



Installation brings East and West together

By Robert Reid, Record staff

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"East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet"

— *Ballad of East and West* by Rudyard Kipling

WATERLOO — The great political wall of China that kept that country insulated and isolated from the rest of the world for so long is not as impenetrable as it once was.

Détente, diplomacy, state visits, cultural exchanges and trade agreements have all contributed to opening the door between East and West.

Nonetheless, there is still considerable misunderstanding between China and the West, reflected in cultural stereotypes, clichés, assumptions, preconceptions and caricatures that persist.

Globalization and the technological revolution, encompassing the internet and social media, have opened lines of cultural communication.

Conversely, the migration of North American jobs to Asia in the absence of human rights, health and safety regulations, labour laws, manufacturing codes and environmental standards has complicated cultural relations.

Karen Tam is a Canadian artist of Chinese ancestry who lives and works in Montreal, although she is currently a doctoral candidate in England. She has exhibited work extensively across Canada and around the world.

Her intriguing installation *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den* investigates cultural identity with insight, sensitivity and wit.

On view in the Robert Langen Art Gallery at Wilfrid Laurier University through April 19, the installation is an imagined replica of an opium den.

By combining authentic Chinese objects with mass-produced, ersatz items purchased at discount stores, Tam raises questions about cultural identity and the commodification of art.

Opium Den is a response to a romanticized stereotype of Chinese culture that blends exoticism and eroticism with decadence — the forbidden fruit with a Chinese twist.

The installation consists of a number of mats laid out on the floor, with pillows. The mats are separated by carved room dividers and beaded, fringe curtains. An oriental carpet is placed in the centre of the floor.

The walls have been painted red and the space is illuminated by vintage bronze lanterns salvaged from a Chinese restaurant in Vancouver.

The space is filled with Chinese artifacts, including scroll paintings and such iconic cultural objects as stylized lions, ceremonial tea sets and miniature Buddhas.

Sometimes it is difficult to discern authentic Chinese objects from the fake objects. In other cases, the cheap



Pagoda Pads - buddhas. A selection of laughing Buddhas, part of Karen Tam's art installation called *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den*, now on display at Wilfrid Laurier University's Robert Langen Gallery. Mathew McCarthy/Record staff Source: Record staff

bric-a-brac is easy to spot.

Tam's point is that when cultural stereotypes are appropriated by mass pop culture, the line between authentic and counterfeit is blurred. Consequently, a fake antique opium pipe is set alongside a water-pipe and a farmer's bamboo pipe.

Opium Den has to be experienced to be appreciated. A viewer has to slowly and attentively take in the space, absorb the atmosphere and contemplate the myriad objects as they relate to what we think about both the real and the imagined China.

The exhibition catalogue, designed as a Chinese menu, consists of a series of short plays inspired by *Opium Den* written by award-winning Waterloo playwright Sunil Kuruvilla.

Art installation

Pagoda Pads: Opium Den by Karen Tam

Through April 9

Robert Langen Art Gallery, John Aird Centre, Wilfrid Laurier University

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