

# YEAY YAI:

## *An ode to grandmothers*

The Gallery at City Hall

25 Dorrance Street, Providence, Rhode Island

October 17, 2024 – January 13, 2024

Opening Reception October 17, 2024 from 4:30–7:30 PM

Artist Talk Saturday December 5, 6-8pm

### **Curatorial Statement**

Kannetha Brown and Tarik Bartel explore memory and resilience through photographs of their Southeast Asian grandmothers and their homes. Kannetha's Cambodian grandmother ('yeay'), and Tarik's Thai grandmother ('yai'), share similar journeys as women who navigated the complexities of separation, abuse, and the search for identity amidst displacement following the Vietnam War and the Cambodian Genocide. Together, they weave vibrant histories of love and survival, revealing how the echoes of their grandmothers resonate today.

This project was made possible in part through support from the Interlace Grant Fund, a regrantee partner of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

## Individual Statements

**KB:** In the 1980s, following the Khmer Rouge Genocide, my grandma Simone and my mother Sara were living in separate refugee camps in Thailand—unaware the other was living. After my grandma was sponsored to live in Upstate New York, she heard from extended family that my mom survived, and arranged for them to be reunited.

Once in America, my mother couldn't recognize my grandma at the airport, having been separated since she was five-years-old. While my mom went through school, they navigated a new life and culture as familial strangers. Their relationship eventually paused when my mom refused a traditional arranged marriage, running away to Rhode Island the night before her wedding. The next day, my grandma and my American step-grandfather were married instead.

After three years, their relationship healed when my mom got engaged to my American father. To this day, my grandma lives in Upstate New York with my step-grandpa, who I recently learned is abusive towards her. Despite being disowned by his family, he refuses to move with her to Rhode Island and let her be with my mom. Thus, their home has become a palpable cage, stale from the air of old age, and mental and physical illness. This summer, I visited my grandma for the first time since I was fourteen—observing her, the home, and her use of gardening as an escape.

**TB:** In this series, I honor the legacy of my grandmother, Somchit Pinudom Vuntangboon, who was born in 1941 in Bangkok, Thailand, and left her homeland in 1981 to escape an abusive arranged marriage. Her journey reflects a lineage of resilience—women in my family who have sought refuge and reinvention amidst cycles of hardship. Each image captures a moment of stillness, taken in December 2023, just six months before my yai's passing. These photographs, framed by the familiar warmth and textures of her trailer home in Flint, Texas, evoke both intimacy and distance.

Through my mother's stories of self-reliance and my grandmother's own recollections of running from her past, I explore the painful yet profound connections between our experiences. This series invites reflection on the legacies of abuse and the patterns of seeking solace in the arms of white men who would continue to perpetuate harm. My work aims to reclaim and understand the narratives that bind us, acknowledging the weight of silence and the power of ancestral voices.

The images serve not just as memories, but as a means of communion. Many adorn my altar now, accompanied by incense, marigolds, and a Buddha statue passed down through five generations of matriarchs in my family. Here, I engage in a dialogue with my yai, discovering that her spirit resonates more profoundly in her absence than it ever did in life. This work has helped me realize the complexity of our stories, revealing both what is lost and what can be reclaimed through connection to spirit and lineage.

How long have I run and fled and raised myself, only to realize my story is the same as my mother's, and her mother's, too? In these photographs, I grapple with the shared threads of our histories, seeking understanding and healing in the delicate interplay of memory, grief, and love.

## Artist Bios

### Kannetha Brown

Kannetha Brown is a Cambodian-American, first-generation descendant of survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime, a genocide that forced her mother and grandmother to flee to America as refugees. Her photographs explore family heritage, generational trauma and healing through a contemporary lens. Her analog practice reclaims and re-contextualizes the Khmer Rouge's use of film photography to document their victims. She has exhibited at Brown University and Bryant University. Her work has been funded by the Providence Department of Art, Culture and Tourism and the Interlace Fund, and has been published in *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. She earned her BFA in Photography from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

**Website:** [www.kannethabrown.com](http://www.kannethabrown.com)

**Instagram:** @kannetha.brown

---

### Tarik Bartel

Tarik Vuntangboon Bartel (they/them) is a Thai-American artist whose work explores embodiment and liberation in relationship to constructions of queerness, diaspora, and community. Bartel is a self taught photographer, an award-winning documentary filmmaker, and a spoken word poet. Their photography seeks to engage and disrupt conceptions of identity, culture, and family. Bartel has worked as a teaching artist, youth worker, and cultural organizer since 2014. Their work has been exhibited at the International Center of Photography in New York, Pao Arts Center, Spaceus, Trustman Gallery, the walls of friends' homes, in empty lots in Chinatown, on brick walls and giant wood blocks, in books, bookstores, and on dinner plates.

**Website:** [www.tarikvbartel.com](http://www.tarikvbartel.com)

**Instagram:** @tarikbartel