

## PHOTOGRAPHIC PASSWORDS

By May Lee-Yang

Photographer Pao Houa Her's work is obsessed with plants—whether they sprout from the earth or are plastic imitations of life. She isn't the only person. Growing up, nearly every Hmong household I knew had a backyard plot of dirt-turned-garden, a collection of potted plants sitting underneath the window that had the most sunlight, or vases of fluorescent-colored flowers—the tackier, the better.

As someone who cannot keep plants alive (I have been known to kill cactus), I, too, am curious about the older generation's obsession with plastic flowers. Historically, we plant things that can be eaten. The few times my mother had flowers in her garden, they were for medicinal purposes. What does it say, then, that so many Hmong women grow plastic flowers?

This is partly about social elevation. To have flowers that exist as nothing but decoration: that is a luxury. That is an American dream. But, of course, we're Hmong so we can't escape the fear—let's call it trauma—of losing. Plastic flowers cannot die or, at the very least, they will last longer. The petals will not wilt. The colors will not fade.

But this is also about joy. Who doesn't want color and reminders of life inside their home?

Pao Houa Her's work is also obsessed with visibility. There are parts of us that we reveal to the public world: egg rolls, farmers markets, sewing *paj ntaub*. Then there are parts that live off-the-record: second wives, growing marijuana, mixing rice with 7 Up. This is *not* the underbelly of the Hmong world. It is the more private side of our existence, which we keep on the down-low in the same way I naturally switch to Hmong when talking trash about Meka people at Costco. We are rebellious, but our survival instincts remind our bodies how much we can push boundaries. For me, that isn't very far.

Her's work is at once subtle and in-your-face. You see a tree, but it overlooks a field of marijuana. You see poppies in a field, but they are a callback to our history of growing drugs for the French. The images are, in essence, passwords into the private Hmong world. If you pay attention, maybe they will unlock a story or a memory for you.