

Arts

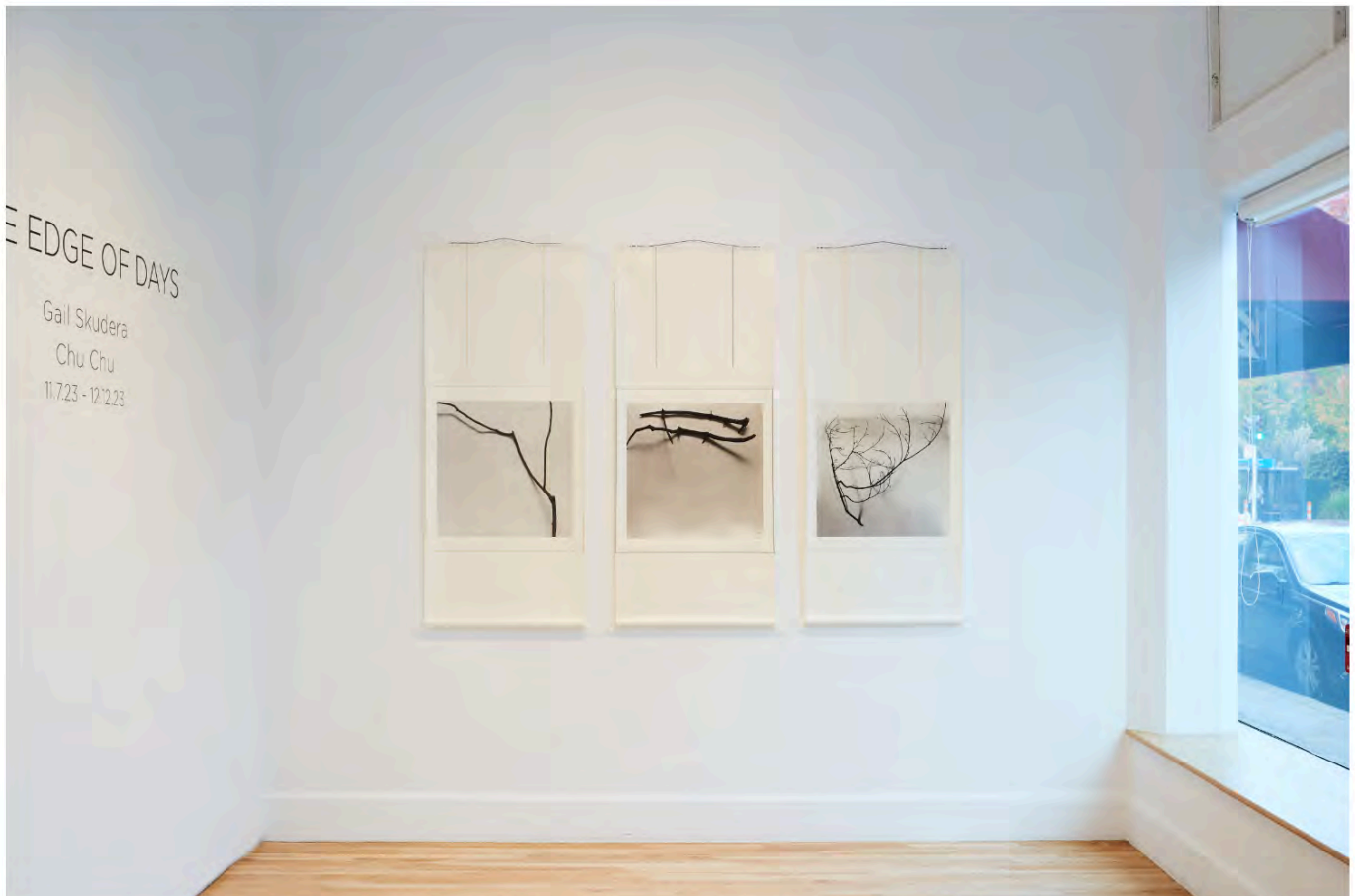
A look at Qualia Contemporary Art's first show in its new home

Downtown Palo Alto gallery inaugurates new, larger space with 'The Edge of Days' plus group show of Asian Pacific artists

by Sheryl Nonnenberg / Almanac



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Qualia has become the place to see both Asian and Western art presented together. “I want to create a platform for a dialogue between different cultures and styles, and I want it to reflect the composition of the population of Silicon Valley,” said gallery owner Dacia Xu. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

Dacia Xu, owner of Qualia Contemporary Art in Palo Alto, is clearly a risk taker. She left a successful career in high tech to open the gallery, located on University Avenue, in 2020, just at the start of the pandemic. After three years of continuously offering solo and group exhibitions in that space, Xu decided it was time for a change. In October, Qualia moved into the venue formerly rented by Pace Gallery on Hamilton Street and its inaugural show, "The Edge of Days," opened on Nov. 7.

Xu described how she had often visited Pace and admired the high ceilings and large exhibition area. When she approached the landlord, she didn't really think she had much chance in securing the lease because she heard there was a lot of interest in the space. "They actually said that they chose me because I had run a local business," she said. Although the former gallery had the advantage of lots of foot traffic, since it was on a main street and next-door to the always-busy Apple store, Xu said it was quite narrow and often not the best size for viewing large-scale works of art



Downtown Palo Alto gallery Qualia Contemporary Art recently relocated a few blocks to a larger space formerly occupied by Pace Gallery. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

More important than location is the intention and direction of the gallery, explained Xu.

"I believe in time and effort," she said adding, "in Silicon Valley people are very busy but they want to know more about contemporary art." She sees the gallery as not only a commercial space for collectors to buy art but also a place where the public can be educated about art. "I want to show people that art can broaden your vision and that it can be a vehicle to understand humanity."

Recognizing the importance of finding a niche in the gallery scene, Qualia has become the place to see both Asian and Western art presented together. Xu said that this has evolved over time for two reasons: "I want to create a platform for a dialogue between different cultures and styles," she said, "and I want it to reflect the composition of the population of Silicon Valley."



"Pine-Book of Odes" by Chu Chu combines a photograph of tree branches found near the artist's home with tiny characters in Chinese calligraphy hidden in the shadows that make up ancient Chinese poems. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

A case in point is the current exhibition, "The Edge of Days," which features the work of two women artists, **Chu Chu** and **Gail Skudera**. "I think they form a great dialogue: one artist from Maine and the other from China, but they both use photography as their base. They are so different but they talk to each other."

Xu offered to explain the work of Chu, who resides in Hangzhou, China, and does not speak English. Chu has degrees in oil painting, new media and a PhD in calligraphy. "Calligraphy is very important in Chinese culture but it is very traditional," said Xu.

"Chu is much more progressive and does it in a very different way."



"Calligraphy New York-Searching," a 2018 diptych by Chu Chu, combines photography, ink silver and color on Xuan paper. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

This might be because the artist has first taken a photograph which is then overlaid with thousands of tiny calligraphic characters. In "City:Bergamo," the artist has captured the cityscape in dark gray at the bottom of the print. Above it, the characters rain down from the top of the canvas in long, vertical streaks. "Dream of the West Lake" is a diptych that consists of a photograph of the reflection of light on ripples of water and a corresponding print covered with very fine, light strokes of calligraphic characters. Xu said prints like this reference the passage of time and seasons, and that the ink paintings are the artist's response to these changes.



"Bamboo in the Wind," photography, Chinese ink and silver gold, calligraphy on paper by Chu Chu. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

There are numerous, large-scale prints of tree branches that might look like brush paintings from afar but are photographs of tree branches the artist found near her home. They are pleasing, light and delicate on their own, but when the viewer looks closely, it is apparent that the artist has added her own touch. In the shadow of the branches are almost miniscule characters that compose ancient Chinese poems.

Xu pointed out that Chu's technique is extremely slow and laborious and that she can only work for short durations because of the strain on her eyesight.

Also presented are the collages of Gail Skudera. While she also employs photography as her base, Skudera evokes the passage of time and obfuscation of memories through the use of weaving techniques. In order to do this, Skudera must first deconstruct the photograph by cutting it into thin strips to create a new work.

In an email interview, she described her process: "While weaving, some of the threads pass over the top of the photographic strips and others pass beneath them to form a matrix of intersecting lines. The woven matrix is basic to the language of weaving."

Skudera uses personal photographs of family and also appropriates images of famous artists and writers. "All are chosen based on my connection with the subject on a personal level or from having an emotional response to the photograph," she said.



In Gail Skudera's piece "Reverie," ghostly figures hover in the background, obscured by the weaving like the mists of time. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

Georgia O'Keeffe, who Skudera said is "particularly inspiring," is portrayed thanks to the iconic image taken in 1937 by Ansel Adams. Skudera has reproduced the image of the smiling O'Keeffe, cut it in half, and then woven mixed media elements over it. "Weaving creates patterns on the surface and below the surface as the cloth is constructed. I use pattern to evoke memory and I want the viewer to connect with their own personal histories and intuition."

In "Reverie," ghostly figures hover in the background, obscured by the weaving like the mists of time. Skudera noted that, "Reweaving a photograph both abstracts and restores attributes of the original image."



A portrait of artist Georgia O'Keeffe by Ansel Adams was the basis for Gail Skudera's piece "Georgia O'Keeffe, Shared Secrets." Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

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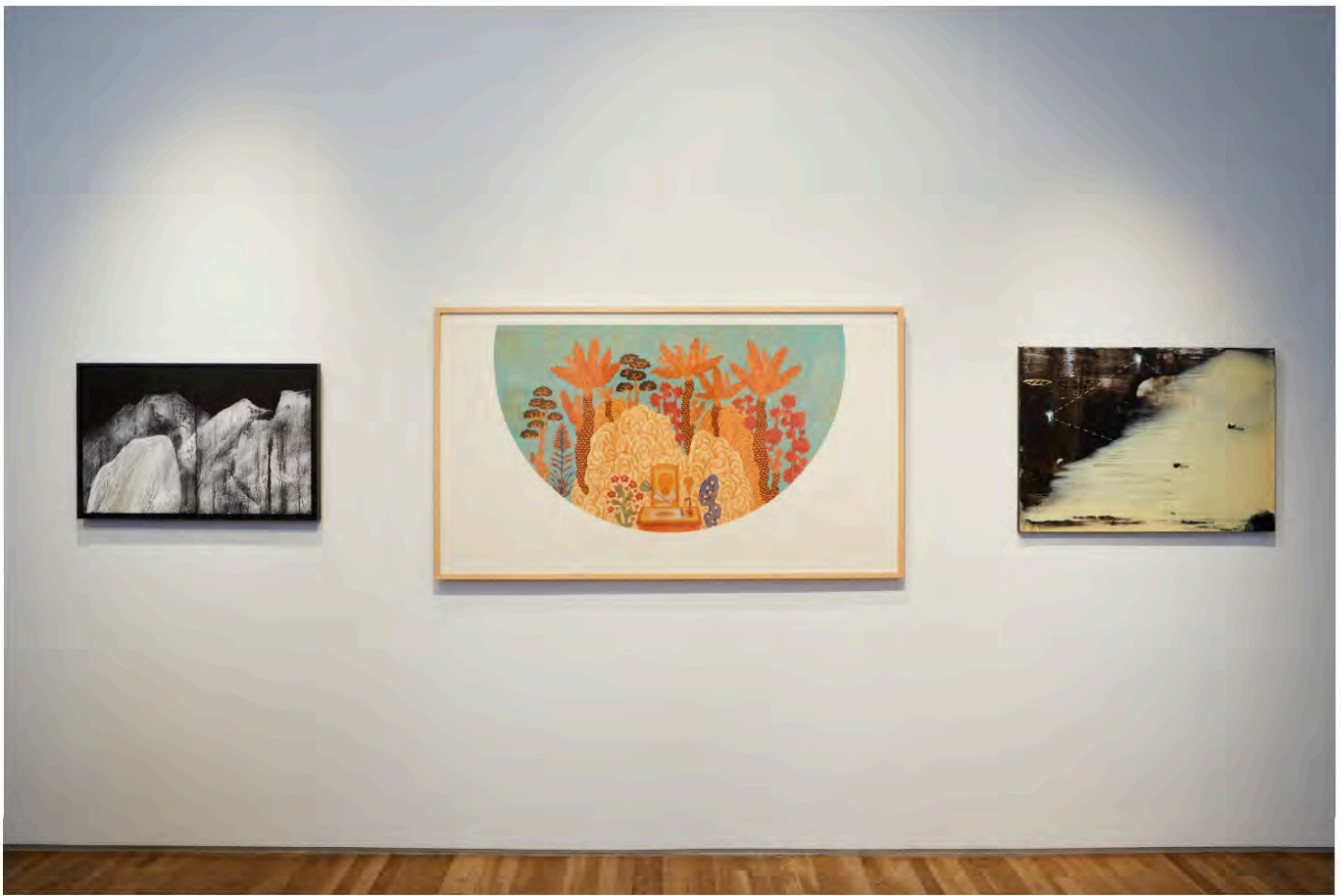
Some of the weaving is quite intricate, as in "Lady Slippers," and quite a few of them incorporate vintage-looking buttons into the warp. It is a very tactile effect that also references the idea of "women's work," a subject that is close to the artist's heart because "I am interested in telling their stories."

When asked if her art had commonalities with that of Chu, Skudera pointed out that both employ "fast and slow" methodologies. "The nature of photography as being a fast medium and calligraphy being a very slow process imbues her work with hidden elements." In her own work, weaving takes a great deal of time. "The process of bringing something forward from behind while leaving some elements hidden is very much in dialogue with Chu's work."



Some of Gail Skudera's pieces, such as "Lady Slippers" seen here, feature especially intricate weaving. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

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Qualia's rear space features a group show of work in a variety of media by Asian Pacific artists. The exhibition is a nod to APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), recently hosted by the city of San Francisco. Courtesy Qualia Contemporary Art.

In addition to the two artists in the main gallery, Xu has used the rear space for a group show of work by Asian Pacific artists. These works are done in a variety of media from painting to inkjet prints to daguerreotypes. The exhibition is a nod to APEC, recently hosted by the city of San Francisco.

Xu said that the gallery is programmed for the next year and, thanks to the new space, she hopes to branch into sculpture and more immersive installations. She is clearly in it for the long haul. "I think it takes 10 years to really establish a business."

The Edge of Days is on view through Dec. 12 at Qualia Gallery, 229 Hamilton Ave., Palo Alto. qualiacontemporaryart.com.

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