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**Skirball Cultural Center to present**

**TALKING BACK TO POWER: PROJECTS BY ARAM HAN SIFUENTES**

**April 14–September 4, 2022**

Exhibition of textile-based works by artist-activist Aram Han Sifuentes explores ideas of identity, power, and belonging in the United States

LOS ANGELES, CA—The Skirball Cultural Center presents *Talking Back to Power: Projects by Aram Han Sifuentes*, the third and final project in a three-year collaboration with the multidisciplinary artist-activist. Featuring garments, banners, embroidery samplers, quilts, and sculptures, the exhibition examines how immigrants and people of color—as well as others often rendered invisible in American society—create spaces of belonging for themselves in the United States. *Talking Back to Power* will be on view at the Skirball from April 14 through September 4, 2022.

The exhibition features a selection of projects by Han Sifuentes that highlight the personal stories of immigrant garment workers in the US. Drawing from her history as the daughter of South Korean immigrants who owned a dry-cleaning shop, she employs familiar and everyday materials in her textile and sculptural works. Some of these materials were collected from garment care businesses run by immigrants from around the world in acknowledgment of the valuable yet undervalued labor that many immigrants provide.

“It is thrilling that Han Sifuentes’s final project with the Skirball will be experienced in person. She has shown so much flexibility and resilience in the face of the last two years, pivoting to online collaborations and integrating new work and ideas into her plans,” said Jessie Kornberg, Skirball President and CEO. “The world around us has changed so much, yet the ideas and themes she explores in her work—cultural identity, memory, labor, citizenship, and the pursuit of justice—feel as vital as ever.”

“It has been an honor to work with Aram over the past three years, to introduce her multifaceted and deeply collaborative practice to our audiences and to show some of her works for the first time at the Skirball,” remarked Skirball curator Laura Mart. “Aram’s projects are personal and intimate and also speak to broader social issues that affect communities across the country in deeply interconnected ways.”

In the summer of 2020, during a momentous period of reckonings over racial justice against the background of the pandemic, the Skirball and Han Sifuentes offered two sold-out virtual workshops featuring her project *Protest Banner Lending Library*. Participants of all ages made banners featuring their own slogans, some of which will be available for check-out in the gallery. In the fall of 2020, the Skirball hosted the online participatory exhibition *Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can’t*, a symbolic exercise in voting open to all people that shed light on who is able to

participate in democracy and who is not. The works on view in the gallery resonate with these works' themes of uplifting underrepresented voices and building a more inclusive democracy.

*Talking Back to Power* includes the following projects by Han Sifuentes:

### **A MEND**

A Mend (2011 - present) was born out of Han Sifuentes's desire to learn the personal stories of other immigrants in the US who performed the same work as her parents. She interviewed immigrant garment workers who do clothing alterations, asking what they did before they came to America, how long they've been in this country, and how much they charged to hem a pair of jeans, one of the most common alteration tasks. She collected remnant cuffs from the jeans hemmed by these workers, stitching them together to form a net-like sculpture and a series of quilts that narrate the workers' experiences through hand embroidery, alongside data on their work in this country and their immigration histories.

### **UNDERDRAWING OF PERSIMMONS**

*Underdrawing of Persimmons* (1992–2015) is a collaboration between the artist and her mother, Younghye Han, a classically trained artist who moved with her family to the US when Han Sifuentes and her sister were young. When they arrived, the demands of working in the dry-cleaning business and raising two young children left Younghye little time to make art. One of the few pieces she started but never finished was an underdrawing—a preliminary drawing for a traditional Korean ink painting. In 2015, when asked by Aram when she intended to complete her painting, she replied that her daughter should do it for her. Aram dipped the work in wax, sealing the paper to preserve it in its unfinished state as a testimony to her mother's history as an artist.

### **U.S. CITIZENSHIP TEST SAMPLERS**

The ongoing series *U.S. Citizenship Test Samplers* (2014–present) is designed to help aspiring citizens study for the US Naturalization Test while commenting on the requirements for gaining citizenship. Han Sifuentes teaches workshops to non-citizens in which she covers not only the civics and history material covered on the test, but also basic embroidery skills. The workshop participants then embroider the questions and answers to the test on fabric samplers—small pieces of cloth used to practice and demonstrate stitches, as well as to teach the alphabet and popular sayings, poems, or prayers.

As displays of literacy and of domestic skills, samplers historically functioned to demonstrate the suitability of young women as potential brides. In this project, Han Sifuentes uses the format of the sampler to explore the ways in which immigrants are asked to prove their worth. Workshop participants embellish their handiwork according to their individual tastes, with motifs ranging from patriotic designs inspired by American history to images drawn from family photographs. The samplers are then offered for sale for the current cost of applying for citizenship; funds from the sales are paid in full to their creators, who can use the proceeds for their citizenship application or whatever else they wish. Han Sifuentes comments on what she sees as a somewhat arbitrary measure of an immigrant's suitability to become a citizen—passing a civics and history test that no US-born citizen is required to take.

Han Sifuentes began the project as she was studying to take the test herself, and her own sampler—a long scroll intended to be a comprehensive answer key for the test—is displayed as a perpetual work-in-progress. She sold the work in 2016, the year she became a citizen, on the condition that she can continue to work on it indefinitely. At the time of its sale, the cost of applying for citizenship was \$680, meaning that in effect she was paid a little more than two dollars per hour for her hundreds of hours of sewing, serving as a reminder of the low wages that many immigrants are paid for their labor.

### **PROTEST BANNER LENDING LIBRARY**

*Protest Banner Lending Library* (2016–present) explores the power of protest to generate ideas that help build a more just society. This collection of fabric protest banners is created by Han Sifuentes and collaborators including community organizations, students, and participants in workshops she has led over the years. Both a vehicle for creativity and a resource for activists championing diverse causes, the Protest Banner Lending Library was originally started to provide an alternative avenue of expression for those who cannot always safely or easily participate in on-the-ground demonstrations. These individuals—including undocumented immigrants, people with disabilities, and parents of young children—can create banners bearing their chosen slogans, which can then be taken to protests by others who are more comfortable protesting in public.

A selection of these banners will be displayed in the gallery, bearing messages about topics ranging from racial justice to LGBT rights and beyond. Weighty slogans, such as the always-prescient phrase “Stop Repeating History” will be exhibited alongside cheeky ones, such as “Aliens Welcome,” which signals acceptance of immigrants by subverting language that is often used to dehumanize them.

During the run of the exhibition, monthly Protest Banner Lending Library workshops, held outdoors, will be offered to the public. The library of banners will grow as workshop participants donate their banners, which can be checked out by other visitors to the Skirball during their visit.

### **PROTEST GARMENT LAB**

*Protest Garment Lab* (2021–ongoing) is a new body of work by Han Sifuentes and her collaborators Andrea Miros Ramírez, Eric Guy, and Miranda Betancourt. These works play on the duality of clothing as an avenue for self-expression and a means of protecting oneself from the outside world. On view will be garments specifically designed to reveal slogans when opened, moved, or held in a certain position. They draw style cues from different communities of color, such as the street wear popularized by cholas, a subculture of Latinx femme youth in the 1990s. Han Sifuentes has created a series of outfits used for traditional Korean Pungmul drumming, which are worn by her Pungmul group Woori Sori (“Our Voice”) during performances. Video documentation of each of the garments on display used in site-specific performances will accompany the garments themselves. *Talking Back to Power* is the museum debut of these works.

### **SAFETY PINS**

*Safety Pins* (2010 - 2022) is a trio of sculptures by Han Sifuentes will be installed temporarily in the Skirball’s permanent exhibition, Visions and Values. These sculptures, composed of found materials from her parents’ dry-cleaning store in Manteca, CA, pay homage to the labor of her parents. Through hours of slowly stitching safety pins onto canvases in the form of a mandala—a sacred shape that is rooted in her Buddhist culture—Han Sifuentes commemorates the labor done by her parents and millions of other immigrant workers. Their inclusion in the Liberty Gallery, which features objects related to Jewish immigration to the US, ties together the lived experiences of Jewish immigrants who made up a large share of garment workers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Latin American and Asian immigrants who do this work today.

“Han Sifuentes’s participatory projects are a generous invitation for people to take part in an expanded, more inclusive, and therefore more hopeful vision of our world,” adds Sheri Bernstein, Skirball Museum Director. “I am moved by how these works of art amplify multiple voices and bring together communities and generations.”

### **About the Artist**

Aram Han Sifuentes is a fiber, social practice, and performance artist who works to claim spaces for immigrant and disenfranchised communities. As the daughter of a seamstress and an immigrant herself, Han Sifuentes often creates work that revolves around skill sharing—specifically sewing techniques—to create multiethnic and intergenerational sewing circles, which become a place for empowerment, conversation, subversion of oppressive power structures, and protest. She has presented her work in exhibitions, performances, and workshops at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), the Pulitzer Arts Foundation (St. Louis, MO), Jane Addams Hull-House Museum (Chicago, IL), Hyde Park Art Center (Chicago, IL), Chicago Cultural Center (Chicago, IL), Asian Arts Initiative (Philadelphia, PA), Chung Young Yang Embroidery Museum (Seoul, KR), and the Design Museum (London, UK). Sifuentes is a 2016 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow and Adjunct Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently the Artist in Residence at Loyola University Chicago.

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### **About the Skirball Cultural Center**

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

### **Visiting the Skirball Cultural Center**

The Skirball is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Admission to *Talking Back to Power: Projects by Aram Han Sifuentes* and most exhibitions: \$18 General; \$15 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$13 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. Advance timed-entry reservations are required. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit [skirball.org](http://skirball.org).