

# PLAYING CHOPSTICKS

INSTALLATION ARTIST KAREN TAM SERVES UP THE  
CHINESE RESTAURANT

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It's pretty clear from the start that you're walking into a simulation. But the eerie familiarity still makes you flip through the Rolodex of your senses – I can see it, but can I hear it? Can I smell it?

What 26-year-old Chinese-Canadian art grad Karen Tam has attempted to create is the illusion of a Chinese restaurant within the walls of the MAI gallery. She's gone all-out: There's an ornate gate decorating the entrance, red and gold lanterns hanging from up high, custom-made paper placemats and plasticized menus on a plausible arrangement of tables. Walk all the way into the gallery, weave a path past the fish tank, fake plants and porcelain Buddhas, and you'll see the doors to the kitchen. Forbidden land of hidden treasure? No, this time we are invited in: The rudimentary structures (a grill, a table, some shelves) are there for us to observe and explore, incomplete yet sufficient to identify the space as a kitchen. On the wall is projected a film of a man preparing dishes in a real version of this facsimile – that was the sound I heard as I walked in. I knew I'd heard the sounds of cooking.

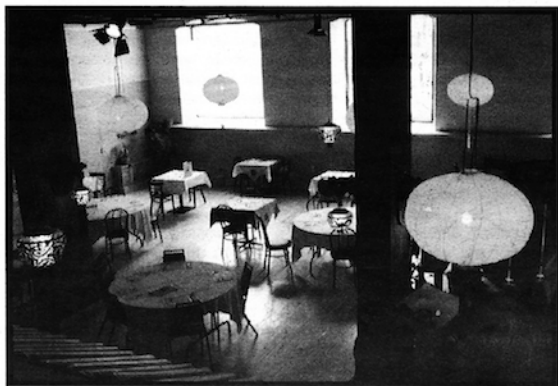
Aside from being a fun exercise in mimicry, *Gold Mountain Restaurant*, as Tam's project is called, serves as a vehicle for cultural critique. Tam grew up in a restaurant-owning family, surrounded by restaurant-owning friends and relatives. For the artist in her, this provided an expertise to set out and study the cultural underpinnings that define Western family-owned Chinese restaurants. Unbeknownst to most unthinking dim sum lovers, there is nothing quite like the business of food as breeding ground for prejudice and stereotype.

Did you know, for example, that most of the dishes eaten in your average Chinatown restaurant are never served in China? Egg foo yung, chow mein, chop suey, egg rolls and fortune cookies have come to be only since the first wave of Chinese immigration to Canada in 1850. Did you also know that the red, gold, lantern-laden, bamboo-inflected settings we unquestioningly take as an invitation to chow

down now are just as unrepresentative of the restaurants in their country of origin? Did you know, too, that "gold mountain" was the Chinese name for Canada during the immigration craze of the early 1900s? Canada was perceived as a land of opportunity.

Tam's methods in demonstrating the perceptive divide are two-fold. The first is that eeriness I spoke of, that creeping sense that something is askew and therefore being mocked. The makeshift aspect of the décor in and of itself is an indicator. The plants are plastic and scrawny; the fish in the tank are fake. The entrance gate, though ominous in its own way, is just slightly too cardboard-y to ring true. The second method becomes evident after any time spent in the installation. Tam's brasher side comes through, as does her generous dose of good-natured humour. We see jokes. In the

visual



GOLD MOUNTAIN RESTAURANT: MORE ON THE MENU THAN MEETS

THE EYE

photo Mathieu Chartrand

(arts)

menu, she writes the history of dishes and ingredients but also includes the odd racial slur. In the corner of the restaurant section, there's a mouse-trap. In the kitchen, those 50-pounder brown delivery bags are full of MSG. Tam is sly, a pleasant poker of social assumptions in an area of cultural exchange that remains vastly unquestioned.

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Don't forget that this Sunday, May 30, is the 18th edition of **Montreal Museums Day!** Entrance will be free to 30 museums across the city, with free shuttle bus service from one venue to the other. Nothing could be easier, freer or more arty. Surf to [www.montrealmuseums.org](http://www.montrealmuseums.org) for info. (.)

GOLD MOUNTAIN RESTAURANT BY  
KAREN TAM

AT MAI UNTIL JUNE 19