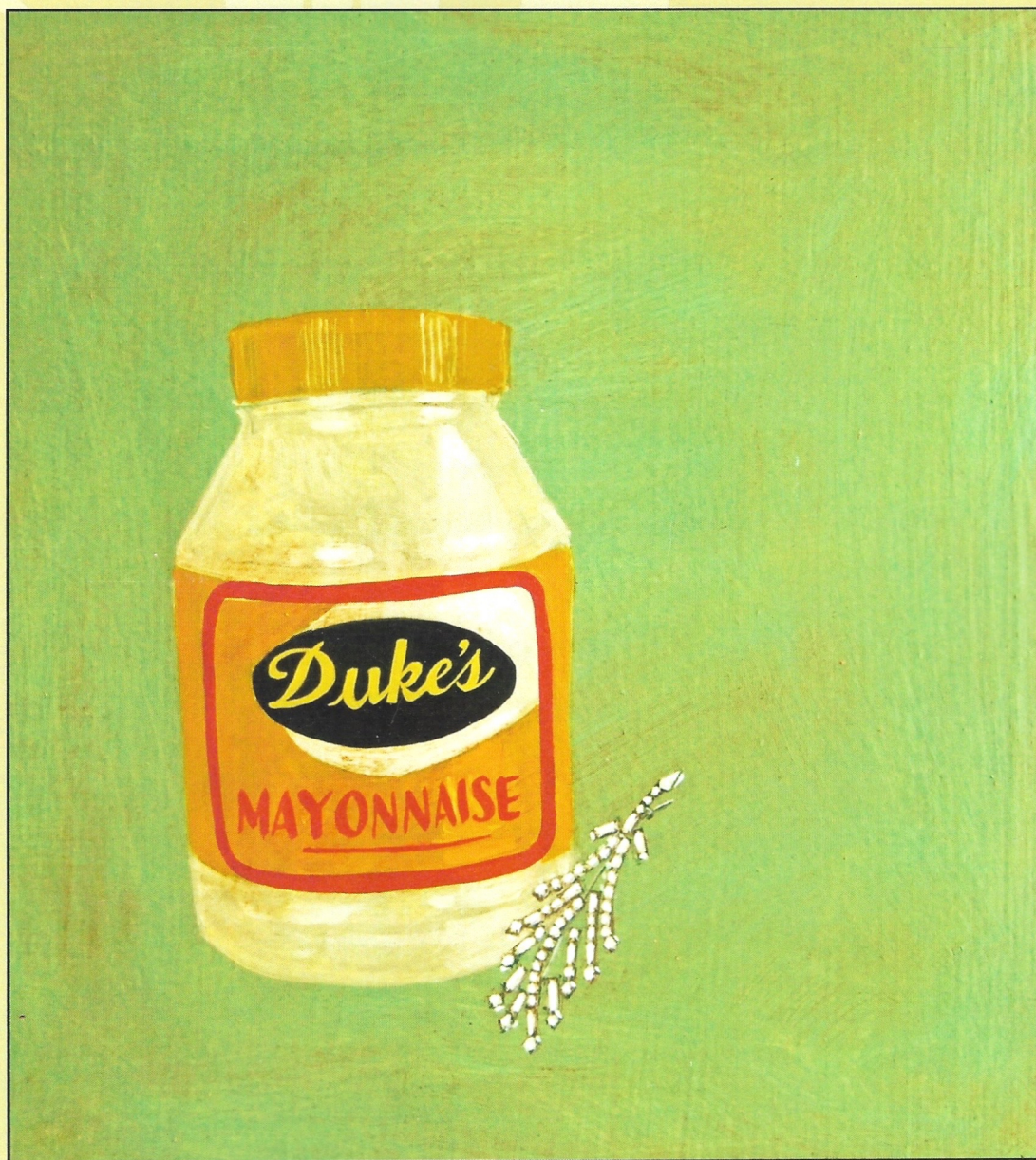


The Southern Quarterly

A Journal of Arts & Letters
in the South



Special Issue: Foodways in the South

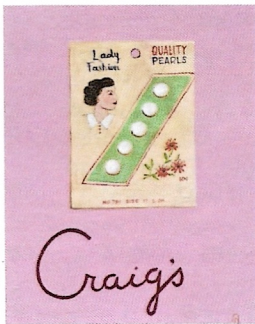
Volume 56

Fall 2018

Number 1

MY HOUSTON: Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History

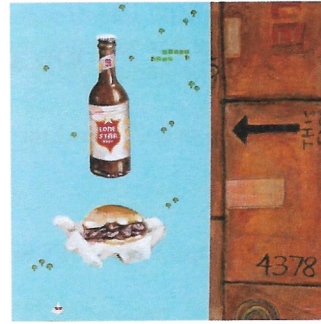
AMY C. EVANS



CRAIG'S Painting
2017



CRAIG'S Photograph 1966



POOR MAN'S COUNTRY
CLUB Painting 2017

A toy store sat next to an X-rated movie theater. Neighborhood kids played arcade games in the back of a beer joint while ladies shopped for hats and gloves down the street. A family-owned restaurant served Chinese spareribs next door to another family-owned business: a bakery beloved for its birthday cakes and petit fours. These were the three or so square blocks where my friends and I spent many hours—and lots of quarters—growing up. It was the early 1980s, and this was The Village—our Village.

Today, my old stomping ground is better known as The Rice Village, partly because of the area's proximity to Rice University but, more and more, it's a reflection of the college's expanding real estate portfolio. My old Village is a thing of the past. The ragtag mom-and-pop stores are all but gone. In their place is what amounts to a high-end outdoor shopping mall filled with national chains: Banana Republic anchors a fancy strip where the

X-rated movie theater used to be; the hats-and-gloves boutique is now an Urban Outfitters; and a branch of Compass Bank has taken over the corner where adults drank Lone Star longnecks and I tried to get the high score in Ms. Pac-Man.

As The Village began to change, so did I. Friends got their driver's licenses, and we went in search of adventures beyond the neighborhood. We chose drive-thrus over Chinese spareribs. Arcade games disappeared in favor of Atari consoles connected to home televisions. I left for art school.

Some years later, I found myself in Mississippi, working as an oral historian, a job that kept me on the road, traveling the American South to collect interviews documenting the region's history and culture through the lens of food. I spent years visiting communities, talking to people, listening to stories about the way things used to be.

In 2014, I moved back to Houston and arrived in my hometown with a new perspective, my eyes fixed upon my own past and the way things used to be and, of course, the restaurants that sustained me. I remembered enjoying those Chinese spareribs at the Swan Den with my dad. Looking forward to my annual birthday cake from Moeller's Bakery. And later, in my twenties, having a few cold ones at the Aquarium Lounge after a long night of waiting tables.

I decided to start work on a group of paintings to document some of these places from my past—an effort to memorialize my youth perhaps, but also an important, albeit personal, collection of stories from my hometown that I fear might be on the verge of being forgotten. To borrow a phrase from the late Ethel Wright Mohammed, famed Mississippi Delta embroidery artist, I began creating memory pictures. It was while making these first few paintings, digging for information to galvanize my visual memories, that I got lost in many an internet rabbit hole, realizing that what I had before me was the beginning of what could be a full-fledged documentary project.

For years my foodways fieldwork influenced my paintings. Now, my paintings were inspiring new fieldwork.

As a first step towards establishing my own sort of creative archive, I included the information associated with each business in the titles of the paintings: names of the proprietors, years in operation, physical address, as well as mention of what stands in its place today.

I continued making paintings and then, in 2017, I started conducting oral history interviews. Many original owners had long since passed, so I went in search of anyone who was in any way associated with the places depicted in my paintings: relatives and regular customers, employees and friends. To date, the project includes twenty-three paintings and five oral history interviews.

These are just a few of the stories from My Houston.

The Sushi King Of Houston

Unlike the franchise Oriental steakhouses, Tokyo Gardens serves a variety of authentic Japanese dishes. Sashimi—raw thin-sliced red snapper, octopus, and abalone—is absolutely fresh. For the less adventurous, shabu shabu is like an Oriental fondue. Several seating arrangements can accommodate the agile and arthritic. (“Around the State: Tokyo Gardens”).

Jutaro and Hisako Gondo opened Tokyo Gardens, Houston’s first tradi-



tional Japanese restaurant and the first sushi bar in Texas, in 1966. They flew in Japanese architects and craftsmen to create a stunning structure that featured lacquered beams, a koi pond, shoji screens, two dining rooms (one with floor seating, the other with chairs and tables), and a small stage. “Exotic” is a word that carries a lot of baggage today, but in my 1970s childhood, Tokyo Gardens was just that. Going there was like stepping into a dream: from the geisha hostess and traditional stage performances, to taking off your shoes before sitting on tatami mats, every one of my impressionable young senses was set ablaze. I

did also happen to enjoy their teriyaki chicken and tempura vegetables. At the end of every meal, the geisha hostess would give me a box of Botan rice candies.

By Houston standards, Tokyo Gardens had a long run: thirty-two years. When it closed in 1998, the land was sold, and the gorgeous handcrafted building was razed. Today, an Extended Stay America hotel claims the historic



In researching the history of Tokyo Gardens and the Gondo family, I quickly found out that, while Jutaro and Hisako have both passed away, a glimpse into their incredible story was revealed in a 2013 interview with their son, Glen: “‘My mother and father were interned during the war,’ Gondo remembers, ‘but they were American citizens, but they never complained to me about it, they wanted me to assimilate as an American and they spoke only English to me’” (“Houstonian Pioneers Japanese Cuisine in Texas”). Remarkably, Glen has managed to carry on the family business, albeit in a very different form. Today, Glen Gondo is the CEO of Tokyo Gardens Catering, a wholesale sushi outfit that supplies more than 100 HEB grocery stores with the style of food his parents introduced to Houston half a century ago. Mr. Gondo is celebrated as the Sushi King of Houston, a reflection of his business acumen, as well as his continued support and promotion of Japanese culture in Houston and beyond. In 2013, the consulate general of Japan recognized Mr. Gondo as a pillar of the Japanese-American community, awarding him the Imperial Decoration of the Order of the Rising Sun.

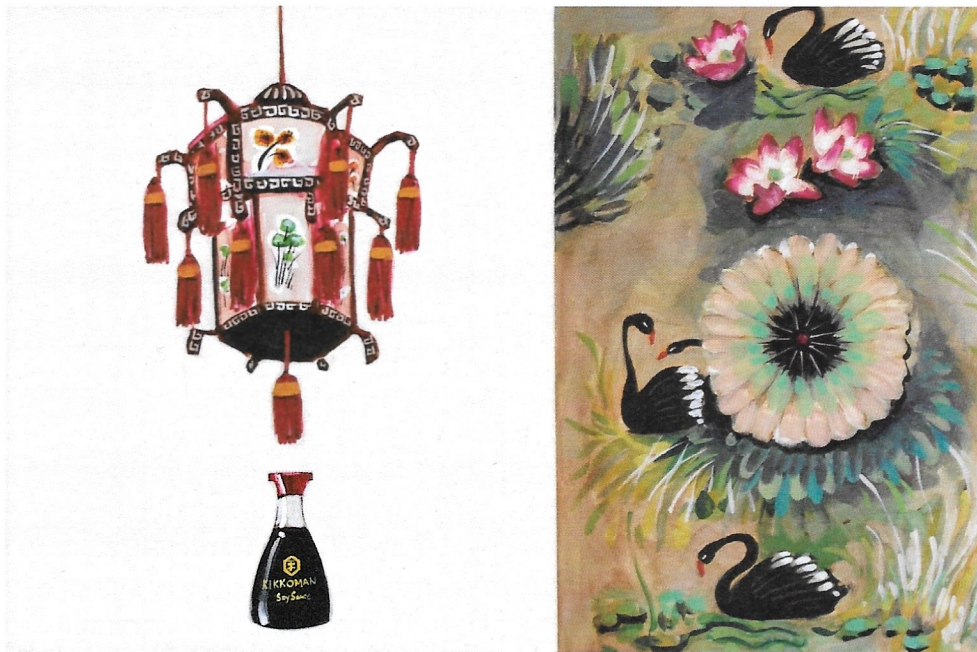
This incredible story that spans a century of American history is what inspired me to make “My Houston” more than just a collection of paintings. But Mr. Gondo would not be my first oral history interview.

Dollhouses and Dragon’s Blood

An only child of divorced parents, I enjoyed a standing father-daughter date with my dad each and every Wednesday night that always involved eating out. Most of the time, we’d go to Ninfa’s, Houston’s famous Tex-Mex haven that still serves its famous fajitas and Ninfaritas (the namesake margarita

that Dad always ordered up, with salt). Other times, we'd go to the Swan Den, a little family-owned restaurant in the Village and closer to home. My usual order was spareribs and steamed rice that arrived to the table in domed stainless steel serving pieces that I thought were so very fancy. I remember the red lanterns hanging in the corners of the room, and the silver-speckled ceiling that glittered in the dim light. We usually had the place to ourselves, and we were always waited on by one of the owners' children. And my dad always teased me that soy sauce was made from dragon's blood.

This is my memory picture of The Swan Den.



It was a completely different project that connected me to the story of this place. I was meeting with Bobby Joe Moon, first generation Chinese-American from the Mississippi Delta, to interview him for an article I was writing for *Mississippi Folklife*. We visited over lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Houston's Asia Town on the city's west side. Early in our conversation I happened to mention that the Chinese food I grew up eating came from The Swan Den, a little family-owned restaurant near Rice University. "Brother Lew's parents' place!" Bobby replied. "Willie and Helen Lew?" I answered. I knew Willie and Helen Lew's names because I included them in the title of my painting of the Swan Den. Turns out that Bobby attends Houston's Chinese Baptist Church with their son, Leone. So, as fate would have it, Leone would be my first interview.

When I met Leone, I recognized him immediately as the young server who waited on my dad and me all of those many years ago. One of the first

things I shared with him was my standing order of spareribs and steamed rice. "I made spareribs last week!" he laughed. Leone's parents were both born in China. His father Willie immigrated to California in 1920, served in World War II, and married Helen in 1955. They settled in Houston and ventured into the grocery business. They opened The Swan Den in 1976, sixteen years after Leone was born. It closed in 1989, the year I graduated from high school. I loved hearing Leone talk about his family and their pan-fried dumplings that were written up in *Texas Monthly*. But it was our conversation about the Village that really got to me and changed my entire perspective on my project.

The Swan Den was located at 2534 Amherst, a block of the Village that included a barbershop and a bakery. I asked Leon what else he remembered about the Village in those days. He was quick to mention World Toy and Gift and the women who ran it.

Adelaide Friedman and Rose Behar operated World Toy and Gift, the toyshop that was located next to the X-rated movie theater on University Boulevard. As kids, my friends and I loved going into the store to ogle all of the stacks and stacks of toys, but we were too scared to touch anything because we were afraid of Mrs. Friedman and Ms. Behar. Mrs. Friedman stayed perched behind the cash register, her eyes on all of us kids, and her dress sleeve tucked up high enough to reveal a line of numbers tattooed on her forearm: the badge of a concentration camp survivor. In our youthful ignorance that I am ashamed of to this day, we did not realize the full meaning of that mark or take even a moment to consider the enormity of her experience. We just knew that she was stern and imposing, and we mostly stayed away from the store for those reasons. And because we couldn't afford to buy anything. (The other name we had for their store was World Rip and



Gyp.) But Leone's memories of these gruff female entrepreneurs in 1970s Houston were entirely different. "Ms. Rose and Ms. Friedman who had the toy shop, they came in all of the time. They would always say, 'Make us whatever you're having.' They were like grandmothers... When I got engaged, I invited them to my wedding."

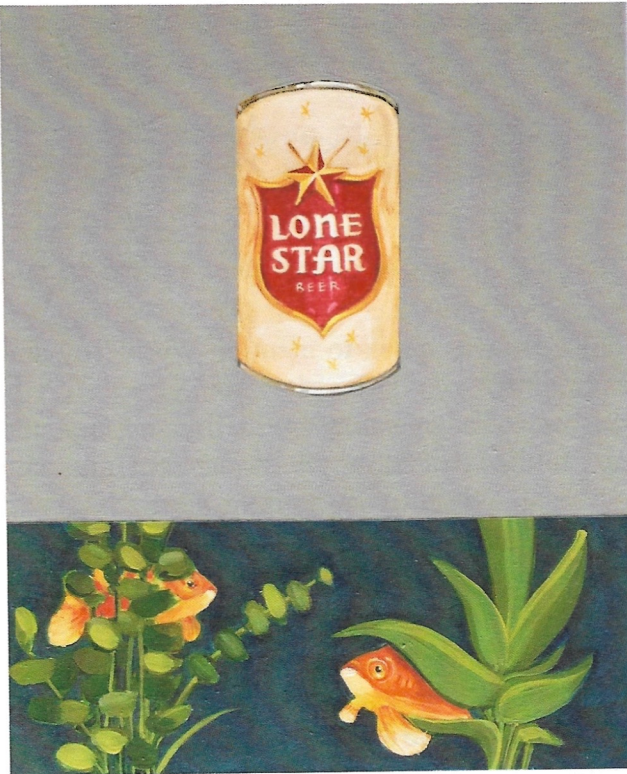
This bit of insight was earth-shattering. Until that moment I had been working in a vacuum, each location from "My Houston" preserved in its own piece of amber, it never occurring to me that the people associated with them would actually interact—that their stories would intertwine with each others in much the same way that mine had as an outsider. It also made me wonder what other female-owned businesses I had frequented in my youth and taken completely for granted. It made me think of Ms. Ruth.

The House That Ruth Built

After art school, I spent a year in Savannah, Georgia, and then returned to Houston in the late 1990s for a short stint before heading off again for

graduate school. I had all manner of jobs, but one of them was waiting tables at the Daily Review Café. After many a late-night shift, a group of us would walk around the corner to grab a drink or three at the Aquarium Lounge on West Dallas Street. This hole-in-the-wall neighborhood bar had a great jukebox, an impressive collection of Elvis memorabilia and, yes, an aquarium.

It was rumored that Ms. Ruth slept on a mattress in the back room. As I Googled for information on the place, I



stumbled upon a couple of articles in the *Houston Press* from September 2000: one announcing Ms. Ruth's retirement, the other mourning her death a shocking seven days later:

At a September 3 farewell bash, the seams were busting on the Aquarium Lounge. Regulars and employees said tearful good-byes as the 28-year-old neighborhood bar shut its doors to business. People even came from out of town to bid farewell to their old hangout. They had no idea how symbolic this final good-bye would be. The heroine of the Aquarium, Ruth Busch, died Wednesday evening inside her bar on West Dallas. (Duggins)

I scoured both articles for names of employees and regulars whom I could interview to try to piece together Ms. Ruth's story. I landed on Marcia Thomason, a bartender, and searched for her on Facebook. As usual, small-town Houston showed itself, and I discovered that Marcia and I have a handful of friends in common. I sent her a message, and we arranged to meet for what would be the second "My Houston" interview.

Marcia started frequenting the Aquarium Lounge in about 1993, before she was of legal drinking age. She'd grab a booth and a good book and hang out between classes at the University of Houston where she majored in history with a focus on Middle Eastern Studies (Marcia is fluent in Arabic). She got to know Ms. Ruth and eventually made her way behind the bar, where she worked until Ms. Ruth passed away. "Ms. Ruth was like another grandmother to me," Marcia recalled in her interview. "She really took me under her wing. She even taught me how to make her oyster loaf."

When Ms. Ruth died, a group of Aquarium Lounge employees and devoted regulars held a wake at the bar and left a reminder for all who passed before the building was eventually torn down:

* * *



My daughter turned eight in October 2017 and, as usual, I ordered her birthday cake from Moeller's, Houston's oldest family-owned bakery, open since 1930. The same bakery that used to be next door to the Swan Den in Rice Village. It relocated

to Bellaire Boulevard in 1990, taking its 1940s-vintage oven and all of its longtime employees with it. When I went to pick up my daughter's cake I met one of them: Dorothy Pickens, who started working at Moeller's as a teenager in 1957. Today, she's a master cake decorator, having personalized generations of children's birthday cakes over the years, likely even mine. When I saw her on this day, we got to talking about the old location in Rice Village. "Do you remember Mrs. Moeller?" Dorothy asked. "She probably gave you a cookie when you came in. She loved children."

Even though this icon from my childhood is open and able to satisfy all of my sugarcoated nostalgic and needs, its future might be a bit uncertain. Palace Lanes, the bowling alley that has been its Bellaire neighbor since forever, has just been sold. The Blackeyed Pea restaurant that was its neighbor on the other side has recently been torn down. Moeller's now stands alone, a beacon of living history under threat.

Dorothy Pickens is next on my list of interviews. The painting will have to come later.

Houston, Texas

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

1. "Craig's, 2501 University Blvd., Houston, Texas. Built: 1949. Closed: late 1980s. Eugene Werlin, architect. (Now an Urban Outfitters.)" by Amy C. Evans | acrylic on wood panel | 14 in. x 11 in. | 2016.
2. Craig's, Northline Shopping City. (1966) RGD0006N-1966-2578, Houston Post Photographic Collection, Houston Public Library, HMRC.
3. "Poor Man's Country Club, 2407 University Blvd., Houston, Texas. Opened: Early 1980s. Closed: 1985. Albert Mills, owner. (Now a branch of Compass Bank.)" by Amy C. Evans | acrylic on wood panel | 24 in. x 24 in. | 2015.
4. Performers, Tokyo Gardens Restaurant. (1978) RGD0006N-1978-2469-7A, Houston Post Photographic Collection, Houston Public Library, HMRC.
5. "Tokyo Gardens, 4701 Westheimer, Houston, Texas. Years of operation: 1966 – 1998. Jutaro & Hisako Gondo, owners. (Now an Extended Stay America Hotel.)" by Amy C. Evans | acrylic on wood panel | 24 in. x 48 in. | 2015.
6. "Swan Den, 2534 Amherst, Houston, Texas. Years of operation: 1976 – 1989. Willie & Helen Lew, owners. (Now The Class Room, a men's clothing store.)" by Amy C. Evans | acrylic and glitter on wood panel | 24 in. x 36 in. | 2015.
7. Dollhouse, World Toy and Gift. (1977) RGD0006N-1977-4014-12, Houston Post Photographic Collection, Houston Public Library, HMRC.
8. "Aquarium Lounge, 3322 W. Dallas St., Houston, Texas. Years of operation: 1972-

2000. Ruth Busch, owner. (Demolished; Now Townhomes)" by Amy C. Evans | acrylic on wood panel | 14 in. x 11 in. | 2016.

9. "The House That Ruth Built," photograph of a photograph in Marcia Thomason's personal photo album by Amy C. Evans, 20

WORKS CITED

- "Around the State: Tokyo Gardens." *Texas Monthly*, Feb. 1975, p. 131.
- Duggins, Kamilah. "The Last Good-bye." *Houston Press*, 14 Sept. 2000. www.houstonpress.com/news/the-last-good-bye-6568798. Accessed 22 Dec. 2017.
- "Houstonian Pioneers Japanese Cuisine in Texas." NEWSFIX: KIAH Channel 39, 8 June 2013. cw39.com/2013/06/08/houstonian-pioneers-japanese-cusine-in-texas/. Accessed 22 Dec. 2017.
- Lew, Leone. Personal interview. 25 July 2017.
- Thomason, Marcia. Personal interview. 11 Aug. 2017.