



Simon Fujiwara: Since 1982 / Interview with Karen Tam
Kurt Perschke's RedBall Project / Adam Chodzko
What is Public Art? / Associate Programmes
KARST / River Cottage / Anthology of Rural Life
Why aren't People Writing about Theatre in the South West?
Festival Previews / The Fish Factory / Josh Greet
Raissa Ioussouf / The Shop



Nom de Strip promotes culture across the arts, regeneration and creative entrepreneurship in the South West, focusing attention on the individuals, groups and organisations that contribute to the regions growing cultural profile.

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4 Simon Fujiwara: Since 1982

A belated review and interview

8 Interview with Karen Tam

We talk to Sinopticon artist, Karen Tam about her Golden Mountain series

10 Kurt Perschke's RedBall Project

A review by Emma Weatherhead

12 What is Public Art?

A discussion by Pamela Peter-Agbia

16 Adam Chodzko On Tour

We talk to Adam Chodzko about his recent commissions in the South West

18 Associate Programmes

What do we want from an associate program in Plymouth?

20 KARST

Plymouth's new contemporary art space

25 River Cottage

The big fish in Royal William Yard

28 Anthology of Rural Life

Oliver Udy tells us about his latest project, documenting contemporary rural life in Cornwall

30 Why aren't People Writing about Theatre in the South West?

Hannah Silva and Thomas John Bacon share their views on theatre criticism in the region

33 Soon

39 Festival Previews

43 Fresh Meat: The Fish Factory

44 Fresh Meat: Josh Greet

46 Fresh Meat: Raissa Ioussouf

47 Fresh Meat: The Shop

Interview with Karen Tam

*We talk to Sinopticon artist, Karen Tam about her Golden Mountain series
Words by Pamela Peter-Agbia*

Karen Tam is one of 13 artists exhibiting in Sinopticon (go and see it before 7 July). She is also one of the nicest artists EVER. Since 2001, she has been grappling with the subjects of cultural identity and authenticity through installations and video works.



Karen grew up in Montreal, Canada in a Chinese Canadian restaurant owned by her parents. The restaurant, in the East-end of Montreal, served Western appropriations of Chinese food tailored to the predominantly French community.

After 26 years, whilst Karen was at grad school, her parents decided to close the family's restaurant. This, she says, was the precursor to her series of *Gold Mountain* restaurant installations started in 2002. 'I guess I just wanted to capture the place where I grew up, that was so special to me and my friends.' Karen started taking photos and making video documentations of the restaurant and her family, which precipitated her thinking about why so many of the Chinese community she knew were involved in the restaurant trade.

Her work is of genuine intrigue, with many layers and aspects to be appreciated in different ways. Aside from being fun and aesthetically pleasing, *Gold Mountain* serves as a vehicle for cultural critique. On one level a lot of the work is autobiographical and looks to recreate copies of her past and her community. On another, the work is political – although the term political art doesn't thrill her – it explores aspects of racism and social stereotypes that still characterize the experience of the Chinese community.

One video she made, of interviews with restaurateurs, features a man of Chinese/Ukrainian descent. 'His dad is Chinese and his mum is Ukrainian,' she tells us. 'His mum passed away during child birth and his father moved the whole family to China and he didn't return until he was

20. It was a really strange experience for him ... he was born in Canada, he has more Western features, but his English is not that great.' This becomes a weird tension for him. 'I remember him telling me that when he got married in Hong Kong and came back to Canada with his wife, the customs officer at the border was really questioning why he was coming into the country. He said really confidently, "I'm a Canadian citizen! I was born here!"'

Karen travels to cities all over Canada, to see what is different, and what is similar about old Chinese restaurants in terms of experiences and the decor. The work talks primarily about the history of these places and the experience of restaurateurs in the Chinese community, particularly some of the racism and discrimination that they face.

One of the first restaurants created was *No MSG at Friendship Dinner*, at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax in Nova Scotia. This was a five-week residency which culminated in a recreation of an old-style family Chinese restaurant from the 1950s to 1970s based on meetings with retired Chinese restaurateurs and using found, fabricated, borrowed furniture, props and equipment from local businesses and individuals. This installation includes the dining area, a game room, a kitchen, living quarters, and a storage area. The game room contains a pinball machine and karaoke, all sourced and borrowed through interactions with the local community.

Karen's installations are so seemingly real and aesthetically pleasing, if it wasn't for the fact that they existed in gallery spaces, you probably wouldn't

question their authenticity. 'People back home call me the Restaurant Lady.' I wonder if anybody has ever just turned up, had a nice meal and left again, without realising where they were, and I ask her how she would feel about that.

'There are enough layers in the installations for people to interpret it however they want and take from the work whatever they want. If they want to take the work at face value, that's fine. But I think most people spending a bit of time in the installations pick up on the deeper, serious issues that I'm talking about.'

'I don't engage with overly political work. I get turned off. What I try to do is lure people in, either through humour, or through how the pieces look, seduce them in. Once you get them in, I can say "this is what the work is really about"'. For example, with the restaurant series Karen says, 'maybe when they go and eat Chinese, they'll look at the restaurant differently and maybe think about the family who run it and how they live.'

NB

Karen Tam:
karentam.ca

Sinopticon:
sinopticon.org



Karen Tam, *Golden Mountain*. Photo courtesy the artist



Karen Tam, *Terra dos Chineses*, 2011-12, mixed media, soap, papier-mâché, aluminum foil, courtesy the artist



Karen Tam, *Terra dos Chineses*, 2011-12, mixed media, soap, papier-mâché, aluminum foil, courtesy the artist