

# Chinese cafes become art form

When Karen Tam was a girl, her parents' small Chinese restaurant on a corner in east-end Montreal was her second home. She ate meals there, did homework at one of the tables and, when she was old enough, waited on tables.

Her parents are now retired and the restaurant has new owners, but Tam continues to explore the milieu by researching and recreating family-run Chinese cafés at art galleries across Canada.

The latest version is the *Big Wok (Big Trouble) Café* in the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art in the Rotary Centre for the Arts until May 28.

Tam has gathered a mismatched collection of aluminum-legged tables and chairs from the 1950s along with an assortment of plastic plants and kitschy paintings.

She displays them along with chinoiserie donated by Kelowna residents and her own creations – elaborate red paper cut-outs pasted onto hand-made paper lanterns and pinned to the wall.

She also created two four-foot high Chinese characters – the double happiness symbol – by painstakingly gluing gold sequins one by one to a styrofoam cutout.

The menus explain certain food dishes, refer to racial slurs and reflect on the experiences of immigrants. The exhibition essay for the show is presented on a paper take-out menu.

"I'm hoping to bring people back into their memories of going to the local Chinese restaurant and, at the same time, to make people more aware of the history and experiences of Chinese restaurant culture," says Tam.

In each city that Tam works, she interviews local restaurant owners about their experiences and does research in archives.

Here, that led her to build two curtained booths that mimic those she saw in old photographs of the City Park Café, once a gathering spot in Kelowna's now disappeared Chinatown.

"People do share their stories about how it reminds them of the small-town Chinese restaurant they used to go to," she says. "Longtime residents automatically recognize the booth as a replica of the City Park Café that was in operation in the 1940s and 1950s.

"For kids, I think they get a kick out of it because



Event art

Portia Priegert

it's an interactive installation. There's a lot of things for them to touch and go through."

The strength of the work is its multi-layered quality – it blends Canadian and Chinese influences to evoke the cultural displacement experienced by immigrants.

For instance, she creates a karaoke machine out of a television that features Western golden oldie songs in Chinese with blended video images of Kelowna and China. The song's text runs along

the bottom in English.

Although Tam is fascinated by Chinese restaurants, she says she felt no desire to take over the family business when her parents retired.

Running a restaurant is not an easy life – the work is hard, the hours long and pleasing customers can be a strain. Her parents, like countless other immigrants, worked hard so she could get a good education – a master's degree in 2002 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the top art schools in the United States.

Now they are keen collaborators with her work, helping her locate materials for her installations and they plan to travel with her as she researches Chinese restaurants in rural Quebec.

**VERNON:**

Vancouver Island artist Marci Katz invites the viewer into past experiences and emotional memories with layered charcoal drawings in a show that runs to June 18 at Gallery-Vertigo in Vernon.

Her show, *Mixed Messages*, encourages viewers to engage with the fantasies and fairy tales of childhood. She will give a talk tonight at 7.

The gallery is also showing *We Are All Assembled Here*, a series of mixed media works by Vernon artist Robin McDonald.

McDonald, a self-described junk collector, creates assemblages of odd assortments of objects.

She will talk Saturday at 12:30 p.m.

The members' wall features paintings by Malcolm MacDougall.



Portia Priegert/eVent photo

Karen Tam strikes a pose in her installation.

An opening reception will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. Gallery Vertigo, a non-profit artist-run centre founded in 2002, is located at 3001 - 31st St. in Vernon. Call 503-2297 for information.

**KELOWNA:**

The Kelowna Museum is showing artwork by the late Gwen Lamont, a longtime arts activist. Lamont, who lived in Kelowna for 30 years, studied with artist Arthur Lismer of the Group of Seven and was active as a costume and set designer. The show runs to July 23. The Kelowna Museum is located at 470 Queensway Ave. and is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is by donation.

- Portia Priegert is a freelance writer and visual artist.

