

The Way Through Doors

Fiona Connor 'My muse is my memory, an
archive of Closed Down Clubs' at Château
Shatto, Los Angeles

by Andrew Berardini

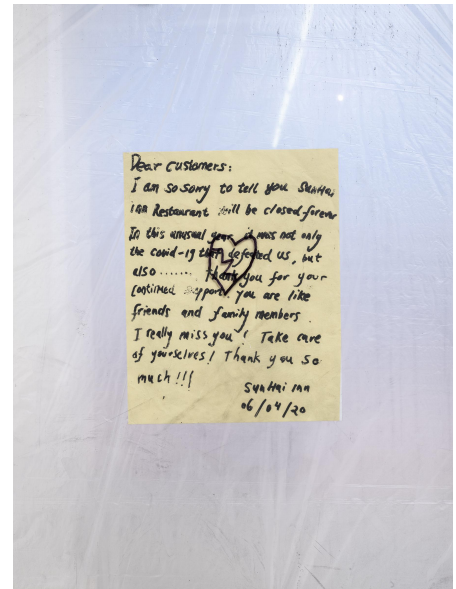
Published on 22.06.2022



Fiona Connor, *My muse is my memory, an archive of Closed Down Clubs*, installation view, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, The Smell* (detail), 2017. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Sun Hai Inn Restaurant* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Oil Can Harry's*. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *My muse is my memory, an archive of Closed Down Clubs*, installation view, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Scuba* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.

Los Angeles-based Aotearoa artist Fiona Connor's first solo exhibition at her gallery Château Shatto presents an archive of forgotten memories. Five years in the making, Closed Down Clubs consists of a series of replicas—front doors of clubs, restaurants and bookstores, recreated down to the very last detail.

In this piece, writer Andrew Berardini pays a visit to the exhibition, where Connor's sculptures—particularly the meticulously rendered door to the iconic club Hop Louie—conjures up recollections of years spent in and out of the LA dive bar, with Connor's work offering a

*fleeting possibility of a return to the past, a lost scene just beyond
a door.*

*Sitting in bars and cafés
Writing songs about songs
And plays within plays
But how rarely we dare
To write something that says
Anything about bars and cafés...*

*Be true to your bar
And don't let it down
Or else it may not always be around.*
- The Magnetic Fields (2017)

Hop Louie was a dive but I loved it.

This will eventually be about a show called, *My muse is my memory, an archive of Closed Down Clubs* by Aotearoa New Zealand-born, California-based artist Fiona Connor at the gallery Château Shatto in Los Angeles, but to understand it truly, you have to understand the way through one of its doors. And so you have to understand Hop Louie.

After parking down a semi-secret alley between Broadway and Hill near a Communist front flying a crimson PRC flag and a restaurant's backdoor aromatic with fish guts, I'd head down Broadway past the naked fluorescents beaming from boba tea parlours and the dusty windows of tchotchke boutiques. Weaving through the little old ladies carrying bags of produce and tourists voguing selfies against the dragons winding the columns down Gin Ling Way, I walked faster than the line of cars caught in traffic stuttering by towards the 110 North. Just behind a chain link fence on the left stood the rotting remnants of a sign, only a few letters left in its broken smile, which once upon a time spelled out CHINATOWNLAND.

Far away in the horizon over a bridge spanning the 101, the downtown spires winked in the twilight, but making a sharp left beyond the remnants of CHINATOWNLAND, down an asphalt

promenade, there, hung out a scatter of coin-operated kiddie rides occasionally squawking and flickering lights: a tiny carousel, a galloping race car, an exquisite spaceship-robot. The latter I rode often with my daughter during the daylight hours as it jiggered and spun and danced after our quarter clinked in its box.

And then, there was Hop Louie.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Hop Louie* (detail), 2020. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Hop Louie*, 2020. Commercial aluminium-frame door, polycarbonate, steel grill, hardware, silk screen on coated aluminium foil, vinyl, tape, cast aluminium, surface coatings, 84 x 60 x 7 in / 213.4 x 152.4 x 17.8 cm. Courtesy Château Shatto.



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Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Hop Louie* (detail), 2020. Courtesy Château Shatto.



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At night, especially after a rare rain, the glitter and neon of Chinatown reflected off the wet asphalt and pavement with noir fantasy... *Bladerunner* and Edward Hopper and movie set exoticism in this ersatz Forbidden City. Unstintingly and beautifully gaudy in tattered paper and embroidered silk. Alongside the tourists' noodle houses and fading shopping malls emblazoned with names like Full House and Mandarin Plaza, artists and gallerists in the late '90s found a home here, allured by the fading cinematic charm as well as the empty storefronts and low rents. Along the pedestrian thoroughfare of Chung King Road, the first commercial gallery to open its doors there was China Art Objects in 1999, the second Black Dragon Society shortly after. Though it's debated who started first, they both took their names from the defunct businesses whose signs already hung above the doors. Hundreds followed. One of the cradles for a rebirth of contemporary art in the city, Chinatown gave the benignly neglected art world of LA a place to experiment, fuck-up, make legends. The later waves of fledgling commercial galleries more conventionally put their proprietor's names on their glass doors: Mary Goldman, Daniel Hug, David Kordansky. I arrived around 2005, confused and twenty-two, with a baby on the way and deadly determined to understand art.

One of my oldest friends Martha always describes Berlin as the cemetery of her 20s, for me it was certainly Chinatown in LA.

And Hop Louie was where we all drank.

Beneath the four-tiered pagoda traced in gold neon, you went through the double door with its vaguely Asian font dancing in orange letters "Welcome to Hop Louie", past the faded chinoiserie of the atrium lined with dusty photos of forgotten stars on plywood-veneer panelled walls. From there, to the left was the bar and up the stairs to the right, I guess there was a restaurant. Almost wholly unmemorable, it unceremoniously shuttered long before the bar. (Maybe I went to a performance/reading up there once, some other time I maybe attempted to eat its soggy approximation of Chinese food some faraway afternoon in the cavernously empty dining hall). I recall a beaded curtain, a clinking plastic that still barely shimmered under the lightbulbs of the atrium's flyspecked chandelier. Permanently pinned open, the

curtain led into the shadowy din of the bar. A long counter to the right curved around until the bathroom doors, while to the left was a bunch of faux-wood grain table tops and stackable metal chairs. I barely recall strings of hanging lanterns and a silky shimmer of wallpaper above the waist-high paneling. A tiny tv played whatever to the bored bartender, Sean, always a bit angry at being interrupted, glasses flopped down on the formica bartop, cash only.



Andrew Berardini in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Courtesy the author.



Andrew Berardini and daughter in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Courtesy the author.



A young Andrew Berardini at the Smell, 247 S. Main St., downtown Los Angeles. Courtesy LA Times and the author.



Gallery co-founder Steve Hanson outside the original China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles. Photo via www.kcet.org; courtesy Artspace.com.



An opening at the original China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles. Courtesy Artspace.com.

In my 20s, I worked as an afternoon archivist at China Art Objects in the shadow of iconic Kiwi co-founder Giovanni Intra's death. Hop Louie is one of the two bars where I went after work, after openings, to meet anyone on a lonesome Tuesday night knowing it would always be devoid of crowds unless of course we filled it to savour the cheap, plentiful cocktails. Also there was always, in lonesome LA, the inkling that I might just see a friend seeking a boozy respite there amidst the same shabby quietude.

The other spot to drink was a three minute walk away at the Mountain, designed in faux Chinatown red-light grandeur by artist Jorge Pardo and founded with him by the other public half of China

Art, Steve Hanson. The Mountain was where the artists Piero Golia and Eric Wesley founded the Mountain School of Arts, which is now the oldest artist-run free school in California. Though that bar has long since sunsetted, I still volunteer with Piero for this historic school every year. And even if the school was housed upstairs at the Mountain and thus we spent the early evenings there, drinks were cheaper at Hop Louie. So it was there that I usually ended the night.

Built in 1940, Hop Louie began its life as the Golden Pagoda, the jewel of New Chinatown, and once erected, it became the neighbourhood's tallest structure. New Chinatown only came into existence after the city tore down Old Chinatown (and the red light district astride it) to build Union Station in the 30s.

The perfume of memory is so thick for me around Hop Louie that I almost cannot breathe returning there in my mind.

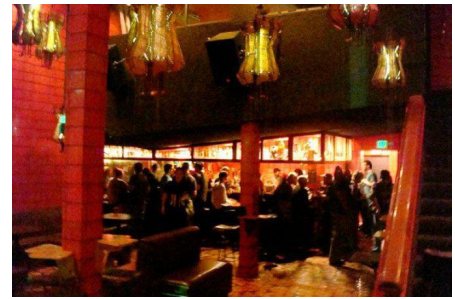
I shimmied atop the tables there and on the scuzzy postage stamp-sized dance floor. I drank til 2 and past 2 with friends and lovers, frenemies and rivals, decadent aesthetes and dedicated amateurs, gajillionaire collectors and penniless assistants, underground musicians and professional scenesters.



Mario Ayala & Greg Ito, *Sun Sprawl* installation view, Club Pro Los Angeles, 2018. Courtesy Club Pro.



Hop Louie exterior, Los Angeles. Courtesy foursquare.com.



Mountain Bar, Los Angeles. Courtesy Artspace.com.



Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles. Courtesy artnet.



Black Gallery Society gallery owners, Los Angeles. Photographer Gary Leonard. Courtesy Los Angeles Photographers Collection.

It was there at the bar that I saw Anya for the last time. I'd dreaded meeting her, haunted by the nightmarish notion we might run into each other unexpectedly, her back in the city after our break-up. So we met at Hop Louie on purpose, a last goodbye maybe. Once we had our whiskeys, I used every linguistic power and manipulatively horrifying spiritual thumbscrew in my arsenal to make her hurt as much as I did. She ran away weeping and so did I. We never saw one another ever again. For the sheer stupid horror of it, it was one of the worst heartbreaks of my life. And that night at the bar of Hop Louie, the meanest I've ever been to another human, a cutting regret that still albatrosses around my soul. Such

bile made me afraid of how much pain my broken heart could spill on others.

After a John Wiese record launch at Ooga Booga or a Lawrence Weiner porno premier at Human Resources, everyone went to Hop Louie. And always the octogenarian Bill either guarding the door at a folding table or chainsmoking out front. Was it his bar? I supposed, but was never bold enough to ask for anything but a light. I walked in through the doors of Hop Louie with fear and trepidation, with more authority than I'd ever earned, that hot swagger that only the nervous fear of youth can give you.

I remember the doors as almost always being open, but I'm sure I handled the curved metal handle at least a hundred times too. Some part of me doesn't really want to remember Hop Louie, even though I spent so much time there. Feeding the jukebox, sneaking a cigarette at the Wishing Well, listening to the fireworks of a million firecrackers like a rattling machine gun on Chinese New Year.

After it closed in 2016 or 2017, I remember two artists, Greg Ito and Mario Ayala, summoning the spirit of the bar in 2018 at Club Pro (a gallery but also a closed down club to me in more than the name) by recreating some part of its interior as an homage. Above their bar-as-artwork hung a shrine to the deceased Uncle Bill. Sean the angry bartender came to the opening, smiling more in a night than I witnessed as a barfly in almost 15 years. Two unlikely figureheads of an odd confluence of time and space. Sean died soon after too. So many more have passed away since then, beyond the count of grief. And the art scene moved on, sprawling into other corners and neighborhoods where aesthetic upstarts might thrive in the cracks of capitalism. And then the Chinatown bars went upscale, the dives closing one by one to give way to bourgeois bistros for young upwardly mobile professionals filling all the SROs turned condo conversions downtown. The cocktails tripled in price and I found other places to drink.

Walking into Fiona Connor's show at Château Shatto in downtown LA in 2022, I stood at the doors to Hop Louie and wept.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Catch One* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Howl at the Moon*, 2022. Steel door, polycarbonate, hardware, silk screen on coated aluminium foil and vinyl, tape, surface coatings, 92.5 x 37 x 9 in / 235 x 94 x 22.9 cm. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Circus of Books* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *My muse is my memory, an archive of Closed Down Clubs*, installation view, Château Shatto, Los Angeles, 2022. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Know Where Bar* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Tonic*, 2017. Commercial aluminum-frame glass doors, silk screen on coated aluminium foil, surface coatings, 82.5 x 64 x 6.25 inches / 209.6 x 162.6 x 15.9 cm. Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Pizza and Wine Bar* (detail), 2017. Courtesy Château Shatto.

The replica of the double door to Hop Louie stands alongside the doors of 29 other closed down clubs (it began with 20 but the artist kept adding more throughout the show's run.) This upright portal, shorn of its building, is designed solely for bodies to pass through that would never pass through them again. If Chinatown in Los Angeles was the cemetery of my 20s, then these doors to Hop Louie are the tombstone.

Moving through Connor's show, I saw the front doors of many other pivotal sites of my life, the other closed down clubs of my youth. The door to Circus of Books, the family-run gay porn book shop in Silverlake that shuttered after 60 years; the door to Catch One, the black lesbian bar in Mid-City that a black lesbian friend both vouchsafed and escorted me more than one summer night; the door to the legendary underground all-ages club the Smell (at 17, going to a Citizen Fish show with my best friend Clint, a photographer took our picture and put us in the *LA Times* as representative of the wastrel teenage clientele for the club as a whole). I went to the Smell a hundred times or more over two decades. Or there's the door to Club Tee Gee in Atwater, which though still technically open, changed so much with the new owners, the original feels long gone. Alongside these I know so deeply are other clubs that I never went to but heard of, like Tonic in NYC or Greenblatt's Deli in West Hollywood. Or some I've never heard of and aren't clubs in the conventional sense of the term, Italian restaurants and Jewish delis, bookstores and cafes, places of community and devotion in the States and beyond.

Each of these doors is lovingly and precisely recreated for the exhibition at Château Shatto. The tattered paper signs hanging in the windows, the chipped and fading stickers on the glass, the door handles burnished with decades of touch, the grease of ten thousand dirty hands along their edges, kickplates scuffed, and for some, layer upon layer of paint scraped and peeling and faded. You feel the wear and accumulation of humans on each. Some bear notices for the change of ownership, legal notices to vacate, heartfelt goodbyes to their clients.

Many bear details wholly unique to just those doors, while others appear almost anonymous, signless except for their names on the paper checklist, but well-known for sure to all the usually informal

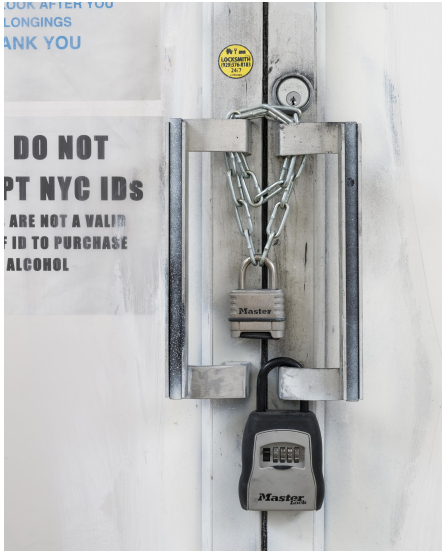
members of these closed down clubs. For the ones I don't know well or even at all, I can plumb my emotions and feel the freight of others who might see the doors of their lost clubs and weep too.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Hollywood* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



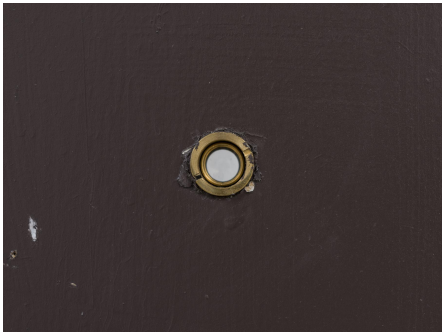
Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Pizza and Wine Bar* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Brooklyn* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Animal Medical Center Hollywood* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Club Tee Gee* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.



Fiona Connor, *Closed Down Clubs, Avanti Cafe* (detail). Courtesy Château Shatto.

They are only replicas after all, but these clubs and their doorways (a handy synecdoche but truly something more) were loved and here Connor, with exacting verisimilitude, brings these clubs back to us. These symbolic fragments enshrine and memorialise the lost

and likely soon forgotten clubs that changed lives, built community in lonesome places for weirdo or outre humans, and gave deeper meaning to each and every who called it theirs. The artist surely went to some of these clubs, if not all of them. Replicas were made from photographs and sometimes from life, the doors hanging there just after the club closed its doors forever. Having lived in Southern California since 2009 when she began her MFA at CalArts, Connor surely felt some of the same emotional connection and resonance to so many of these doors from Los Angeles as I do.

Nan Goldin's photographs always felt like stand-ins for the photographs of my messy youth that no one ever took. A few of Connor's doors were mine. These physical structures fill me with a body memory more than an image ever could. And even if your closed down club isn't here, I hope Connor's archive calls you back, helps you to remember. Here truly, my memory is my muse.

After rambling wistful and dewy-eyed to the gallerist at Château Shatto, he told me that Connor asked the owners of the closed-down Hop Louie if she could borrow a handle to replicate it for her project. They gave it along and told her she could keep it. After the gallerist walked back to the office, I illicitly placed my hand around the door handle.

I do not know if it was the real one or the replica and perhaps it doesn't matter. I got to feel the possibility that once lay on the other side of that door. One last time.

Biographies



Fiona Connor (b. 1981, Auckland, New Zealand) currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California. She received a Bachelor Degree from the University of Auckland, New Zealand and a Masters of Fine Arts from California Institute for the Arts, Santa Clarita, California. Fiona Connor's installations typically present collections of objects or structures that have been derived, at one-to-one scale, from pre-existing architectural systems. Her projects have documented vernacular structures from outside the gallery, while others have explored the architecture and display mechanisms of the museum itself. Within a sustained dialogue between location and representation, Connor's work explores how specific environments condition our perception of objects.

Recent solo exhibitions include *My muse is my memory, an archive of Closed Down Clubs*, Château Shatto; *Work University*, Fine Arts, Sydney, Sydney; *Closed for installation, Fiona Connor, SculptureCenter, #4*, SculptureCenter, New York; *#8, Closed for Installation, Sequence of Events*, Secession, Vienna; *Closed Down Clubs*, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles; *Object Classrooms*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Selected group exhibitions include *Daily Nightshift*, Kunsthall Extra City, Antwerp; *Celebration of Our Enemies*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; *In Plain Sight*, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; *Haunt*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *Berman Board*, Armory Center for the Arts, Los Angeles; *Stories of Almost Everyone*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; *Not the Apple but the Fall*, 500 Capp Street/David Ireland House, San Francisco.



Andrew Berardini is a writer and curator from California. With past curated exhibitions at MOCA-Los Angeles, Palais de Tokyo, Castello di Rivoli, and the Pavilion of Estonia at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Since 2008, he has been faculty at the artist-run free school the Mountain School of Arts. Best known for his poetic and corporeal writing, Berardini is a long-time contributor to Artforum. Currently, he helps run the Private Practice Residency with artist Inga Bard for MobileCoinArt. He is the author of the book *Danh Vo: Relics* (Mousse, 2016) and *Colors* (Not A Cult, 2022).

