

Sweet-sour memories at Shangri-La Café



Peter Goddard

Years back, in an attempt to show my father what progress was really all about, I took him to the hippest new Chinese restaurant I could find for dim sum, something he'd never had.

He took one look at the pasty white plops of delicately boiled squid or whatever it was and blanched. This was Chinese food? He was agghast. Where were the sweet-and-sour chicken balls varnished in that syrupy nuclear-sunset yellow sauce? Where were the dangling red Chinese lanterns? Where's the real thing?

He would have felt utterly at home in the *Shangri-La Café*. Karen Tam's installation at YZ Artists' Outlet, which does nothing less than recreate the soul of every down-to-earth, old-style mom-and-pop Chinese restaurant across the country — a place "as Chinese as bird's nest soup and pigtails," according to the ironic fortune cookie-like note provided by the 28-year-old Montreal artist in a bowl on a café countertop.

"My parents, Gordon and Christina Tam, ran the restaurant Aux Sept Bonheurs in east-end Montreal before selling it and semi-retiring," says Tam. "They're now working there part-time to make pocket money for their trip to China. We lived in an apartment above the restaurant. It was where I grew up. So I started to document it and eventually thought about recreating it, using the ideas that people had about the Chinese restaurant."

The ideas are there all right, even if no food is served. A dreaminess floods Tam's restaurant as the light from the red-and-white Chinese lanterns is reflected by the hard surfaces of the tabletops and glass display case. Shadows are cast along walls. A wooden divider with an ornate carved pattern is near the door, separating all the mysteries that go with this space from the mundane non-Chinese Canada outside.

Here and there in the *Shangri-*

La Café concessions are made to a non-Chinese world. A carcass of an old-fashioned Coca-Cola counter dispenser is behind the counter. You can order "Golden Brown Fish & Chips English Style" for 70 cents.

It's like walking into the set of a retro-movie set in the 1940s, where you might expect to hear a little Artie Shaw on the jukebox. But this is not just any old Chinese restaurant. It's every old Chinese restaurant all at once. One sign suggests you're at Restaurant Montage d'Or in Quebec for some "riz frit." But another notice says it's the Ricksha Drive-In where the rice is fried.

In fact, Tam's restaurant has morphed over the years following installations in Chicago, Halifax, Montreal, Kelowna, B.C., and Brandon, Man.

"It was the centre of cultural activities in a lot of towns so my restaurant takes on different incarnations," says the artist. "The show in Brandon was in a much bigger space. I showed half of a kitchen there, a living space and a games room. In the '50s and '60s, a lot of the restaurants would have games rooms where there'd be gambling.

"After YZ, it'll go to Saint-Hyacinthe as the *Jardin Chow Chow Garden*, to London as *Old Silver Moon*, Windsor as *House of Wong*, and Saint John as *Oriental Years*. In 2007 it'll be in Saskatoon as *On Rock Gardens*, Edmonton as *Miss Chinatown* and Calgary. I haven't decided on that name yet."

Tam cooked up the idea for the restaurant as her 2002 master's thesis at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she studied sculpture after graduating from Concordia University in Montreal. *Shangri-La Café* connects with a hefty tradition of the restaurant as art installation that goes back at least to Ed Kienholz's *The Beanyery* in 1965, where the Los Angeles artist replicated Barney's Beanyery, a West Hollywood bar.

Al's Café, a 1969 installation by American installation artist Allen Ruppersberg, was recreated for a recent show at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. As with Tam's restaurant, *Al's Café* looked as if it had been airlifted from some tiny midwestern town, with every familiar item, from the old tablecloths to the faded postcards, left intact.



Karen Tam's classic composite Chinese restaurant — the exhibit changes with each new city — began as a master's thesis, where she documented everyday life at her parents' Montreal restaurant.

But if Ruppersberg's efforts were a realization of hyper-reality, Tam's restaurant is a realization of hyper-nostalgia for an object, an experience and a way of life quickly disappearing.

"I see it as something that brings back memories for people, whether for the customers or the restaurant workers," she says. "My parents took an active part in the installation. My uncle (Kwanchee Tam) kept telling me it reminds him of his restaurant. There was a similar pattern to these restaurants. The region where most of the workers came from is Toishan, in Guangdong Province.

"These restaurants were the most visually exotic things in many small towns. Now the people who worked in them have either retired or passed away."

Shangri-La Café: A Division of Gold Mountain Restaurant by Karen Tam is at YZ Artists' Outlet, 401 Richmond St. W., Suite 140, until Aug. 12.

pgoddard@thestar.ca