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## CATALOGUE OF WORKS

### Ruth Cho *Australian Knockoffs*

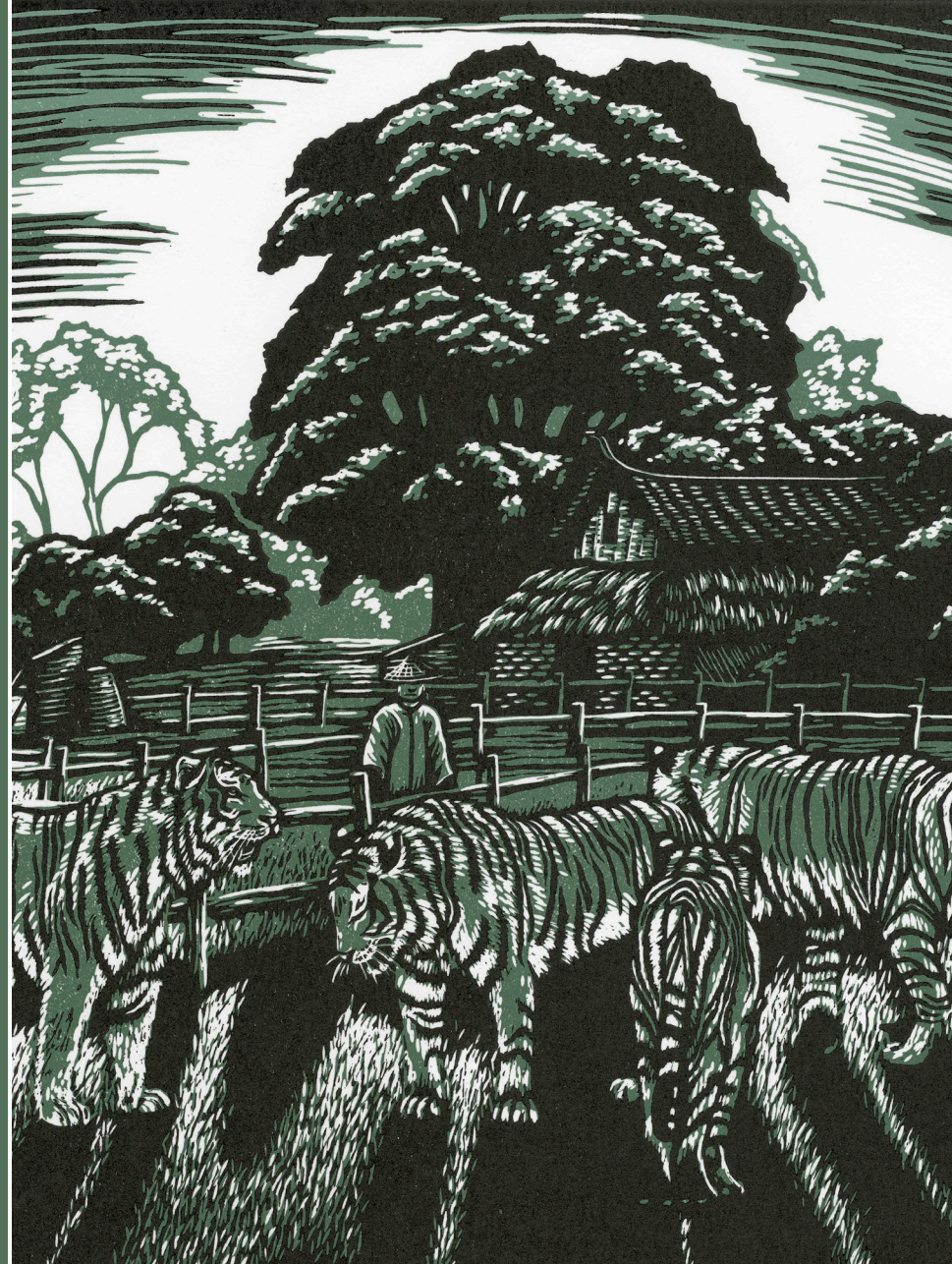
4 May – 4 June 2021

[ONLINE EXHIBITION]

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Feature Image: Ruth Cho, *Tiger King (after Elioth Gruner)*, 2021, Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 29.2cm x 44cm, Edition of 10.  
Image: Courtesy of the artist.



## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Ruth Cho's first online exhibition with Onespace Gallery, *Australian Knockoffs*, challenges the dominant Eurocentric representations in Australian art history, despite our longstanding cultural diversity. Cho appropriates very familiar compositions from iconic Australian art images - including *Down on His Luck* by Frederick McCubbin; *Spring Frost* by Elioth Gruner; *Shearing the Rams* by Tom Roberts and Charles Meere's *Australian Beach Pattern*. This online exhibition comprises a series of sparingly coloured linocut prints that question the exclusivity of predominantly white Australian identity but also evoking the stylistic language of traditional and modern Chinese woodcuts in order to create new hybrid compositions

**As catalogue writer Martha Liew suggests:** "*Australian Knockoffs* is a cheekily satiric interpretation of Australian art history with 'Asian characteristics' when it is read against the background of Australia's growing multiculturalism. While one may consider *Australian Knockoffs* as emphasising the artist's cultural identity and her early reflections on Australian art, the series is more concerned with questioning mainstream contemporary Australian art."

*Australian Knockoffs*, completed during the COVID-19 year of 2020, explores the potential to de-Westernise iconic images of Australian identity. Cho's online exhibition comprises a series of sparingly coloured linocut prints, which evoke the stylistic language of traditional and modern Chinese woodcuts to create new hybrid compositions. These relief prints utilise the aesthetic of Chinese woodcuts to create a visual overlay that convincingly recasts selected Australian art historical iconic compositions as potentially Chinese historical narratives, reminding Australians of our diverse past.

## Ruth Cho

*Australian Knockoffs*

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ruth Cho is an emerging artist and printmaker and born in 1998. Ruth currently lives on the Gold Coast, Queensland. Her mother is Chinese, and her father is Korean, and both migrated and settled in Australia in the 1980s.

Ruth graduated from the Queensland College of Art in 2018 with a major in Print Media, before returning shortly after to complete her Honours Degree in 2020. She utilises a variety of relief printing techniques, but linocut is used predominantly in her work. Her prints are heavily pictorial in style, relying on the graphic nature of the medium to convey her subject matter. She is influenced by modern Chinese woodcut prints of the 1930s and attempts to evoke the visual qualities and techniques of these prints. Throughout her undergraduate degree, she addressed the duality of her cultural identity through combining Australian and East-Asian imagery to create hybridised images.

More recently the focus of her art practice has shifted to questioning Eurocentric representations in Australian images that continue to uphold a predominantly white national Australian identity. She reinterprets these images to reflect the diversity of Australia's past and present. Animals play a dominant role in her works as she also uses them to symbolise Western domination and convey how attitudes towards animals can be easily transferred towards foreigners.

In her most recent series, *Australian Knockoffs*, Cho appropriates some very familiar compositions of iconic Australian art images - including such works as *Down on His Luck* by Frederick McCubbin; *Spring Frost* by Elioth Gruner; *Shearing the Rams* by Tom Roberts and Charles Meere's *Australian Beach Pattern* - to question the exclusivity of Australian identity as predominantly white. This series which 'explores the potential to de-Westernise iconic images of Australian identity', evokes the stylistic language of modern Chinese woodcuts to create new hybrid compositions, which remind Australians that we have a diverse past.



Photo: Jonathan Tse. Courtesy of the artist.

## ESSAY

On one level, Ruth Cho's print series, *Australian Knockoffs*, appears to relate to her cultural identity as an Asian Australian artist. This exquisite body of work reinterprets and reconfigures culturally significant Australian works of art, repopulating them with Asian immigrants and exotic animals. However, there is another layer to reading Cho's work. Through her use of linocut, this talented emerging artist presents us with an opportunity to understand the medium's cultural significance. For Cho, linocut is not just a tool for artistic expression but also an extension of her ideological beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Born to a Korean father and Chinese mother in Australia, Cho grew up in a culturally diverse family. Her mother, who migrated to Australia as a result of the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, has been a strong influence in Cho's work. Cho recalls her mother sharing her early life stories in China and Australia with her from a young age. This exposure to the Chinese way of life and culture has played a vital part in the development of Cho's work.

In 2018, Cho began to examine her own cultural identity using printmaking. The decision to use linocut was intentional, as the artist considers the medium culturally connected to her roots and beliefs. Historically, discourses regarding the practice of printmaking are mostly confined to the West<sup>2</sup>. However, woodcut printing has a much longer history. The technique originated in China during the Han Dynasty (220 BCE), and it was generally used for printing scriptures, folklore, history and cultural events in Ancient China. The medium regained its popularity in China when it was used by progressive Chinese during the Republic of China period (1912–1949), and later, by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (1949–1976).

While woodcut printing has a long history in China, linocut was only introduced during the mid-20th century as part of the New Woodcut Movement led by Chinese intellectual and poet Lu Xun from 1930. This movement is distinct from traditional forms of woodcut printing: it utilises Western techniques and printing styles and is ideologically driven. It sought to send powerful and realistic imageries to deliver messages to the masses and to focus on their time's social ills, with its primary objective being to instigate social and political change.

In this respect, woodcuts and linocuts produced in the mid-20th century are symbolically associated with the notion of 'resistance' and 'revolution'. They also seek to question existing social and cultural orders. When they are understood in this historical-cultural context, the artist's provocation on the question of her cultural identity and the challenges that she faces in navigating between three cultures—Chinese, Korean and Australian—accentuate the complexity of the world that she lives in. For example, Cho is considered a rebel by her parents for choosing art as her profession (as her siblings are doctors and lawyers).

In Cho's *Year of the Pest* series (2018), the artist sought to develop a hybrid culture narrative by juxtaposing Australian and Chinese native animals using different styles and techniques (specifically, Western engraving and traditional Chinese papercutting). As shown in *Year of the Asian Carp* and *Year of the Rat*, these imageries are technically superb and conceptually explorative in nature.

Australian and Chinese cultural icons continued to be a major theme in Cho's work in 2019, when the artist began to incorporate imagery of Chinese historical figures and workers and Australian native animals in *Cultural Confucianism* (2019)

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and *Ploughing Tiger* (2019). While these images show the artist was still refining her technical skills, and creative expression, they also show a significant shift in subject matter where images of carps, water buffalos and horses are replaced by tigers, thylacine and koala, each carrying its own symbolic meaning. A 'story' behind each linocut was also starting to take shape.

Cho's latest work, *Australian Knockoffs* (2020), is considered a significant milestone in her work conceptually, artistically and technically. Here, Cho appropriates iconic Australian paintings, incorporating Chinese imagery into them. For example, in *Tiger King*, while the overall composition and background of the work are almost identical to that of Elioth Gruner's *Spring Frost* (1919), the artist replaces the farmhand with a Chinese immigrant and a herd of cattle with a pride of tigers<sup>3</sup>. The reinterpretation of iconic Australian artworks, such as *Shearing the Rams* and *Down on His Luck*, and the reconfiguration of their subject matter references Cho's complex cultural identity. She has also introduced well-defined, ink brush stroke lines in the sky that are typically used in Chinese propaganda art.<sup>4</sup> The maturity of this body of work is evident by the artist's choice of subject matter (*Bailed up on the Way to Ballarat*<sup>5</sup>) and her commentary on social issues, such as her observation of Chinese immigrants (*Australian Beach History*<sup>6</sup>). In terms of technique and style, the artist has shown considerable advancement.

*Australian Knockoffs* is a series of cheeky takes on iconic Australian paintings with 'Asian characteristics' when it is read against the background of Australia's growing multiculturalism. While one may consider *Australian Knockoffs* as emphasising the artist's cultural identity and her early reflections on Australian art, the series

is more concerned with questioning mainstream contemporary Australian art. Is Australian art provincial or part of a globalised contemporaneity? The latter seems more logical, given our close geographical and political connection in the Asia Pacific region is growing, and our Asian population is expanding. Many major Australian art institutions have also been supporting Asian artists since the early 1990s, and artists such as Lindy Lee, Ah Xian, Guan Wei and William Yang have achieved phenomenal success both at home and abroad. Emerging Asian Australian artist Ruth Cho's journey has just begun.

## Martha Liew

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1 Cho considers printmaking to be one of the most democratic and publicly accessible artforms. Historically, this artform is widely used by revolutionaries in Russia, Europe, China and Mexico.

2 Ann Kirker, "Printmaking as an Expanding Field of Contemporary Art Practice: A Case Study of Japan, Australia and Thailand," PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2009, 7.

3 Cho appropriates several iconic Australian works of art, including Tom Roberts's *Shearing the Rams* and *Bailed Up*, and Frederick McCubbin's *Down on His Luck*.

4 This is not to say that Cho is supportive of the totalitarian regime or challenging Australian art historical canon. Her use of propaganda art style could be interpreted in many ways: to reflect the image of 'revolutionary spirits' in an iconic Australian painting or to suggest a new chapter in contemporary Australian art.

5 In *Bailed up on the Way to Ballarat*, the artist replaces the horsemen with Chinese immigrants who arrived in Victoria during the gold rush in the 18th century.

6 *Australian Beach History* depicts Chinese immigrants' arrival on Australian shores during different periods (e.g., during the 1800s, 1989, and today).

## WORKS IN THE SERIES



Ruth Cho

*Shearing the Tigers (after Tom Roberts), 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 21cm x 30cm, Edition of 10

\$750

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.



Ruth Cho

*Australian Beach History (after Charles Meere), 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 29.2cm x 37cm, Edition of 10

\$750

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

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**Ruth Cho**

*The race that stops the nation, 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 22.2cm x 44cm, Edition of 10

**\$750**

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.



**Ruth Cho**

*Why the yellow face? (after Frederick McCubbin), 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 23cm x 30cm, Edition of 10

**\$750**

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

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**Ruth Cho**

*Tiger King (after Elioth Gruner), 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 29.2cm x 44cm, Edition of 10

**\$750**

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.



**Ruth Cho**

*Bailed Up on the way to Ballarat (after Tom Roberts), 2021*

Multi-coloured linocut print on paper, 29.2cm x 44cm, Edition of 10

**\$750**

Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.



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