

SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART

PAO HOUA HER: THE IMAGINATIVE LANDSCAPE
OPENS AT SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART ON JULY 11, 2025

First survey of artist's work to be presented in 2025
at the San José Museum of Art and John Michael Kohler Arts Center



San José, CA (March 19, 2025)— *Pao Houa Her: The Imaginative Landscape* is the first comprehensive survey of the artist's compelling body of work. On view from July 11, 2025 through February 22, 2026, the exhibition weaves connections between Her's past series, recent projects, and ongoing explorations, linking California's agricultural landscapes, the jungles of Laos, Minnesota's poppy fields, and beyond. While rooted in Her's Hmong American experience, the exhibition offers a meditation on the construction of homeland—a theme that resonates deeply across global diasporic communities.

Co-organized by the San José Museum of Art (SJMA) in California and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, the exhibition will be presented at both venues in 2025, showing works from the same series. This collaboration reflects the diverse contexts in which Hmong communities have established new homelands. California hosts the largest Hmong population in the United States, while the Twin Cities region near Sheboygan is home to the nation's most concentrated Hmong community.

"Her's engagement with the histories of her medium is profound," said Lauren Schell Dickens, chief curator of SJMA. "Her work traverses portraiture, landscape, still life, and vernacular photography, portraying herself, her community, and their surroundings through the tinted lens of diasporic longing. In her images, Minnesota and California transform into stand-ins for Laos, where plastic florals replace living tropics, and the line between reality and artifice blurs."

The exhibition's title derives from Her's 2017–2020 series, *The Imaginative Landscape*—a body of work that has never before been exhibited in its entirety. Created during the pandemic, the series juxtaposes images from her earlier works with new ones, offering a reimagined vision of a Hmong homeland. Her drew inspiration from historian Valerie Flint's study of Christopher Columbus, particularly the concept of "imaginative landscapes" shaped by myth and medieval legends.

Her's *Fall of Hmong Tebchaw* (2017) addresses themes of loss and deception. The series reflects on the historic loss of "tebchaw" (homeland) and a more recent scandal in which a Minnesota Hmong man swindled nearly \$4 million from elders by claiming he was negotiating government-backed land purchases in Laos to create a Hmong country. Despite his conviction in 2017, many Hmong elders continue to believe in his promises. Her's portraits of these elders, set against artificial foliage and the lush flora of St. Paul's Como Conservatory, reveal their resilience and patience amidst the backdrop of an imagined jungle.

The longing of Hmong Americans is mirrored in Laos, where nostalgia for the United States intertwines with diasporic yearning for a homeland. Her's two-channel video, *Paj Puam Ntuj (Flowers of the Sky)* (2022), portrays two figures—one in Minnesota and one in Laos—each singing longingly for the other land. Inspired by Hmong song poetry, a tradition of call-and-response that transmits intergenerational knowledge, the work captures the interplay of distance, memory, and cultural preservation. In Laos, the abundance of plastic and silk flower shops, contrasted with natural florists, underscores the blurred boundaries between reality and artifice.

The exhibition also features a series of large-scale light boxes showcasing images of Mount Shasta's landscape. These works employ advertising-inspired strategies to romanticize the natural environment. As Her's artistic practice evolved, the concept of land as a vessel for longing became increasingly central. Drawing on the traditions of Western landscape photography—epitomized by Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, and Ansel Adams—Her reimagines these landscapes through a diasporic lens. She focuses on the Mt. Shasta region of Northern California, where Hmong farmers have applied ancestral knowledge of highland opium farming to cultivate cannabis amid the so-called "Green Rush." Opium poppies, a recurring motif in Her's work, symbolize both colonial imagination and Hmong resilience, evoking memories of a prosperous era in Laos.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a comprehensive monograph. It is co-curated by Lauren Schell Dickens, chief curator at SJMA, and Jodi Throckmorton, chief curator at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION AT JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER ARTS CENTER

Pao Houa Her: The Imaginative Landscape will be on view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC) from March 15 through August 31, 2025. JMKAC's presentation includes over 50 new and recent works accompanied by installations at public sites and community gathering places throughout Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The Arts Center will debut recently commissioned lenticular prints of the jungles of northern Laos and a video of kwv txhij (HMong song poetry) alongside selections from Her's past series that will also be featured in the show's run at SJMA. Site-specific installations include a large-scale billboard on the Art Preserve grounds with an image of blooming

poppies, symbolizing Hmong resilience and prosperity; a roadside commercial illuminated sign with a new image created by Her; lightboxes depicting Her's family mythology at popular local restaurants; a series of images displayed at the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, a vital advocacy and gathering place for the Hmong community since 1980; and works installed in an active courtroom at the Sheboygan County Courthouse. Additional information and a full list of sites can be found [here](#).

SUPPORT

Pao Houa Her: The Imaginative Landscape is co-organized by Lauren Schell Dickens, chief curator at the San José Museum of Art, and Jodi Throckmorton, chief curator at John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Pao Houa Her: The Imaginative Landscape is made possible with lead support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Teiger Foundation, and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The San José Museum of Art presentation is also made possible by the SJMA Exhibitions Fund, with generous support from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Brook Hartzell and Tad Freese, and Wanda Kownacki.

Operations and programs at the San José Museum of Art are made possible by principal support from SJMA's Board of Trustees, a Cultural Affairs Grant from the City of San José, and the Lipman Family Foundation; by lead support from the Adobe Foundation, the California Arts Council, Toby and Barry Fernald, Brook Hartzell and Tad Freese, the Richard A. Karp Charitable Foundation, Tammy and Tom Kiely, the Knight Foundation, Evelyn and Rick Neely, Yvonne and Mike Nevens, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Skyline Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the SJMA Director's Council and Council of 100; and with significant endowment support from the William Randolph Hearst Foundation and the San José Museum of Art Endowment Fund established by the Knight Foundation at the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

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ABOUT SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART

The San José Museum of Art (SJMA) is a modern and contemporary art museum dedicated to inclusivity, new thinking, and visionary ideas. Founded in 1969 by artists and community leaders, its dynamic exhibitions, collection, and programs resonate with defining characteristics of San José and the Silicon Valley—from its rich diversity to its hallmark innovative ethos. The Museum offers lifelong learning for school children and their educators, multigenerational families, creative adults, university students and faculty, and community groups. SJMA is committed to being a borderless museum, essential to creative life throughout the diverse communities of San José and beyond.

SJMA is located on Plaza de César Chávez at 110 South Market Street in downtown San José, California. The Museum is open Thursday 4–9pm; Friday 11am–9pm; Saturday–Sunday 11am–6pm. Admission is \$20 for adults, \$15 for seniors, and free to members, college students, youth and children ages 17 and under, and school teachers (with valid ID). Admission is free from 6–9pm

on the first Friday of every month. For up-to-date information, call 408.271.6840 or visit SanJoseMuseumofArt.org.

ABOUT JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER ARTS CENTER

Founded in 1967, the [John Michael Kohler Arts Center](#) (JMKAC) is dedicated to generating creative exchanges between an international community of artists and a diverse public. Central to its mission is promoting understanding and appreciation of the work of self-taught and contemporary artists through original exhibitions, commissioned works of art, performing arts, community arts initiatives, and publications. The Arts Center's collection focuses primarily on works by artist-environment builders, self-taught and folk artists, and works created in the Arts/Industry residency program. JMKAC is the world's leading center for research and presentation of artist-built environments. In June 2021, the Arts Center opened the Art Preserve, a satellite campus highlighting its collection of 30,000 individual works of art by 40 art-environment builders. The Art Preserve features immersive displays of art environments and curated visible storage of environment components. It also serves as a resource for research on art environments and the artists who create them.

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PRESS IMAGES

San José Museum of Art:

[flickr.com/photos/sjma/V1SPz66xn0](https://www.flickr.com/photos/sjma/V1SPz66xn0)

IMAGE CREDITS (LEFT TO RIGHT)

Pao Houa Her, *My grandmother's favorite grandchild* – Pao Houa from “My grandfather turned into a tiger” series, 2017. Wheat-pasted vinyl, 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Pao Houa Her, *untitled (real opium, behind opium backdrop)* from “The Imaginative Landscape” series, 2020. Pigment print, 52 x 65 inches. Courtesy of the artist.