



## Alumna Joyce Wong's social experiment about the power of touch through palm reading inspires her art exhibit

BY JOHN O'BRIEN, Assistant Features Editor

As soon as alumna Joyce Wong's blanket hit the ground on the sidewalk of a busy street in Portland, Maine during late June of last year, the lines began forming.

Wong said lines containing politicians, children, students, tourists, dancers and suit-clad businessmen stretched down the block as dozens of individuals waited their turn to sit on the blanket on the cool, concrete sidewalk with Wong and have their palm read.

For them, it was a chance to receive a free palm reading. For her, it was an excuse to hold someone's hand.

This project, which Wong named "An Excuse to Hold Your Hand," became the basis for her current art exhibit "A Funeral For Your Past" at the Kirksville Arts Association and led her to become the first artist in residence at A. T. Still University.

Upon graduating from Truman State during Spring 2011 with a bachelor's degree in fibers, Wong moved to Portland to study art at the Maine College of Art. She left Missouri, her possessions and everyone she knew behind. Alone in Portland, she became lonely and depressed, longing for human interaction and a hand to hold, she said.

So one day, she grabbed a blanket and a chalkboard and went to the street, setting her project in motion through the best medium she could think of — palm reading. With the blanket laid out on the ground and the chalkboard reading "Free Palm Readings, Accuracy Not Guaranteed" leaning against the brick wall behind her, customers began flocking and Wong's project began.

"It's not really something you have to believe in or fake science or anything like that, but for me, it was just a way to connect with people and that is all that really matters," Wong said.

She said she began studying palm reading at about 8 years old, reading any book she could find about the art of reading palms. However, this phase ended shortly after it began, she said, and she didn't revisit the idea of palm reading until she developed "An Excuse to Hold Your Hand." In fact, Wong read palms for the first time the day she set up shop on the busy Maine sidewalk.

"I was really up-front with people too," she said. "As soon as someone sat down, I'd be like, 'I don't really know how to read palms.' Then at the end of it, I would tell them that the whole thing was just me wanting to hold someone's hand. And they were touched."

After a successful six-hour-long first day of reading 22 palms, Wong decided to continue the project she deemed a social experiment and eventually expanded the project from one day to eight weeks. Each day brought new faces from all walks of life, she said, and she formed a special connection with each person. Wong said she would spend anywhere between five minutes and one hour with individuals, serving as a therapist for some and a shoulder to cry on for others.

Throughout the project, Wong asked for no payment. Nonetheless, grateful individuals would slip money under her blanket, she said. In addition, people often bought her lunch, keeping her well-fed throughout the project, she joked.

"I think that they felt like they owed me something, but really all that I wanted was their hand to hold," she said. "If there was some sort of camaraderie, they had already fulfilled that. They'd already paid their dues."

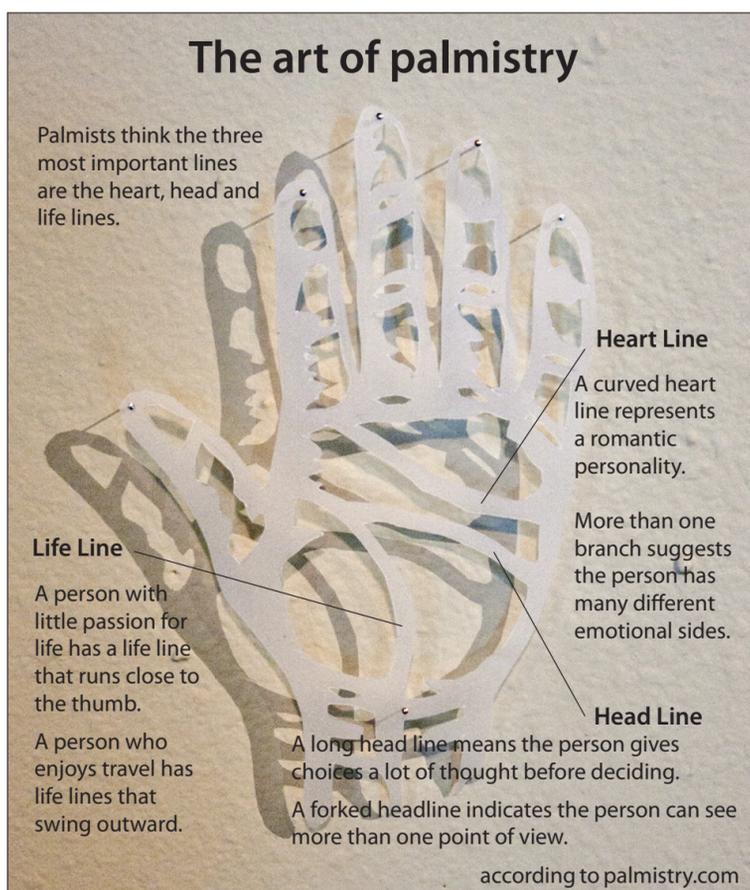
Because The Maine College of Art is a medium residency program, Wong spends summers in Maine and the remaining two trimesters working outside Portland, which led her to return to Missouri during October 2011, she said. Wong, who always has been interested in anatomical art, wanted to document "An Excuse to Hold Your Hand," and use clinical research to aid her, but was unsure of what steps to take, she said. That's when Julie Lochbaum, Truman education professor and former A.T. Still University medical education professor, stepped in.

"I said 'What's your dream?' and she said 'You know, there is this idea I've always had about ATSU and art and the human body, but nothing ever came of it,'" Lochbaum said. "She had the concept, she just didn't know the concrete steps to take."

Lochbaum, a longtime admirer of Wong's artwork, help set up an art residency for Wong at A.T. Still University, making her the school's first artist in residence.

Under the supervision of Jason Haxton, A.T. Still Museum of Osteopathic Medicine and International Center for Osteopathic History director, Wong began working on "A Funeral For Your Past," the art exhibit currently on display at the Kirksville Arts Association.

The residency provided Wong with personal work space and access to the school's medical collection and resources, including medical books, exhibited human specimens and skeletal remains,



Haxton said. Wong used the resources to further study human anatomy, but more specifically the hand, because of her interest in palm reading and her experiences with palm reading in Maine.

Haxton, who also has studied palm reading, was interested in Wong's work and thinks her residency is a great success, he said, and hopes to see many more art residents at ATSU during the future through collaboration with the Truman art department.

"Joyce added one more component and gave the students one more opportunity outside the classroom to grow a little bit and have an escape," Haxton said. "It allows our students who are always busy with medical education to have an outlet and to experience things that are not

classroom related. They get to be part of an art movement."

While the exhibit, which is on display until Feb. 20, was an important experience for her, Wong said it is secondary to "An Excuse to Hold Your Hand," and serves as a documentation of that project.

She said she thinks she might finally receive closure when she has her own palm read, but she has not yet had the opportunity. Including palm readings she has given at Truman and at her exhibit's opening, Wong she has had nearly 500 palms to read, 500 people to meet and 500 hands to hold.

"I felt like for a few minutes, I gave people a more communal loneliness when I held their hand," Wong wrote on her blog. "Somehow, we were all connected."



Alumna Joyce Wong's sculptural piece "Palm Garden," sits on display at the Kirksville Arts Association. Wong, now a graduate student at Maine College of Art, was inspired by her experiences reading palms. The exhibit will be on display until Feb. 20 and includes sculptures, drawings and velum hands (see above infographic). Blaise Hart-Schmidt/Index