsiders" in someone else's narrative, we have the responsibility to tell it with "imagination and skepticism," and the understanding that we may have to "prioritize justice over [our] freedom [to narrate]" (Cole 1). Because of our inherent association of photographic depiction with objective truth, images are often the first casualty of oppressive storytelling, becoming the easiest way to advance a narrative agenda, cast judgment, and present fiction as truth.

The power dynamic of photography is pervasive. Consider the verbs we use to describe the act of photographing—one "takes" a photograph, "captures" a moment, "shoots" a picture, "aims" down the camera, and "triggers" the shutter. When we take a photograph, we are, in essence, stealing something from the world and making it ours. Throughout this treatise, I've tried to use "make photographs" as the primary reference to my craft; though we cannot escape the extractive nature of photography, the "making" of photographs implies a level of consideration and thought that goes beyond simple extraction.

Historically, Photography was essential to the spread of European colonialism. Through helping "administrative, missionary, scientific and commercial activities" by the colonial powers, photographs "imaged the world in order to study, profit from, and own it" (Cole 2). Moreover, the unequal distribution of power is inherent in the act of making a photograph. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, remarks: "photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had,

necessarily, a point of view,” in that they reflected the subjectivities of the photographer looking at the scene (Sontag 2). Though we assume a photograph to be a true depiction of its subject, the image actually depicts what the photographer saw at the moment, interpreted through the mechanisms of the camera. The photographer retains all agency; they choose the image’s framing, its moment of capture, whether it is shown to the world or deleted. Once the photograph is taken, the subject loses their power to change the way they have been depicted. This dominance of the artist, though present in all forms of art, is particularly insidious in photography due to our association of the medium with objective truth, which disguises the subjectivity and nuance of photography.

In the context of my work, the power dynamic presented itself even before I made a single photograph. Consider the expenses of this thesis project, both as one-time and recurring outlays. The former: large purchases, of a camera, flash, tripod, and the printing costs of the photobook. The latter: rolls of color negative film, processing at a local lab, fuel costs in order to access my subjects, along with many other smaller expenses that accumulate over time. In short, I was able to create this body of work because I could afford it. My concerns continued during the image-making process, where I found myself attempting to tell a story that—beyond shared ethnic background—I simply could not relate to. Because of my grandparents, I had a sense of “closeness” with the story; I was not a complete outsider, and at least had some measure of access. Despite this, however, this remained: I was a young person, with privilege, attempting to depict the stories of those much older, with whom I had no shared experience nor commonality.

How do I prevent my depictions from becoming caricatures? To begin, I wanted to make photographs that reflected how I saw their lives—as a thing of beauty and interest. My images of

the interior and exterior focus not on cleanly kept rooms or manicured vegetable plots, but rather on the way that my subjects inhabit and influence these spaces. At the same time, juxtaposing my elderly subjects within their space helps to subvert the immediacy of photographic judgment; because the images present the viewer with more information and context, they are harder to reduce to our preconceptions of elderly life. By looking for things of visual beauty on subjects who are not commonly associated with a sense of the visually interesting, I wanted to show the subtle beauty of their existence without reduction or preconception.

Moreover, this precluded the inclusion of large amounts of clarifying details or context for the photographs. During the editing process, I chose not to write captions or other explanations that would have altered the viewer's conception of the images. Though I asked my subjects about their background, upbringing, and the circumstances of their migration, I wanted my body of work to stand alone as a photographic narrative, unaided by the inclusion of written context. Because the images are intended as a display of the beauty present in their current situation, providing chronologies, backstories, and other details would have distracted the viewers from the photographic depiction—and the ideas carried in the sequence.

I did, however, choose to include a poem after the presentation of the photographs. This helps to elucidate some of my observations while making photographs, as well as the context around them. In my view, this provides just enough context for the viewer to understand the images in a new light once they have finished the photographic sequence. Additionally, it adds a layer of grounding to our understanding of the images, constraining it just enough to prevent the narrative from being wildly misread or pulled out of context.

Ultimately, one can never truly escape photography's unequal allocation of power and agency. Pictures, after all, are made by those who can afford to make them. As viewers, we *cherish* the photograph's ability to reduce reality into the constraints of a frame, its ability to convey complex information with ease—"here, in front of you, is what has happened." Though we cannot fully escape it, we can begin with acknowledging its deficiencies and inequalities. Through our work, perhaps, we can negotiate with, question, and advance photography.

## Endnote

According to Teju Cole, photography is the easiest way of "taking something that belongs to someone else and making it serve you"—when we capture their appearance we are fooled into believing that "we [have] captured their truth" (Cole 1).

I am unsure if my work captures any definitive truths. What I have been able to create, within the confines of the thesis process, can only ever be a partial illustration into the nuances of their lives. Partiality is the manifestation of my judgmental eye onto their existence—it forces me to question my motivations, my focus, and the way I execute my creative vision. The completion of the work, and the associated satisfaction of my graduation requirement, only creates more unanswered questions, some of which include:

- Is my work sympathetic to their existence?
- Have my depictions appropriated their lives for my personal benefit?
- Who does this body of work serve?

I am still unsure.

## References

- Berger, John. "Understanding a Photograph." *Selected Essays of John Berger*, edited by Geoff Dyer, Vintage, 2003.
- Bunnell, Peter C. "Minor White's Photographic Sequence, 'Rural Cathedrals': A Reading." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 135, no. 4, 1991, pp. 557–568. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/986816](http://www.jstor.org/stable/986816).
- Cole, Teju. "Getting Others Right." *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times. Web. June 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/getting-others-right.html>.
- Cole, Teju. "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is)." *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times. Web. February 6, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html>
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. RosettaBooks, 2005, *lab404*, [www.lab404.com/3741/readings/sontag.pdf](http://www.lab404.com/3741/readings/sontag.pdf).
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Picador, 2003.
- Yanagihara, Hanya. "A Conversation With Alec Soth About Art and Doubt." *The New York Times Style Magazine*. The New York Times. Web. March 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/t-magazine/alec-soth.html>.

### About the Artist

Junyuan Tan is a dual Plan II and Government major at the University of Texas at Austin. He goes by “Jun,” which is pronounced just like the month. Born in New Zealand and growing up between China, Great Britain, and the United States, his personal story of family and migration at times seems stranger than fiction. Jun has practiced photography since the age of fourteen, buoyed by an incredible amount of guidance from his father, who is also a photographer. He created *Produce* as a means to explore his upbringing, his family, and his creative medium; Jun continues to believe that making photographs is the most fulfilling way to miss a deadline. Aside from his creative pursuits, Jun is a self-taught software engineer and will be moving to New York City after graduation to begin his career.

Most of all, however, he would like two things: to stop writing about himself in third-person, and to keep looking.

*Produce*

Junyuan Tan

Junyuan Tan

*Produce*

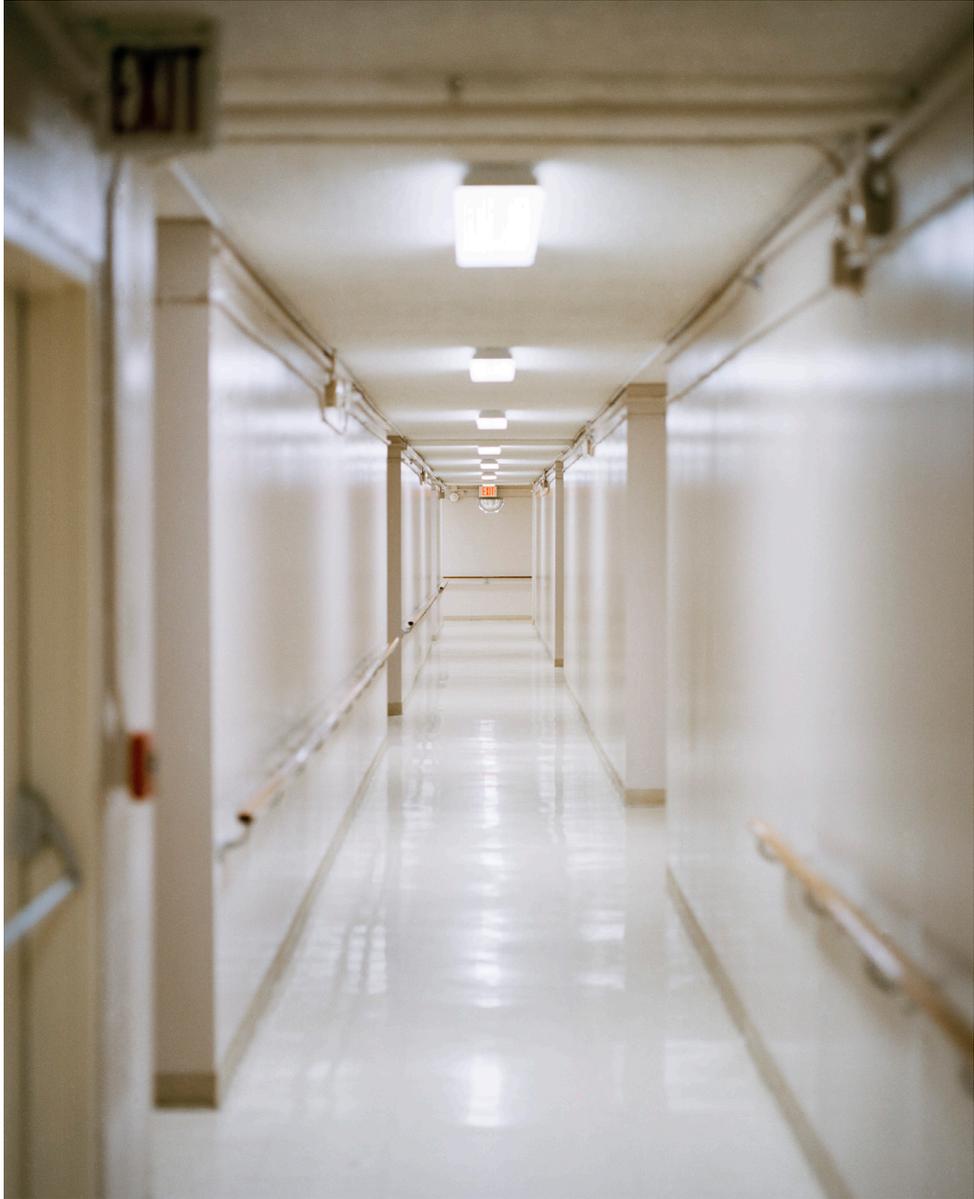
*Produce*

Junyuan Tan





























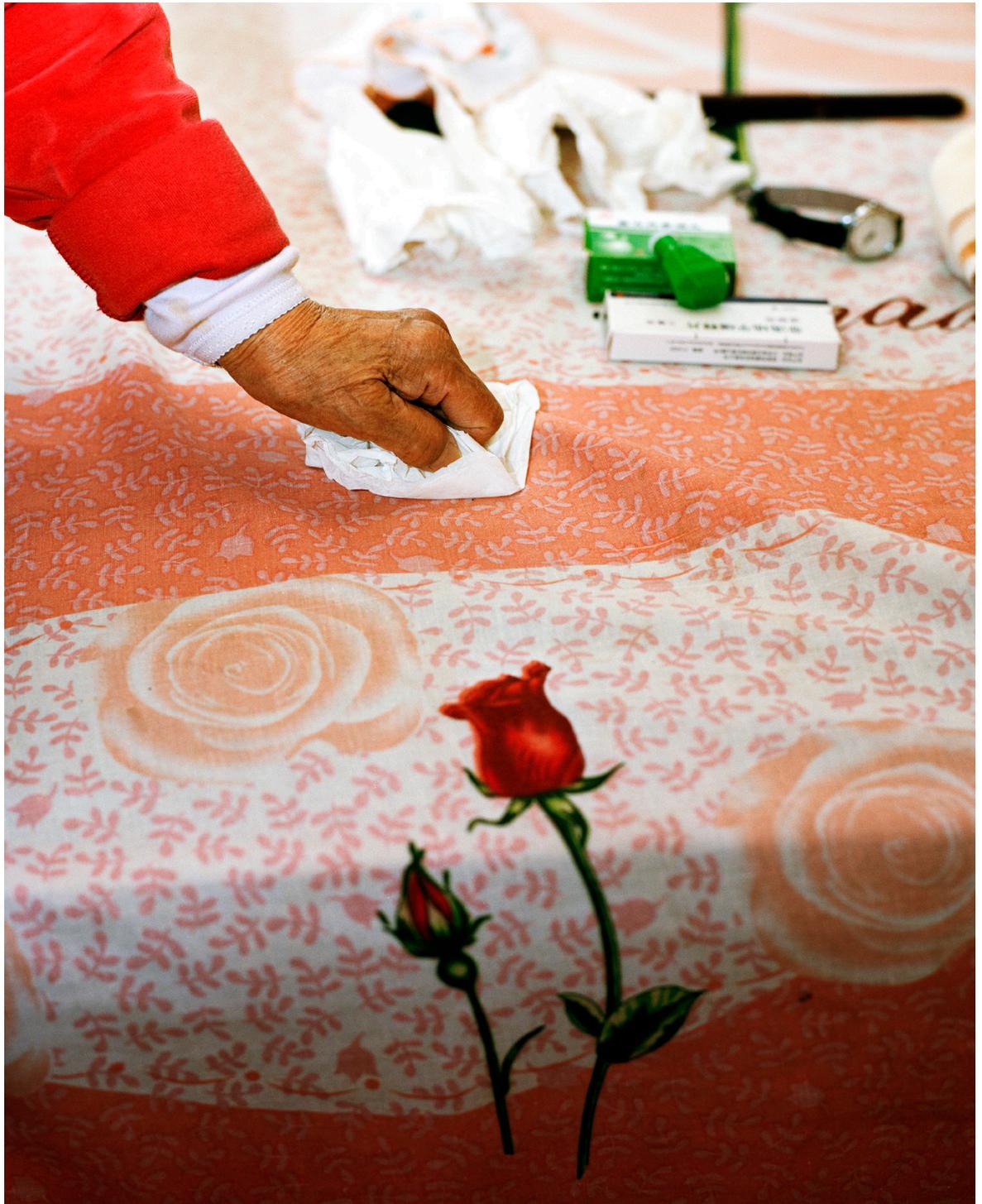


















信心

決心就是力量  
信心就是成功  
灰心就是哀傷  
死心就是失敗

惜也



你能成为  
上帝的朋友！





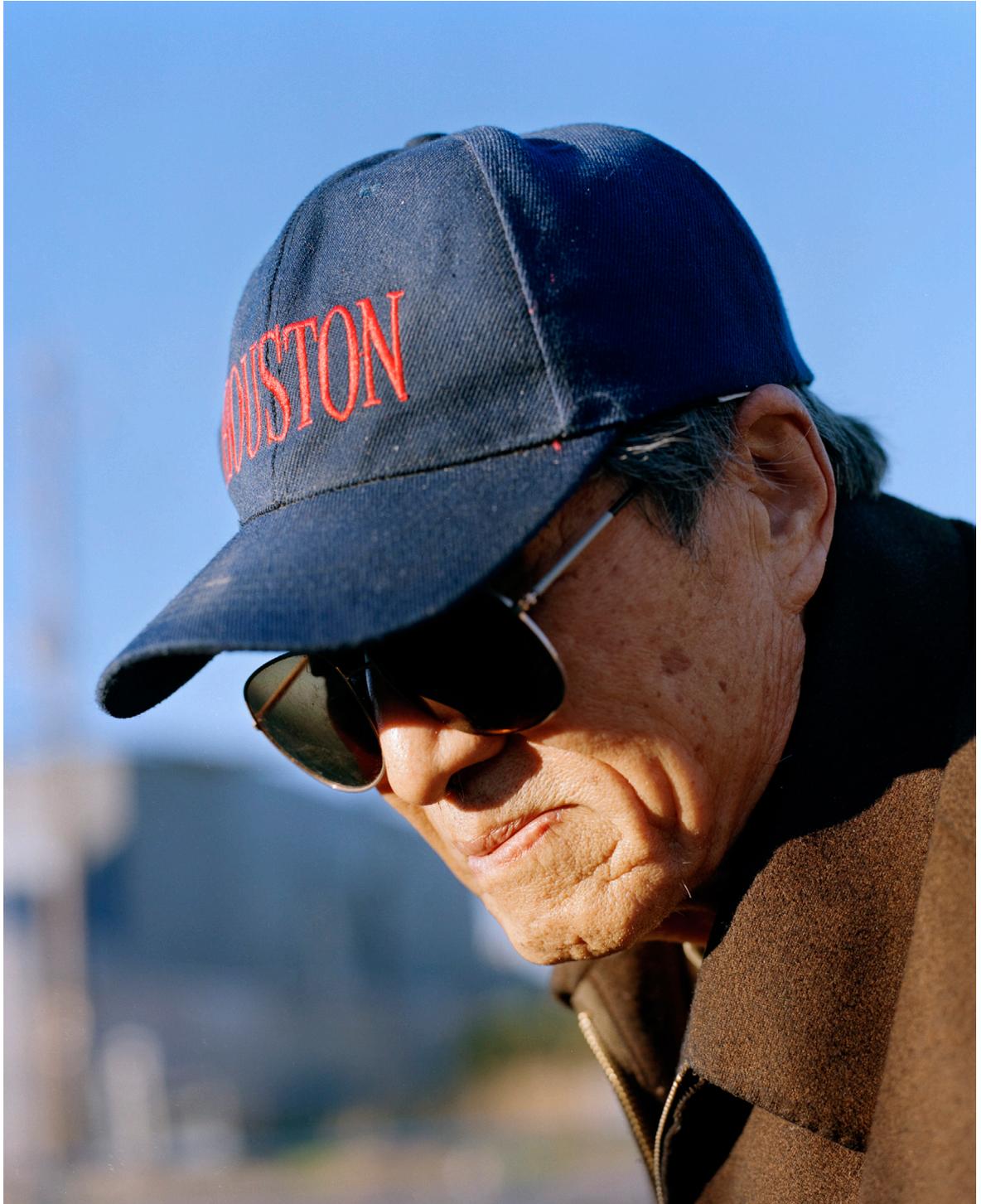
























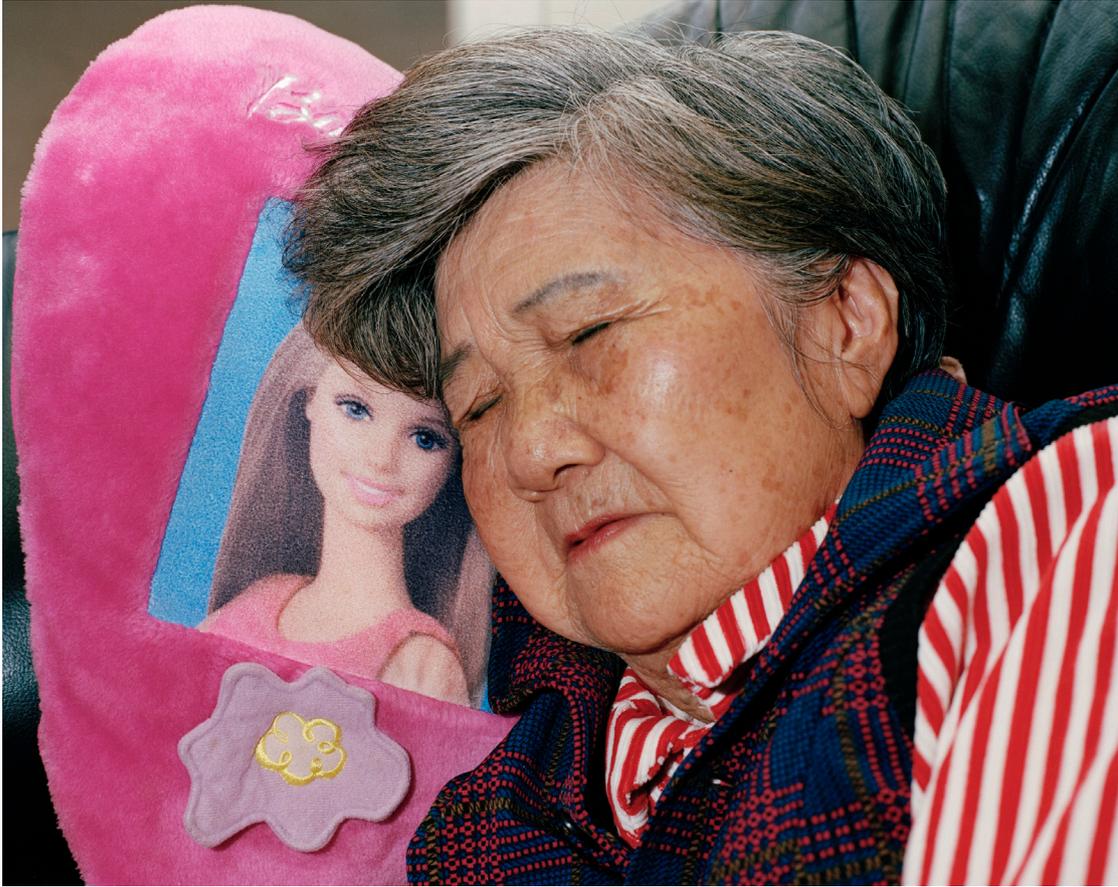
























































AMERICAN FIRST NATIONAL BANK

AMERICAN FIRST NATIONAL BANK

8648

AMERICAN FIRST NATIONAL BANK















←EXIT

← 315-328

POST OFFICE  
MAILBOXES MUST BE OPEN  
ON A REGULAR BASIS  
AND SHOULD REMAIN OPEN  
WHENEVER.

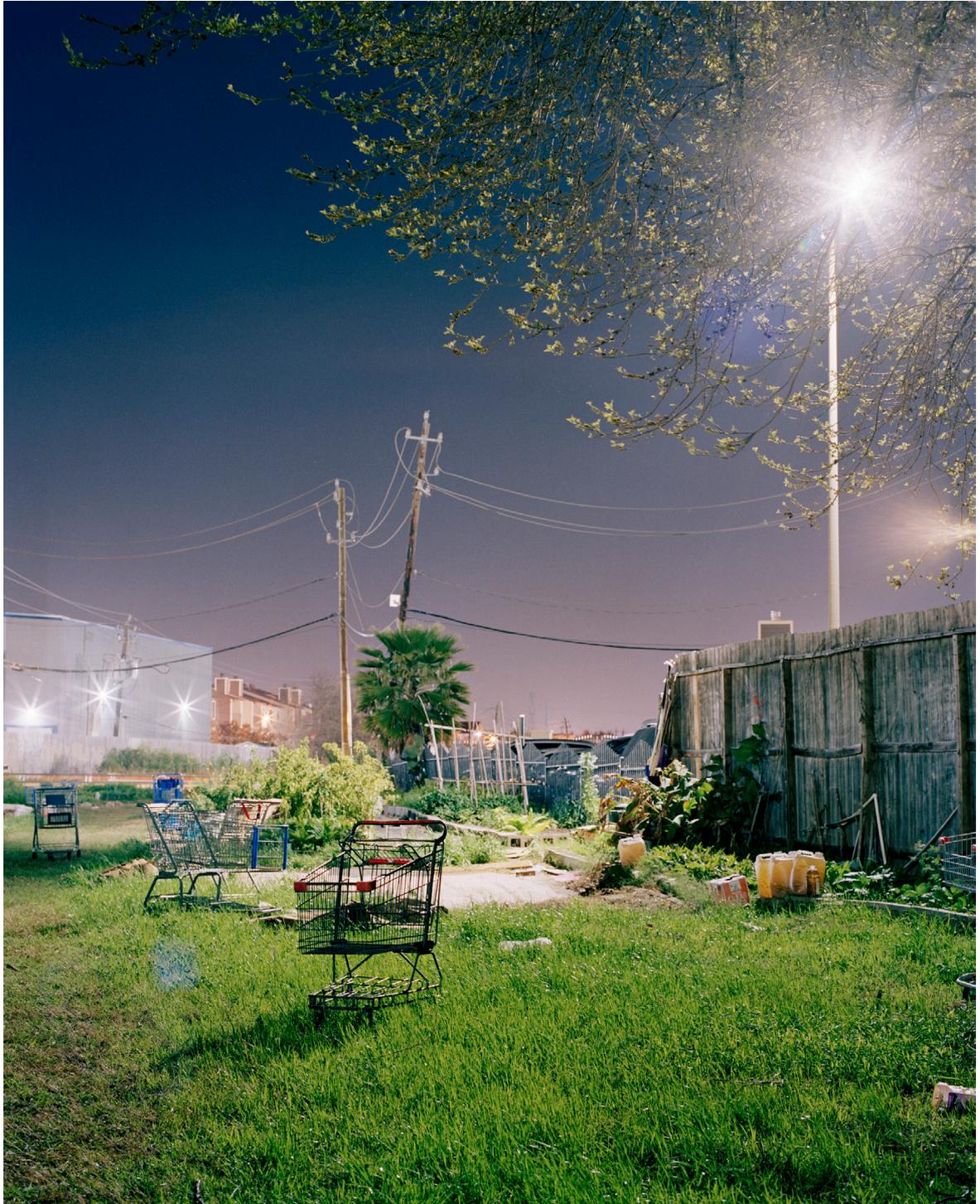
IN ORDER TO RECEIVE SERVICE,  
YOU MUST BE IN  
A PLASTIC BAG  
OR PUT ALL TRASH  
IN A BAG.  
DO NOT LEAVE  
TRASH ON THE  
FLOOR.

MAILBOX SERVICE  
IS AVAILABLE  
DAILY FROM 8:00 AM  
TO 6:00 PM.  
FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
CALL 1-800-455-5811.





















*Bending down must be painful*

I make photographs  
of my grandparents and those who remind me of them

in rooms both for sleep and living  
I imagine all of them my relations  
their rooms with different elevator stops  
all look the same:

a space for one or two to live  
a place for cooking so skinny  
my elbows recede into my chest  
my body against the wall to fully see  
I do not stay there long

I find accumulations  
where they sleep and clean  
I say accumulate because familiarity taught me  
there once was nothing to waste  
waste nothing before

it outlives every shimmer of its use  
though now they can afford to waste  
a bottle, a bag, an aluminum can  
which their hands nurture and raise  
for new life on their farm:

a space to grow  
food living next to their home  
plots tended daily  
like nursing children which, no doubt, they have done  
for years over, no guides then and none now but they know  
sprouting is effect, the cause consistent,  
a tiny tenderness applied over time

I catch myself thinking as I squeeze a moment  
into a photograph holding still a body  
grasping towards the soil  
a figure longing for ground  
to use, to grow, and live

I thought bending down would be painful  
for all the elders but  
it could not be so  
I have seen otherwise.





# Produce

This was a family affair. I am unspeakably indebted to my grandparents, my mum, my dad, my step-dad, my aunts and uncles, my dear friends, and everyone that has helped me to reach this point in my life:

I love you all. Thank you.

Dr. Lai, Eli, riel, thank you—for bearing with me and pushing me to go farther.

Most importantly, to the grandpas and grandmas and aunts and uncles that I have been lucky to meet, talk to, and photograph:

谢谢你们。

Houston, Texas  
2018 - 2019

Photographs by Junyuan Tan  
Design by Junyuan Tan & Neesha Vakil

