

LIMINAL

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Vulnerable Intimacies

BY CHER TAN

Commissioned by Counihan Gallery,
this catalogue essay explores the
interlinking themes that resonate in new
work by three artists of different cultural
backgrounds.

DEANNA HITTI'S *K IS FOR KITAB TABAKH*, ALI
TAYAHORI'S *KILL ME SOFTLY* AND
CYRUS TANG'S *EMBRACE* ARE NOW SHOWING AT THE
COUNIHAN GALLERY
UNTIL 28 JULY 2024.

[MORE DETAILS HERE](#)

The experience of 'being within, yet apart' remains a preoccupation for many from migrant diasporas, whether it is they themselves who migrated or their parents and grandparents. Questions surrounding belonging and identity are clearly present, especially if one finds themselves caught between cultures. Where do we find the bridge? And if one does appear, what does it look like to cross? What if, simply, there is no need, for we can try and make meaning through this apparent discord, looking for resonances while also being clear about who we are?

Three new exhibitions, currently showing at Counihan Gallery in the Brunswick Town Hall in Naarm/Melbourne, all share this preoccupation, reaching for an intimacy that transcends static understandings of culture. The sense of vulnerability that permeates all three exhibitions is most poignant, particularly as they converge to explore the intricate dance between intimacy and public visibility as the artists navigate this through their respective cultural backgrounds.

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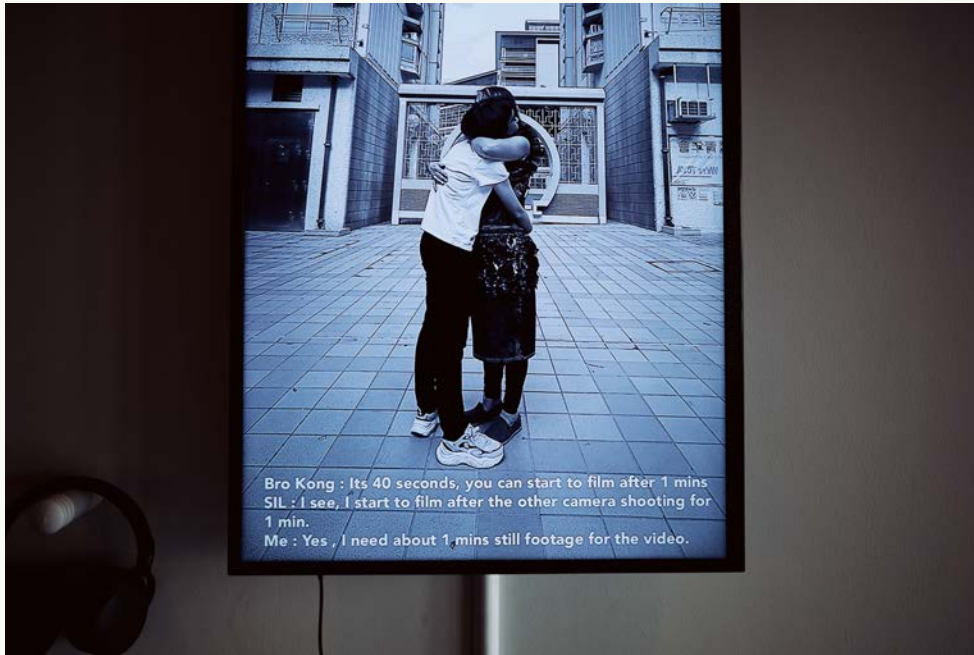
K is for Kitab Tabakh, Deanna Hitti (credit: Simon Fazio)

In *K is for Kitab Tabakh*, the first exhibition you encounter when you step into the gallery, with an ornate arrangement of Lebanese cultural objects by the window display, Deanna Hitti presents an interpretation of her experience as a child of Lebanese migrants who grew up living in two cultures at the same time. Of course, this is a common theme for many children of migrants: often, family would continue homeland traditions in the home—either through food, language, religion or all of the above—which may not map in the same way when the child steps out into the outside world, either in school or elsewhere. This sentiment is most evident through the way Hitti puts together her exhibition, where the Lebanese table setting takes centre-stage alongside the titular kitab tabakh (‘cookbook’ or ‘recipe book’ in Arabic) inspired by Hitti’s mother’s collection of Lebanese family recipes, juxtaposed with Western ones found in 1970s English cookbooks. This duality is further rendered by large-scale cyanotypes draping the walls, with recipes for dishes such as biscotten torte and cream mahktouk against both Western and Arabic classical art and architecture. Hitti’s exploration of food, culture, and identity underscores how culinary practices become repositories of cultural memory, binding generations and communities together across geographical distances while taking cultural differences into account.

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K is for Kitab Tabakk, Deanna Hitti (credit: Simon Fazio)



Embrace, Cyrus Tang (credit: Simon Fazio)

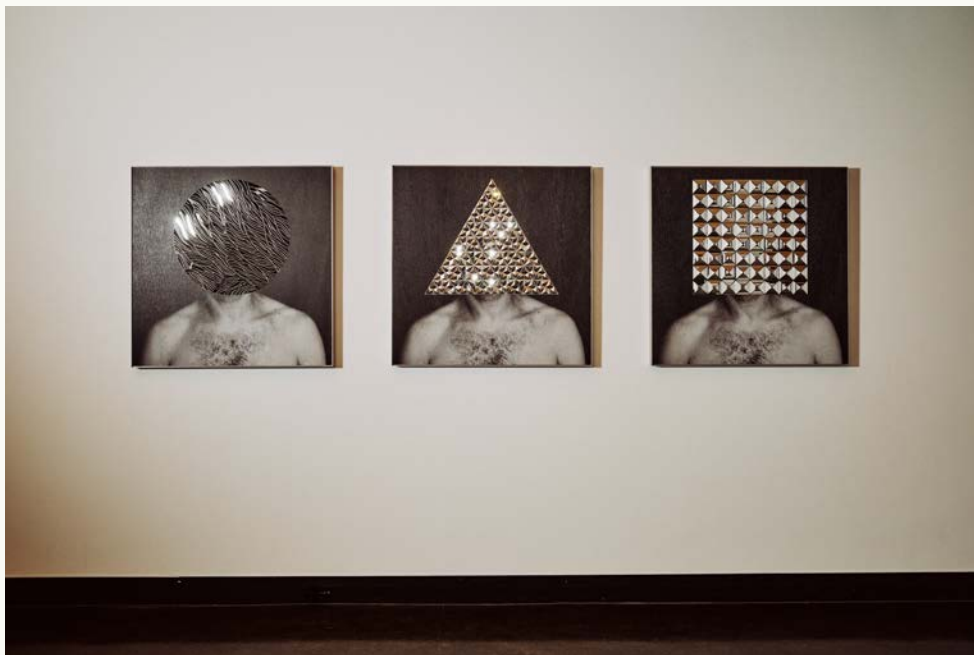
Family, as well, is a prominent theme in Cyrus Tang's exhibition *Embrace*. Located to the left of Hitti's work, in another section of the Counihan that looks out onto Sydney Road, Tang offers a personal exploration of intimacy and familial bonds within the context of her Chinese cultural heritage, in particular her own experience as a first-generation migrant born in 1970s Hong Kong. Through a costume made out of rice paper which Tang then coated with cyanotype chemical, Tang invited her family in Hong Kong to take part in the exhibition. By asking them to hold still—as they embrace her for eight minutes—their body marks eventually formed on the costume after being exposed by LED light, pieces of which are now hung on the ceiling alongside a video documentation of the process. Here, Tang's project transcends the physical act of hugging to encompass broader themes of social interaction and familial dynamics influenced by both Confucian values and contemporary Australian openness. By navigating the nuanced intersections of personal and social space, Tang reconciles

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expressive forms of affection prevalent in Australia. As such *Embrace* becomes a visual dialogue on the evolving nature of cultural intimacy, challenging stereotypes and fostering deeper understanding across cultural divides.



Embrace, Cyrus Tang (credit: Simon Fazio)



Kill Me Softly, Ali Tayahori (credit: Simon Fazio)

Walk through a curtain to the right of Hitti's work, and you're literally transported into another kind of psyche. This time, one encounters *Kill Me Softly*, Ali Tayahori's work that explores themes of desire, intimacy and violence through a queer lens. As a first-generation migrant from Iran, the reality of being queer is fraught, as people's identities are often intertwined with state repression, criminalised and subject to violence. Yet in Australia, while LGBTQIA+ rights are generally recognised and celebrated, homophobia and transphobia remain. How does one begin to bridge this chasm? By

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contemporary artistic forms such as photography, Tahayori not only critiques oppressive social norms but also celebrates resilience and defiance. The kaleidoscopic patterns the individual glasspieces project onto the floor reveals a hidden beauty that is especially moving. Go around the corner, and one sees a projected video on the wall, showing two wrestlers grappling with one another in a way that suggests ambiguity, a type of homoeroticism that is at once revealing yet concealing especially as the athletes are pixelated. Tahayori's artworks serve as poignant narratives of otherness and the quest for acceptance, highlighting the ongoing struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights globally especially as many queer people still encounter a duality around being hypervisible and invisible at the same time.



Kill Me Softly, Ali Tahayori (credit: Simon Fazio)

Collectively, *K is for Kitab Tabakh*, *Kill Me Softly*, and *Embrace* weave a rich tapestry of narratives that explore the intricacies of intimacy and belonging in the context of dual cultural identities. Whether through the lens of culinary traditions, queer identities, or familial embraces, Hitti's, Tang's and Tahayori's work offer profound insights into the ways individuals negotiate their sense of self within cultural landscapes that can be simultaneously alien and forgiving, where a certain "right to oscillate" is required. Each artist's work speaks to the universal human need for connection and recognition, while also highlighting the unique challenges and triumphs faced by those straddling multiple cultural worlds. They remind us that while cultural heritage undeniably shapes our identities, it is our shared humanity that ultimately bridges differences and fosters a sense of belonging in an increasingly interconnected world.

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