

The Iconic Pink Donut Box: An Analysis of Memory and Identity Amongst Cambodian Refugees in California

Authors : Basmah Arshad

Abstract : In the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide, many refugees resettled in America. They carved out a distinctively Cambodian-American space in California with donut shops, establishing a tight-knit community that worked to achieve 'the American dream'. Urged by traumatic memories of the genocide and American society directly encouraging (if not demanding) cultural assimilation, these refugees and successive generations continuously worked to re-identify themselves as Americans. Artist Phung Huynh grew up in this context of family-owned donut shops and the frantic scramble for stability and security. It is this community that she depicts in her artwork series from the late 2010s, 'Khmerican: Drawing on Pink Donut Boxes'. Huynh's artwork challenges dominant Western narratives about the Cambodian genocide by pushing forward images of resilience, resistance, and joy, while also allowing for a discussion about issues of assimilation, identity, and nostalgia in the Cambodian-American community. It also provokes deeply relevant questions about how refugees and immigrants deliberately appropriate elements of the Americana (eg, donuts) to assimilate and re-fashion their identity as a tactic for financial stability and social survival.

Keywords : Cambodian diaspora, cultural identity, assimilation, food, artwork

Conference Title : ICFHC 2024 : International Conference on Food History and Culture

Conference Location : Manila, Philippines

Conference Dates : February 19-20, 2024