

False perspective, my old China

Sarah Walters meets Karen Tam, an artist challenging the cultural stereotypes that bedevil the West's view of China

HOMAGE or racism? That's the question posed by a new exhibition from Canadian artist Karen Tam as she looks at the growth of Chinoiserie in the West. Karen has spent months studying and collecting items and ideas copied from the East by Western culture, and her latest *Breathe Residency*, at the Chinese Arts Centre, examines how notions of China are reconstructed in popular culture.

Her long term interest in the interiors and décor of Chinese restaurants led Karen to examine how photographs, music, text and other exotic accessories have been adopted into Western culture to form a Chinoiserie sense of the communist country.

Karen, who lives and works in Montreal, presents her observations through a series of Pagoda Pods - small modern-day rooms decked out with items designed with a certain image of the East in mind - that the public can walk around.

She uses the rooms to express her malaise with the idea that China as a region can be understood through ornaments, décor and spiritual approaches to interior design.

In my research, I've found that, generally, popular culture takes the surface ideas, looks and

designs without investigating in depth the meanings or looking at the people," said Karen, 29, whose parents are originally from Hong Kong.

"People say, 'I know about Chinese culture because I have a Chinese vase', but that's problematic for me. The vase does not stand for our culture or our people. In Hollywood or on TV, the Chinese are seen as gamblers, opium addicts or dragon ladies - that fills me with both fascination and repulsion."

Karen says that everything in her studio has been chosen to challenge our perceptions of Chinese life - whatever you see in the pods, you won't find in China. "I have different rooms, like a Zen bedroom and another room full of kitsch. I've also inserted different objects and fragments of text that have a more critical and racist slant to make people think about what they're looking at."

"I feel repulsed by some of the objects and the whole idea that you can appreciate a culture by, say, making your own Chinese take away box. But I know that they mean well - I hope the rooms will also make people laugh."

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 = Karen's *Breathe Residency* is open until February 19, and Karen will be available at her open studio to talk to visitors about the exhibits until February 12.



» **STEREOTYPES?** A pagoda pod (The Opium Den) from Karen Tam's *Breathe Residency* at the Chinese Arts Centre looking at the pernicious effects of Chinoiserie; a stencilled wall hanging from the exhibition