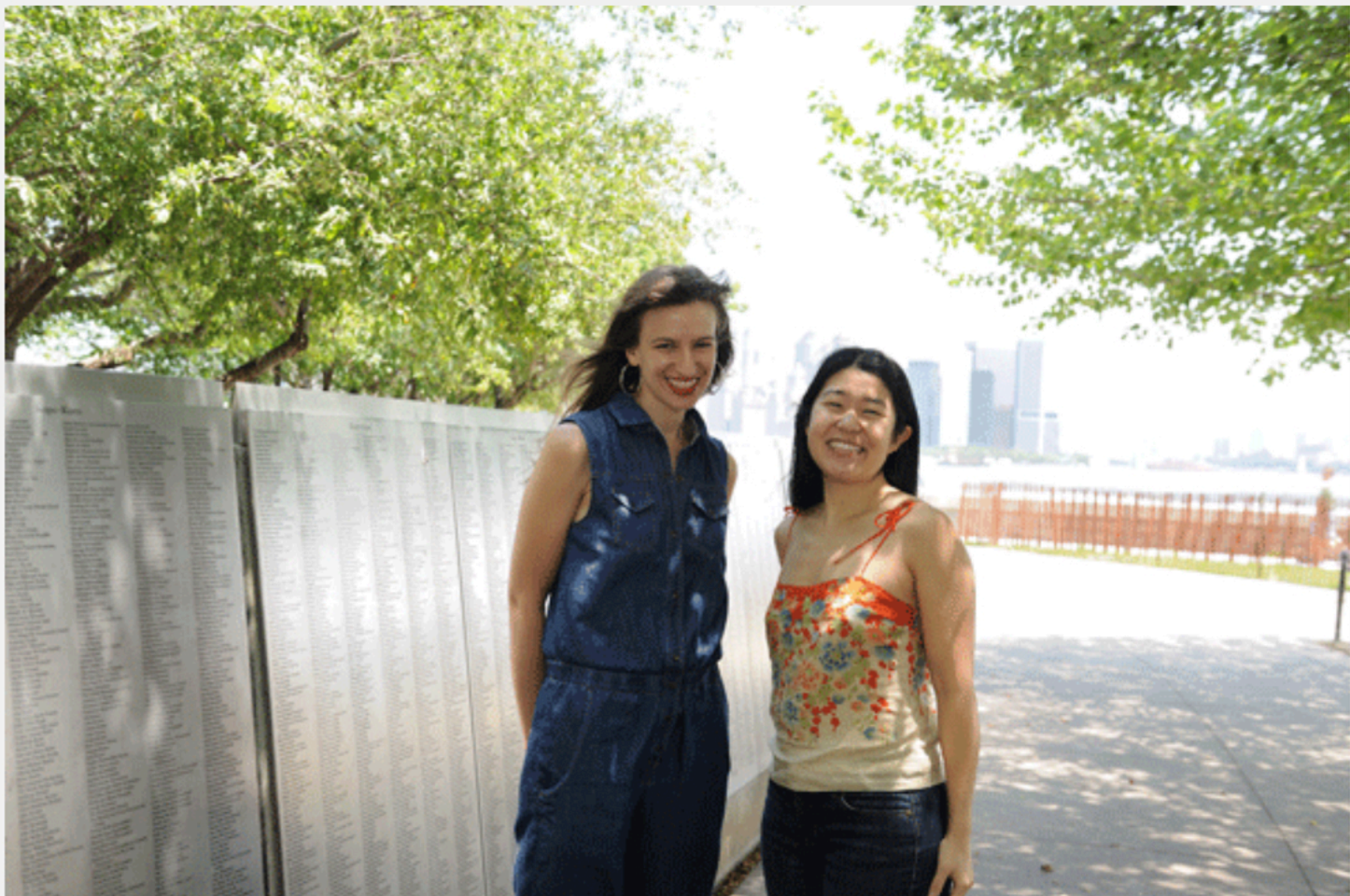


Resident artists reflect on family, food and history

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Debra Scacco (left) and Theresa Loong, two of three recipients of a new artist-in-residence program, on Ellis Island. For the month of July, Scacco and Loong, along with artist Laura Nova (not pictured) will have access to archives and collections on Liberty Island and Ellis Island that are closed to the public. Downtown Express photo by Terese Loeb Kreuzer

BY TERESE LOEB KREUZER | When the National Park Service and New Jersey City University announced in the spring a jointly sponsored artist-in-residence program this summer on Liberty and Ellis Islands, applications poured in from across the U.S. and from other nations such as Canada, Spain, the U.K. and Australia. There were 16 finalists.

A jury made up of National Park Service staff and members of the N.J.C.U. art department selected three women for the unpaid, month-long residency: artist Debra Scacco and the video team of Theresa Loong and Laura Nova.

Their award gives them unparalleled access to the park’s museums, library, oral histories, archives and behind-the-scenes collections. Each artist will create artworks from this experience and will also present hour-long public programming during their residencies.

Scacco, a 36-year-old painter and sculptor, was born on Staten Island but has lived in London for the last 16 years. Her maternal great-grandmother, Vittoria Morano, came through Ellis Island in 1921 as a widow with two young sons. In 1949, her father, Santo Scacco, emigrated to the U.S. from Sicily at the age of 14.

Scacco is especially interested in the role of women in the early 1920s and is focusing her residency project on female Italian immigrants from that era. The artist is presently listening to some of the thousands of interviews in the Ellis Island archives, seeking to gain a better understanding of her own background as an Italian-American.

“This is an amazing opportunity to be able to delve into this history within the context of my history — but also in the context of immigrants in general and, in particular, women immigrants,” she said.

Theresa Loong, 39, and Laura Nova, 38 — both native New Yorkers — are using food as the impetus for their research. Since the two joined forces in 2010, they’ve found that asking people about what they ate in their childhoods often evokes a raft of memories.

Last summer, Nova was an artist-in-residence on Governors Island under a grant provided by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. During that residency, Nova and Loong created “Feed Me a Story,” which has since evolved into a series of videos shot in various locations.

Loong said they give away cookies in exchange for people’s stories.

“We’re looking for stories about food, and we’re looking to engage the public,” said Loong. “Of course, the stories are about food or drink, initially, but they end up being about love or memory or homeland.”

For their field work, Loong and Nova are searching through Ellis Island archives but also plan to have numerous conversations with people who visit the island and Liberty Island.

They’ll be assisted by two other people as they conduct their interviews on the islands and will record them on video, as they’ve done in the past.

The duo will leave the residency with videos, photographs and audio recordings.

Loong’s father, Paul, a merchant seaman, was briefly detained on Ellis Island in 1950. “We are ethnically Chinese,” Loong explained, “but he was born and raised in Malaysia. In 1950, he wasn’t yet an American citizen — he was called a ‘British protected person.’”

Nova said that her mother’s family arrived on Ellis Island from Russia. Nova’s great-uncle had polio, “and they nearly sent the whole family back to Russia,” Nova recalled. Nova’s paternal grandmother, whose last name was Einhorn, also came through Ellis Island shortly after World War I.

“Both Theresa and I have families that continually tell us stories about their immigrant experiences,” Nova said. “I grew up hearing stories from my parents and my grandparents and Theresa made a film about her father’s immigrant experience. We know that everyone has those stories.”

“When I think about younger generations now, I think it’s very important that they understand the weight of where these people came from and what they had been through,” Scacco commented.

All three artists-in-residence have weighty resumé’s with significant achievements in their fields. Loong is an award-winning multimedia artist, filmmaker, interactive media professional and educator. She graduated from Harvard University, where she majored in anthropology.

Nova, an assistant professor in the Creative Art and Technology program at Bloomfield College in New Jersey, is a multi-disciplinary artist working in sculpture, video, sound, performance and installation. She has received grants for her work from the Henry Street Settlement, the L.M.C.C.’s Workspace program and the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Scacco, a graduate of Richmond University in London, has been exhibiting her work in the U.S. and Europe for the last 12 years. She’s currently represented by Marine Contemporary gallery in Los Angeles, which recently mounted a large solo show of her work.

The Liberty Island/Ellis Island residencies started on July 2 and will run through the end of the month. The National Park Service and New Jersey City University will use this year’s experience to plan other similar artist residencies.

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