



SPECIAL MENTION ART:  
 "DON'T SWIM ON AN EMPTY STOMACH" BY ANTHONY LE

Reimagining Democracy,  
 Reimagining Ourselves  
 by Jennie E. Park

Anthony Le also addresses dual and dueling political identities in **"Don't Swim on an Empty Stomach"**, inspired by a New York Times article describing opposing political views held by a father and son living in Hong Kong. While the father had fled mainland China for Hong Kong in the 1970s due to the poverty and political persecution he and his family experienced under Mao Zedong, he acknowledged a sense of nostalgia and loyalty toward the mainland after witnessing its rapid economic development. While he himself had been among the "freedom swimmers" who escaped to Hong Kong, he, five decades later, implored his own son not to protest laws increasing mainland China's power over Hong Kong.

"I was drawn to the paradox of the father condemning his son's protesting because the father himself took such drastic steps as a 'freedom swimmer,'" Le, who identifies as first-generation Vietnamese American, remarked. "I thought about this paradox in naming this piece, because at first glance it seems contradictory and a twist on, 'wait an hour after eating before swimming.' This friction reminded me of my own interactions with my family. We occasionally have conflicting values but still love each other and still want the best for each other." As Asian parents tend to chronically urge their children to eat, Le's title on one hand expresses this love and concern, while on the other urges the recipient of the advice to swim with a full stomach. Is foregoing eating more or less risky than swimming right after eating? The Neutral provides a space for affirming both possibilities, or third, fourth and fifth possibilities arising from entirely different questions that further metaphorically destabilize conceptions of ethnicity, loyalty and freedom. "I don't want to guess at what the father [in the painting] is thinking exactly, but I like to pose questions in my paintings," Le stated.

Interwoven in this dream-like scene are generations of people and art, as well as Le's personal history. "The food encapsulates a memorable meal I had in Hong Kong," Le explained. "For the street scene of the painting, I wanted to include references to Hong Kong's street art. I saw Eddie Colla's 'I have a name, but it doesn't matter' wheatpaste there and referenced it. I also wanted to highlight the generational difference between the father and son, so I referenced Warhol's Mao on the right side and then did a portrait of Xi Jinping in a similar style on the left." Through repeating colors, Le further creates circular relays among his cultural and political references, the painted subjects and himself; despite his bright, clearly delineated colors, an opacity occludes who, or what ethnicities, the subjects are, or where he personally stands. Does Le identify with the son whose face we cannot see, the father whose expression we cannot decode, neither or both? The question of identity seems less pertinent than the web of cultural and generational relays created, highlighted by Le's depiction of Xi Jinping, which reflects his personal take on Warhol's personal take on Mao's portrait; this disorienting and time-distorting aesthetic recursion sets a tone for the ironic relationship between the depicted father and son. The engaging energy of this piece thus lies in its multiple idiosyncratic possibilities and directions, rather than in a predictable set of political questions or agendas.