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Diner Of The Mind

EXHIBIT EXAMINES HISTORY OF CHINESE IN CANADA THROUGH META-CAFÉ
by *Bart Gazzola*

ON ROCK GARDEN
AKA Gallery
Runs to October 10

One of the more fascinating — and disheartening — aspects of relocating to Saskatchewan is that your national narrative, or your "national imagination" (to parse from all that postcolonial theory that infests the university world), has to change. You can't perceive a national election, for example, the same way: after all, when I still lived in Ontario, it was understood we were the centre of the universe at the ballot box. Now, in SK, we have a prime minister who can treat us like a punching bag — and yet, god forbid we vote for anyone else. (I'm tempted to respond to the cowardice of our MPs on equalization by asking, in a bad cockney voice, if we can have another, sir?)



Now, before you wonder what tangent I've gone off on this time, let me ground this: a lot of these ideas were running through my head as I spoke to Karen Tam, the artist exhibiting *On Rock Garden* at AKA gallery. In discussing that exhibit, we can use theory-speak and cite \$50 words such as authenticity and Diaspora, and all the post-colonial theorists out there will be getting all hot and bothered. But what we're really talking about here, in regards to Tam's mock Chinese restaurant installation — or perhaps that should be "meta Chinese restaurant" — at AKA is whose history counts, whose doesn't, and who decides this.

Revisionist history is the worst form of arrogance: but I also despise glossing over history, to make it palatable to the children and more sensitive types, like we often see at the Western Development Museum. Our country's history is a minefield, as is the history of the states' interaction with the respective nations found within our borders.

The gallery space is completely believable as a Chinese restaurant: tables, laminated menus, Chinese zodiac placemats, pictures on the mint green walls — and in fact, some of the detritus here is salvaged from the building's previous incarnation as Toon's Kitchen. But if you sit down to read the menus you begin to see that all is not as it seems: menu items include some of the following 'explanations': "Dog Muncher — Asians. They have been known to eat dogs," or the equally cringe worthy "Chinaman — self-explanatory."

The walls have older photographs, of other "Chinese cafés," and Tam explained these have accumulated as *On Rock Garden* traveled around the country. As you advance past the "counter," in the back of the gallery is a video of Tam's father cooking in the family restaurant: Tam has mined her own experience for this presentation of contested historical narratives.

This is a resonant exhibit, on a variety of levels: the fact that AKA + paved's building used to be Toon's kitchen is the most immediate and superficial of these, but the Chinese café (as an aspect of Canadian history most of us like to gloss over with shiny wet eyes while speaking of the immigrant experience and the notion of Canada as a welcoming country) is more important. We don't like to speak of the genteel racism of the head tax, or that owning and operating a Chinese Café didn't automatically make you a valued merchant in the community, someone to be consulted and considered in the larger society. Compare this with something like Don Atchison's family, and their store, and how that would be perceived differently — more favourably — than families like Tam's: it's understandable why someone like Atchison would want to be mayor, and fully believe that he could, just as it is still obvious that, in our society, there remains an unspoken assertion of knowing your station, and not rising above it.

The artist statement asserts that, "aside from Tam's humorous use of mimicry, her project also serves as a cultural critique. Tam grew up in a restaurant-owning family and views the Chinese restaurant as a metaphor for an imaginary China, imagined by the West as a place recreated by the Chinese in the West. Tam's work looks at cultural identity and authenticity, and has dealt with the history of the Chinese Diaspora, especially its close connection to the emergence of Chinese restaurants and cuisine in North America."

Tam's work is like Ignazio Itturia's work about the military juntas in Uruguay during the cold war that was at the Mendel a while back, or Arthur Renwick's *Delegates of Earth and Sky* in the aneco off site art project: its relevance is not confined to the gallery space, and it reveals some uncomfortable truths — and while they may be couched in humour, the best comedians are the ones who say what otherwise would be unspeakable.

Overall, *On Rock Garden* is an insightful and innovative inaugural exhibition for the renovated space at AKA.