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New York City

New York has long prided itself on being a haven for transplants like me—those who relinquished home, language, and familiarity to stake a claim in the city's vibrant ever-evolving cultural landscape. But after five years as a cultural critic here, I have watched that promise unravel. The art community feels increasingly fragile, especially this year, as political tensions escalate and the federal administration slashes funding for cultural and educational institutions that are already stretched thin. The sense of exuberant possibility that once drew me in has been replaced by the sobering reality of regression. With Donald Trump's recent executive order dismantling Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs in federal agencies—dismissing them as unnecessary and polarizing—public institutions are now grappling with uncertainty around representation and sustained support.

Still, artists in New York—particularly those from Asian diasporic communities—continue to create, with a heightened urgency. In the past few weeks, I encountered quiet yet profound resilience in three exhibitions in particular, each highlighting practices that preserve cultural memory and reclaim overlooked narratives.

At Nunu Fine Art, Indian artist Purvai Rai's solo show "Until Harvest" grounded memory in the land—literally. The centerpiece, *Shifting Fields* (2025), was a floor installation comprising etched red and black rice tiles, surrounded by architectural elevation prints hung unusually low on the walls. As viewers, we were compelled to bend, reorient,

and circumambulate. Inspired by her ancestral haveli in Punjab, India—a granary that became a silent witness to the country's agrarian policy shifts of the 1970s—Rai's work invites our bodies into postures of humility and devotion. Her layouts evoke not only agrarian memory but also spiritual ritual; by recalling the cardinal pathways of the Sri Harmandir Sahib, she redirects sanctity from temple to terrain. In a time when land rights, borders, and displacement are once again flashpoints around the globe, Rai's reorientation of space reclaims a sense of belonging amid ongoing threats to both personal and communal land ownership.

A few blocks away at RAINRAIN gallery, Zhi Wei Hiu, a New York-based Singaporean Chinese artist, presented her debut solo exhibition in the city, "Slivered Wake, A Cast Lance," a haunting meditation on memory, image, and the afterlives of matter. Hiu reconstructs photographic practices by combining analog reproduction tools such as enlargers and developing tanks with relics that have deteriorated over time, including waterlogged wristwatches and early-1900s glass plate negatives, creating sculptures that resemble Chinese folk altars. Some frames protruded from the wall like miniature shrines, housing images meant to be encountered indirectly through reflection. Peering inside felt ritualistic—intimate and deeply personal. On one wall, a series of contact prints on gelatin paper—rephotographed from archival images—hung alongside frameworked borosilicate glass, establishing



Installation view of PURVAI RAI's "Until Harvest" at Nunu Fine Art, New York, 2025. Courtesy Nunu Fine Art.

a delicate interplay between surface and depth. Hiu liberates the photosensitive surface from tradition, using chemical manipulation and fine silverpoint drawing to transform the prints into mirrored palimpsests that reflect rather than depict. In these spaces, the photograph is not evidence but invocation—one that treats memory as a body to sit with, mourn over, and honor.

Then there is Korean artist Heryun Kim, whose first solo show in the US, "The Great Tomb of Hwangnam and Other Paintings," opened at Bienvenu Steinberg & C. Kim's ink drawings—particularly the monumental *Hwangnam Daechong Tomb* (2017), a series of 164 delicate studies on paper—resemble an archaeological chant transcribed through brush and line. Inspired by ancient Silla metalwork and Korean script, Kim's works hover between abstraction and code, gesture and artifact. She observes that what appeared to be repeated patterns in a Silla tomb saddle actually contained spontaneous variations—an accidental modernism embedded in history. The visceral, tactile

clarity of her work that stands out. Through gesture and repetition, she conveys cultural memory not as symbolism but as touch—forms that feel both ancient and freshly imprinted, reverent without recourse to nostalgia. In a year where "heritage" is often politicized, Kim's work embodies an astute weaving of tradition and innovation.

As an expatriate, I navigate languages, policies, and places. I was drawn to these three exhibitions not only for their formal rigor but for how each artist wrestles with the residues of history through process and material. Rai's rice installation, Hiu's chemically altered mirrors, and Kim's archaeological linework each enact a form of cultural retrieval, revealing what has been obscured or forgotten. In a politically strained and culturally underfunded era, these artists resist erasure and compose new languages of inheritance, persisting in artmaking not in defiance of the prevailing climate, but because of it.

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