

Zhi Lin: Chinese Railroad Workers of the Sierra Nevada

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, this exhibition features works by Zhi Lin (born 1959) that recall the sacrifices of Chinese immigrant workers in the Sierra Nevada. The completion of the railroad—which spanned the American continent—was celebrated as the defining achievement of America’s Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century rallying cry for westward expansion of the United States.

Zhi Lin’s mixed-media canvases, video installation, and watercolor paintings honor over 20,000 Chinese workers who constructed the railroad, and the nearly 1,200 Chinese workers who lost their lives to accidents, avalanches, and explosions in treacherous Sierra terrain near Donner Summit. These works represent Lin’s years of study dedicated to the vital role that Chinese immigrant laborers played in the history of the American West, and how their stories and contributions have been gradually erased from mainstream American historical narratives.

Born in Nanjing, China, Lin studied fine art at the state-run China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou and at the Slade School in London, where he was trained in both traditional Chinese and contemporary Western printmaking. He also received a graduate degree from the University of Delaware. Although Lin employs conventional modes of representation, his work became more political following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and his subsequent move from the United Kingdom to the United States. Lin lives in Seattle, Washington, and is a Professor of Painting and Drawing at the University of Washington.

Media Sponsor

KUNR Reno Public Radio

[WATERCOLORS-small vinyl]

“Besides the grade or the rails, people find only trees on the ground and the sky above sites. This landscape for them does not have a human memory. However, I hope that after viewing my work, when people look at the trees, and the sky, and along the passage of the old grade, they will be able to see the presence of the workers.”

In his ongoing series of watercolor paintings, Zhi Lin reminds us how easy it is to overlook places where tragic historical events have occurred. While traveling in California and Nevada between 2005 and 2007, Lin made sketches of tunnels, bridges, rivers, and other sites where he discovered traces of Chinese railroad workers who once lived and worked in the Sierra. He hopes that his paintings help people to better understand the lives of workers who left no written accounts or journal entries chronicling their experiences.

One of Lin’s sketches shows the treacherous granite cliffs on Donner Pass, where many railroad workers lost their lives in the winter of 1866-67. Another painting depicts a Chinese temple in Auburn, where the bodies of workers were transported before their return to family members in China. In 1870, families living in China sent a bone collector to California to recover the human remains of their deceased relatives—which amounted to 20,000 pounds of human bones. Following the completion of the railroad, many Chinese workers settled on the outskirts of towns such as Truckee, Auburn, Nevada City, and Reno. These communities became targets of racial discrimination, many were condemned, and others were burned due to arson. One of Lin’s illustrations shows the Chinese Herb House in Truckee, the last remnant of Truckee’s historic Chinese population, which at its peak numbered 1,400 people.

"Chinaman's Chance" on Promontory Summit: Golden Spike Celebration on Promontory Summit, 12:30 pm, 10th May 1869, 2015

HD video projected on painted canvas

Running time: 10 minutes, 41 seconds

One of the best-known moments in American history is the Golden Spike Ceremony of 1869, which took place on Promontory Summit in Utah to commemorate the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. The event was documented by Andrew J. Russell in a famous photograph that shows two locomotives facing each other as a bottle of champagne is raised by the celebratory group. Just before the photograph was taken, a golden railroad spike was hammered into the last rail, and a telegram was released announcing completion of the great accomplishment.

Roughly 23,000 Chinese workers participated in the construction of the railroad, but they are nowhere to be seen in Russell's historic photograph. To bring attention to their absence, Zhi Lin created this multimedia installation that re-imagines the 1869 ceremony from the vantage point of Chinese railroad workers, who were present, but who observed the ceremony from the periphery. While the completion of the railroad signaled a new era of prosperity for the United States, Chinese railroad workers lost their jobs the moment the last spike was hammered. The title of Lin's work, "*Chinaman's Chance*," refers to a once-popular racist expression used to describe a person's chance of succeeding—when in fact they had little or no chance at all.



Andrew J. Russell, *East and West Shaking Hands at the Laying of the Last Rail*, May 10, 1869

Iced Bones, Donner Pass, California, 1866-7, from the series, Building of the Central Pacific by Chinese Workers, 2013

Chinese ink and colors on Chinese paper

“My intent is for the audience to imagine themselves as the migrants on that day, to feel their way into the work. I want them to see the mountains and the snow but also the workers and their gestures, their efforts,” Lin says of works such as Iced Bones, Donner Pass.

In this large, scroll-like painting, Lin memorializes the great human sacrifice endured by Chinese railroad workers during the construction of the 1,659-foot Summit Tunnel on Donner Pass during 1866-67. Faced with more than forty winter storms, workers used hand tools and dynamite to carve through solid granite at an average of eight inches per day. The workers endured heavy snow and freezing wind storms by working at night and sleeping in snow caves during warmer daytime hours. They survived an average of 18-feet of snowfall at the summit and freezing wind storms by sleeping in snow caves. Their use of dynamite caused regular snow slides and avalanches and swept many workers swept to their deaths in the steep canyons below. Lin’s work incorporates subtle references to human bodies, bones, railroad tracks, and an icy white and gray color palette to suggest the harsh conditions.

Bloody Summer, Cape Horn, California, 1865, from the series, Building of the Central Pacific by Chinese Workers, 2013

Chinese ink and colors on Chinese paper

In this series of large-format paintings, Zhi Lin sought a poetic way to express how stories of the sacrifices made by Chinese railroad workers have been omitted from American history books.

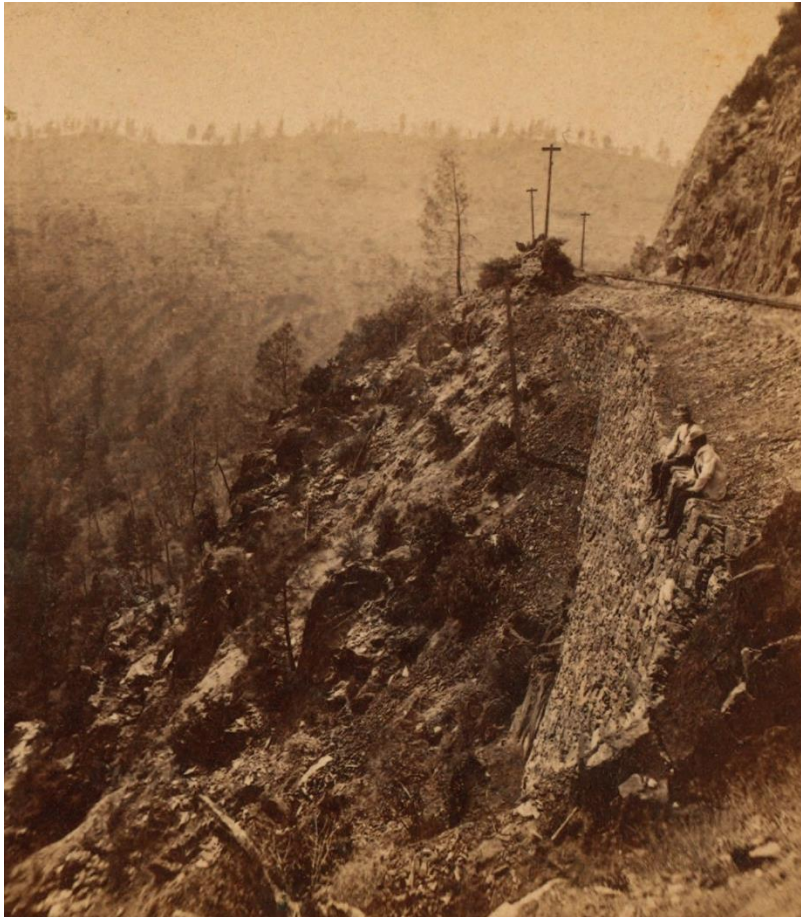
The title of this piece, *Bloody Summer, Cape Horn*, refers to the many tragic deaths that occurred at a location in the Sierra Nevada known as Cape Horn. The sheer, vertical granite cliff east of Colfax, California, was one of the first major obstacles to railroad construction. More than 300 Chinese workers fell to their deaths at Cape Horn in 1865.

Elev. 1,358-2,058 ft./38.8°N 120.2°W, Burn Flat China Camp, CA, 1866, from the series, Building of the Central Pacific by Chinese Workers

2014

Chinese ink/colors on Chinese paper

The title of this painting refers to a campsite known as *Burn Flat* where Chinese workers lived while working to blast through the nearby granite cliff known as Cape Horn just east of Colfax, California. Workers used hundreds of barrels of an explosive mixture called black powder to etch a ledge in the mountain upon which the railroad tracks could be laid. Many Chinese workers lost their lives in these blasts, and others return to camp covered with dirt, black dust, and smoke from a full day of explosions.



View of Cape Horn

Hung Liu: On Gold Mountain [small vinyl]

Immigrants began arriving in America from southeastern China in 1850. California, and especially San Francisco, promised freedom, prosperity, and the opportunity to escape the poverty and overpopulation of their homeland. San Francisco was known to these immigrants as *Jiu Jin Shan* or “Gold Mountain.” By 1880, more than three-hundred thousand Chinese immigrants had arrived in the city’s port *en route* to California’s gold fields, in search of better lives. The prosperity and good fortune they dreamed of seldom materialized.

Hung Liu (b. 1948), a contemporary Chinese artist living in California, memorializes these Chinese immigrants and honors their important contributions. The painting on view here is related to a major installation Liu prepared for *Tahoe: A Visual History*, an exhibition at the Nevada Museum of Art in 2015. Titled, *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)*, the installation featured more than 200,000 fortune cookies piled in a symbolic gold mountain that buried two crisscrossed railroad tracks. Like her installation, this painting alludes to the thousands of Chinese workers who labored on California’s first railroads, in large part because they were forbidden to mine gold after the first few years of the gold rush.

For Western consumers, fortune cookies symbolize hope and prosperity. However, as Liu is quick to point out, the popular mass-produced sweets are an American invention that does not exist in China.



Hung Liu, *Jiu Jin Shan (Old Gold Mountain)*, 1994, 200,000 fortune cookies with support structure and train tracks

[small works vinyl stereocards]

Alfred A. Hart (1816–1908) became the official photographer for the Central Pacific Railroad (C.P.R.R) in 1866 and would spend five subsequent summers documenting the construction of the railroad line between Sacramento, California and Promontory Summit, Utah. Hart was originally trained as a painter on the East Coast before he moved to California in 1863 to make photographs in California's gold-mining regions. Construction on the C.P.R.R. began in Sacramento that same year and Hart became acquainted with Edwin B. Crocker, who provided legal counsel to the railroad firm and was the brother of Charles Crocker, one of the company's primary partners.

Crocker became Hart's advocate and patron, offering him free travel on the rail line and broad latitude to direct work crews and laborers for photographic views. Hart hauled his portable darkroom and equipment atop train cars and took images of snow sheds and tunnels under construction. Only occasionally did he turn his camera toward the thousands of Chinese immigrant laborers who risked—and lost—their lives during the construction of the railroad. Since there are no known written accounts left behind by Chinese railroad workers, these photographs are the only evidence left to document the experiences and conditions under which they worked.