

## "Renee Lai: A Study of Fences" at grayDUCK Gallery

In her grayDUCK Gallery solo exhibition, the artist considers not only what these barriers keep out but also what gets through them

REVIEWED BY BARBARA PURCELL, FRI., 22, 2021



Renee Lai, "Near and Far," (Courtesy grayDUCK Gallery)

Artist Renee Lai is on the fence about fences. What exactly is their purpose? In "A Study of Fences," on view now at grayDUCK Gallery, Lai attempts to answer this question through a series of paintings and drawings based on the enclosures in her own Austin neighborhood.

"At night they look almost threatening, with sharp points, but in the day they turn into such mundane structures," she observes. "I'm interested in that switch and the way the same shapes can hold different emotional registers."

Lai, who is originally from Spring, Texas, recalls seeing fencing everywhere while growing up. As a college student in rural New England, she was surprised by the more open, uninterrupted landscape. It got her thinking about access to spaces and the boundaries we create.

"A Study of Fences" is as much about invisible barriers as physical ones: what gets included and what gets excluded in the vision of American society. Lai says the symbolic nature of a fence took on new sinister urgency back in 2016 with the divisive rhetoric around building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

But instead of Trump's border wall, Lai looks to the white picket fence as America's first line of defense. Her black-and-white painting *Suburbia* emits a certain neighborhood hypervigilance, as does the drawing *Picket Fence Portrait IV*, with its creepy carceral vibe. A friendly facade of fresh paint, she notes, disguises a "deeper fear of anything that might try to invade the carefully controlled territory of the American home."

Barrier VII, one of the more abstract pieces on display, does away with fences altogether in pursuit of unseen barriers. Lai has chosen simple materials (graphite, ink, a clear primer) that allow the natural quality of the canvas to come through. The canvas, however, has been torn in two, an insert hand-sewn into its center, thick black button thread suturing the surface. These countless stitches – a project which took Lai six months to complete – might easily be overlooked from afar. Painstaking pencil lines, relentless in their repetition, barely leave a mark.

But sometimes a fence is just a fence, like the one in *Near and Far*, which pulls you in from across the room with its mellow silhouette against a fading sky. A bit of space between the boards gives the whole thing surprising sway. The lines in this painting – as in most of her paintings – deserve a closer look. Lai tells me that as a young girl, she enjoyed playing with Chinese ink sets; that early informal training clearly carried over into what she's doing now.

In the back part of the gallery, a sudden shift: Three bamboo paintings burst with calligraphic vigor. The brushwork totally loosens up as nature takes over. These organic forms are a nice juxtaposition to her other structures, a leafy alternative to securing one's privacy. Bamboo, Moonlight is still drying on the wall when I visit, the smell of fresh paint like a sign of spring.

Since the lockdown began last March, Lai has noticed more fences going up in her neighborhood. They tend to be medium height, somewhat sturdy, kinda friendly. She still wonders about their purpose and that white picket politeness. What gets kept out, but even more so, what gets through.