

A decorative chandelier with green, beaded branches and lit candles. The chandelier features several green, beaded branches that curve and loop. Each branch is adorned with small, circular, beaded details. Two lit candles are visible, one in the foreground and one in the background. The candles are dark blue or black with a warm, glowing flame. The chandelier is set against a dark, almost black background. The overall aesthetic is elegant and classic.

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Gjekë MARINAJ

## An interview with Shin Yu Pai

A former Dallas resident, Shin Yu Pai grew up in the Inland Empire of Southern California and has lived and worked in Boston, Madrid, Boulder, Chicago, Dallas, Taipei, and Seattle. She is an award-winning oral historian, photographer, and editor with a long history of working in the nonprofit, museum, and education industries. She is the author of seven books of poetry, including most recently *Hybrid Land* (Filter Press, 2011), *Adamantine* (White Pine, 2010), *Haiku Not Bombs* (Brooklyn Artists Alliance, 2008), and her poems have been published throughout the U.S., Japan, China, Taiwan, The United Kingdom, and Canada. Since 2010, she has been a member of the Maconda Writers Workshop. She has completed residencies at the MacDowell Colony, the Ragdale Foundation, Soul Mountain, Taipei Artist Village, the Centrum Foundation and the Seattle Art Museum. She is former assistant curator for the Withliff Collections at Texas State University-San Marcos and currently serves as managing director of the Hendrix-Murphy Foundation Programs in Literature & Language.



Photo courtesy of Daniel Carilo

**Gjekë Marinaj:** Many of your poems, sometime directly and at times indirectly, leave the reader under the impression that Dallas is near to your heart. What is your relationship to place, with respect to the time that you spent living in Dallas, and Texas at large?

**Shin Yu Pal:** I first moved to Dallas in 2000, after finishing my MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. At the time, I had been thinking of leaving Chicago to move to Taiwan to teach English. I went down to Texas for a job interview at the Dallas Museum of Art and then drove cross-country back to California intending to stay with my parents until my plans became clear. Shortly before arriving at my parents' house in Riverside, I got a phone call offering me a job in the Education Department at the DMA. At the time, the man I was dating (who I would eventually marry) asked me to move to Dallas. So I worked for a year as the docent manager and spent long hours in the galleries around the museum's collections. During that time, I started to write about the works of art around me, paintings by UTD professor John Pomara, pollen and milk sculptures by the artist Wolfgang Laib, Felix Gonzales-Torres' candy piles... the artists themselves and curators helped me to see those work in deeper contexts and the poems that I began to produce engaged in dialogues with these artworks about the process of art and poem-making. Many of these poems formed the core of my first full-length collection *Equivalence* (La Alameda, 2003).

When I left the DMA, I maintained close relationships with many of the staff educators and was invited back on different occasions to take part in the museum's public and educational programming. This included teaching writing workshops in the galleries, giving readings of my work, completing a poetic commission on the work of Alexander Calder, and producing a new poem on a lobster box tableau ("Pantry Ballet") by Joseph Cornell to commemorate a major gift of contemporary art to the DMA. The poem was performed for the public as part of their Generation M series.

I left Dallas in 2001 to return to Boston when my partner was accepted into an acupuncture and Chinese medicine program at the New England School of

Acupuncture. We moved back in 2004, when I was offered a spot in the UT Dallas Southside on Lamar program. We lived in Dallas from 2004-2007, and during that time, I got very involved with Bob Trammell's organization, WordSpace. First as a board member, and when Bob passed away of cancer in 2006, as their programming director. With WordSpace, I produced several seasons of programming and developed partnerships with Dallas-area venues that included the Trammel Crow Collection of Asian Art and the Women's Museum of Dallas. I worked with author Ben Fountain as my board president and with a dynamic and creative board that was deeply supportive of my creative life. Through connecting with one of WordSpace's board members, I was invited to submit my work to the Dallas Poetry-in-Motion program, sponsored by the Poetry Society of America, which was selected for display in the Dallas Area Rapid Transit system.

We left Texas and lived in Seattle from 2007-2009. When I finished my Museology program at the University of Washington in '09, I was offered a position as a curator for the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University-San Marcos, a repository dedicated to literary archives and photographic collections. I expanded the Collection's poetry holdings by hundreds of unique small press items and successfully acquired the archives of Santa Fe poet and small press publisher Miriam Sagan, in addition to working on photography and general literary acquisitions. I also helped to develop the Collections' social media plan and organized an evaluation and review of the Collections by the American Association of Museums.

**GM:** Residency programs can be essential in the professional development of an artist. Do you feel like you got an extra push toward your creative goals at the Southside on Lamar Residency program? Who were some of the artists who participated in the program? What was the relationship between the program and UT Dallas?

**SYP:** At the time that I was involved with the Southside program, it was still very new and under development. Rick Bretell directed the program with assistance from a coordinator, and the partnership between UTD and Jack Matthews, the real estate developer, seemed to be evolving. Ultimately, the Southside program was closed and relocated and revived under new leadership. Some of the artists that were in the program with me included local photographer Misty Keasler, artist Brian Fridge, and a handful of others – a ceramic artist, painters, etc. UTD produced a small catalog of the artists in the program called *Conspicuous Production* and Quin Matthews shot a short film about the artists involved with Southside.

The residency provided me with free rent and studio space for over a year, during which time I wrote, published new work, developed new projects, and also had my first taste of academic teaching. Jack Myers at Southern Methodist University asked me to teach his poetry writing class and later, the University of Texas at Dallas invited me to lead a graduate-level creative writing workshop.

**GM:** You have composed some of the most powerful ekphrastic poems that I have ever read. They portray you as a poet who has a deeply engaged response to visual art. Am I correct to assume that the category of true art exists for you?

**SYP:** I'm not sure what "true art" means. I think there is something like "true experience." And that all great works of art and all great poems get at the truth of a lived, embodied experience. Alfred Stieglitz spoke of it when describing his photographs of the sky – he called them *Equivalents*, because they were to him, to look upon them, a comparable experience of the living sky.

**GM:** I was first drawn to the poems from your *Unnecessary Roughness* series which appear in *Sightings: Selected Works*. Can you please talk about the visuality and physicality of that poem series?

**SYP:** I started writing the Unnecessary Roughness series inspired by conversations with photographer Ferenc Suto, who explores images of masculinity and subtle violence in his black-and-white images of models posed in vintage sports gear. Ferenc derived some of his own inspiration for the series from looking at athletic manuals and thinking about some of the violent penalty language used in various sports, ranging from football to roller derby. I began to think of the poem on the page as a kind of dynamic playing field or arena where violent acts could be enacted through language, such as in my pieces on dodgeball and four square.

**GM:** After reading your books, I've come to wonder if you are still in search of your true poetic identity. With each new book, you seem to bring along a new poetic style including free verse, ekphrasis, haiku and semiotic-based texts. Can you please describe your ongoing quest for new creative expression?

**SYP:** Artists evolve and change over the span of a professional career. A person that starts out as a painter may later turn to three-dimensional sculptural-based works. I see this in the work of my colleagues, and in the work of my mother, a visual artist who in her life has worked with ceramics, watercolor, pastels, collage, and oils. A project finds its own form. My collaborative work spans working with dance companies to letterpress printers. Currently, I'm working more with archival research and oral history in my line of inquiry. I recently made a poem video for Rabbit Light Movies.

**GM:** You've worked on several hand-bound, limited-edition artist book projects, from *The Love Hotel Poems and Works on Paper*, to more recently *Hybrid Land*. How did *Hybrid Land* evolve as a project?

**SYP:** Brooklyn Artists Alliance paired me up with Sara Parkel of Filter Press to produce *Haiku Not Bombs* in 2008. Shortly after the collection was published, Sara moved to Alabama to attend the U of A book arts program. We kept in touch and I pitched a broadside

project (Bamiyan) to her that we produced together, continuing our creative collaboration. When she needed text for her graduate thesis project, she asked me if I might like to create a specific text related to agriculture, plants, and food. I created a 3-part text that reflected upon my memories of food and gardening with my parents and played with the notion too of the “recall” of “food” products by big agribusiness.

**GM:** Response poems like “A Day Without an Immigrant, Dallas, Texas” seem to play prominently in your book *Adamantine*. What role do news stories and storytelling play in your most recent collection *Adamantine*?

**SYP:** *Adamantine* does have several poems that draw from news stories – from labor strikes in Dallas to the tragic death of James Kim and the Virginia Tech shooting to lighter stories like Olympian Toby Dawson finding his birth father and the marriage of the tallest man in the world. I’m very interested in stories and storytelling –the collection opens with “This is Not My Story” – which shares an intimate story about two lovers with very divergent life experiences. I’m interested in the human story, the personal narratives that are different from our individual field of experience but that are ultimately close to the stories of our own hearts. The stories become a vehicle for connection and the evocation of compassionate response.

**GM:** Do you believe that, if translated into other languages, your poetry can help to change the way a culture thinks about the world?

**SYP:** My poems have many pop culture references and draw from many different aesthetic traditions and diverse interests (fine art, advertising and design, sports culture, Buddhism, journalism, etc.) – there would be many images and symbols to unpack in translating my work for a reader who might not have these cultural reference points. My aspirations are on a small scale. If I reach one or two ideal readers and open up their way of seeing the world through my eyes, which in turn, may lead them to reflect upon

their own perspectives, as I think you, yourself, have been engaged by some of my work – that is enough.

**GM:** True. Nearly a decade ago, our introduction to each other came about directly through poetry. But now that you've gotten me addicted to your work, can you talk briefly about your current projects?

**SYP:** I'm currently working with two geographers at the University of Central Arkansas to develop a multimedia mapping-related project on my migration patterns and how place has impacted my poetry and manifested itself in my creative expression. I hope the outcome of that project will be an interactive online map that we may also translate into print medium.

As perhaps an outgrowth of my interest in human stories, I've been working on a children's picture book manuscript related to the life of Chinese-American racecar driver Al Young. I've been interested for a long time in multicultural children's literature – particularly many of the innovative and beautiful picture books that have been produced by gifted poets like Jonah Winter and Marilyn Nelson, who explore real-life stories of often overlooked historical individuals.

I'm also embarking on a poetic research project on Taiwanese cultural memory and plan to conduct oral history interviews with Taiwanese elders and immigrants who lived during the same era as my parents. I hope to create a poetic response to these stories and to also explore my own relationship to Taiwan over the last two decades – my efforts to understand where my family comes from and to clarify and re-contextualize my own unique relationship to this cultural history.