

object lessons



Folding Fan,
2021.

Cherry, fabric, and glue,
12 x 72.25 x 131 in.

Atterbury's work is on view in "+ collection," an exhibition of recent acquisitions at the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine, through April 28, 2024.

Elizabeth Atterbury

▶ *Folding Fan* is based on a fan that belonged to my maternal grandmother, Lily Lung-Yi Liu Wang. I have no memory of her using it, nor can I recall when I pulled it out of a box, hung it on my studio wall, and started thinking about it as a form. Initially, I appreciated the look of the fan most when it was folded and closed—the layered blades stacked and sandwiched together, the alternating notches in the middle, visually minimal but suggestive.

When open, my grandmother's fan presents small, delicate paintings on silk—mountains, reeds, willows, cherry blossoms in bloom; a pond, a pagoda, and two figures rowing a boat. These landscapes on fabric, glued to the wood, hold all of the pieces

together. Closed, the fan fabric compresses into slivers of red, pink, and green. Turned on its side, it has a contour like a figure, with neck and shoulders, arms folded in, legs coming together to a point.

When folded, *Folding Fan* is just over six feet long. Closing and opening it, I think about clocks, the inside of a chambered nautilus shell, endings and beginnings as concurrent events. I see a turkey tail, spiral stairs, a hand of playing cards, and Barbara Morgan's famous portrait of Martha Graham in the ballet *Letter to the World*. And I think about potential—specifically, female potential. Latent potential. My grandmother's potential, never fully realized. My mother's potential, never fully articulated. And also my own. ■