

REVIEWS

CONTEMPORARY CHINOISERIE

COLLYER BRISTOW GALLERY,
LONDON WC1R

11 SEPTEMBER – 26 NOVEMBER, 2008
REVIEWED BY GIGI CHANG

This year has seen a craze for embracing all things Chinese. Out of the resulting babel of exhibitions pipes up the lone voice of *Contemporary Chinoiserie*, to present a selection of responses to the country by nine artists from Britain and Canada. Brought together by their personal links with the country – through family, marriage and emigration – these artists provide a unique outsider's view, re-imagining China in much the same way as Western craftsmen of the 18th century did with the exotic and prettified style of Chinoiserie.

As may be expected, the works abound with motifs from traditional Chinese art and design, such as stylised flowers, dragons and sages. Pamela So's strangely grainy photographs see brightly coloured cardboard cut-outs of floral motifs – which So refers to as 'aliens' – inserted among real foliage. Lisa Cheung's porcelain work mixes the modern (Mao suits, jumbo jets) with traditional patterns on crockery that recall the export wares made for foreign markets in the 18th and 19th century.

This disparate group of artists are also captivated by gastronomy, perhaps because for many, the ubiquitous Chinese restaurants and take-aways of modern cities may be their first in-person encounter with 'China'.



'Chinese Princess',
Lisa Cheung,
laser-cut acrylic, 2007

Particularly notable is the micro-sculpture created by Gayle Chong Kwan out of up-turned tin takeaway boxes. Bases of the boxes are gouged out and shaped into delicate leaves and flowers. The fragile beauty and laborious craftsmanship is a strong contrast to the crude experience of takeaway meals, subverting the disposable nature of mass-produced containers.

Karen Tam provides more biting commentary on the perception of Chinese restaurants – as well as such larger social issues as cheap labour – through the vernacular craft of paper-cutting. Her messages are cleverly embedded within traditional imageries

of mythical creatures and figures, recreating familiar compositions for a modern audience.

Curators Lucy Day and Eliza Gluckman have efficiently incorporated nearly 70 pieces into the gallery space formed by the reception and meeting rooms of a solicitor's office. I was impressed by the unusual layout, which made viewing the works like a treasure hunt, but did feel rather uncomfortable lingering on video works in this world.

The vision of China represented in this exhibition is, as its title suggests, still a romantic and fanciful one, though more actively engaged and critical than its antecedents. Moments of darker realities do pierce through uncomfortably, with Helen Couchman's paper works commenting on the changes in Beijing's built environment and Gayle Chong Kwan's detached observation of the deserted English-style satellite town outside Shanghai.

Contemporary Chinoiserie does not pretend to present radical new insights into modern China, although it is interesting to see works by overseas Chinese artists, who are often overshadowed by their mainland counterparts. The diversity on show is also a necessary reminder that it is a mistake to think of one overreaching 'Western' view. To some extent, I felt the curators had been too predictable in their choices, as some of the works reinforce reassuring stereotypes about China – but it is fair to say that the exhibition delivers the content that the title promises.

GIGI CHANG WAS ASSISTANT CURATOR OF CHINA DESIGN NOW AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM