

Two rooms with a view

Exhibits explore identity, illusion versus reality



ELISSA BARNARD
At the Galleries

KAREN TAM grew up in her parents' Chinese restaurant in Montreal.

As an artist, she is fascinated by what the hybrid cuisine and decor of North American Chinese restaurants tell us about identity, cultural expectation and racism.

To make her point, she has constructed the interior of a typical Chinese restaurant, the mom-and-pop kind with red paper lanterns, potted palm trees, a fish tank and a glass jar of fortune cookies.

Her exhibit, *No MSG at Friendship Dinner*, at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, is so accurate, viewers are getting hungry. As one person wrote: "I've been waiting an hour and a half to place my order. What gives?"

Tam, who is Khyber's artist-in-residence to Oct. 8, also researched the history of local Chinese restaurants, videotaping Mary (Ling) Mohammed of Mary's Bread Basket, whose parents ran the Pearl in wartime, Jia Tsu (Chai Chu) Thompson of Mulan Cultural Centre and Greg Fong of Garden View Restaurant.

Initially, the local community was suspicious of her inquiries, just as her own parents had been. "At first it was really hard," says Tam. "But then when I got to Mary and Mrs. Thompson and the Mulan Cultural Centre. They hooked me up and made phone calls, and it was so much easier and they were very, very helpful."

A second video of a man preparing food is Tam's father at work in his kitchen, rapidly laying down egg roll dough like stacks of tiles before filling them.

Tam's great-grandfather came to Halifax in 1908 and ran a restaurant before moving to Montreal.

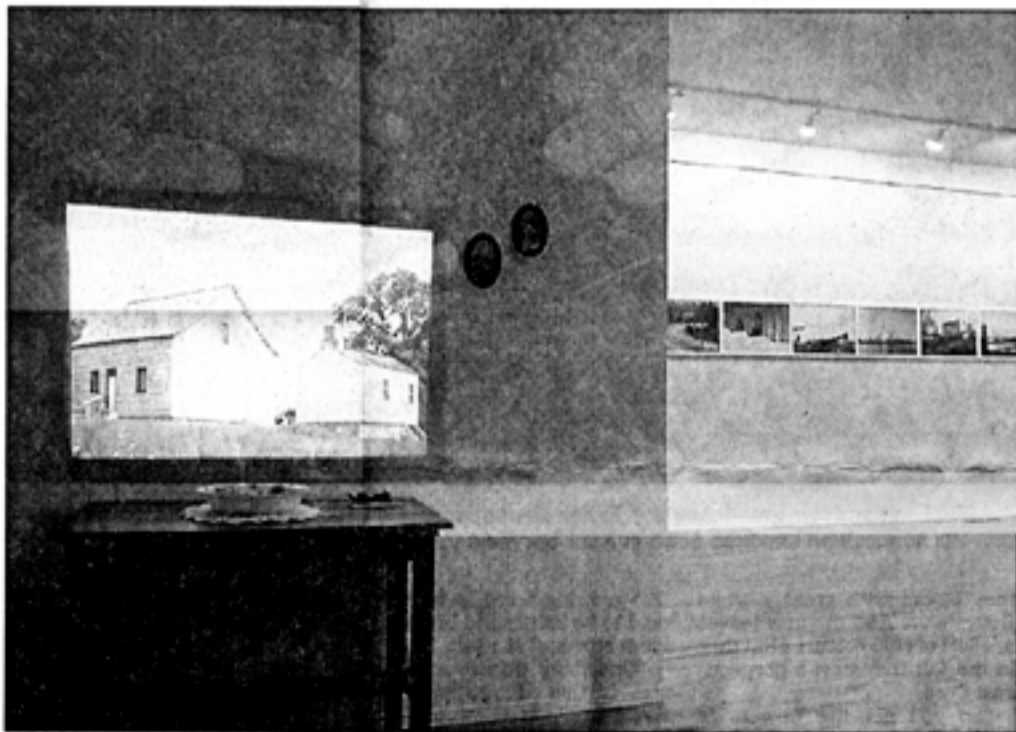
Skipping a generation, her father came to Montreal from his ancestral village in southern China in 1967; he opened his restaurant on Montreal's French-speaking east side in 1978. As a child, Tam lived above the restaurant; later she went there after school to do her homework, to eat and to help out.

"I was always interested in the history of Chinese immigration in North America," she says, having just tried out lunch at the new Hungry Chili Sichuan restaurant on Blowers Street.

"A couple of years ago, when my parents talked about selling the restaurant, I realized this is my second childhood. I spent most of my childhood in the restaurant. I felt I needed to document the place.



Eric Wynne/Herald Photo



Contributed

Mitch Robertson creates a slide show in a living room set as part of his *Original Copy* exhibit of real places and the postcards that idealize them at ART'SPLACE, Annapolis Royal.

"From that I started thinking about how Chinese restaurants inform a lot of their customers of what China is and how the Chinese eat and act."

By deconstructing and elaborately reconstructing her own restaurant, using objects that are common to most establishments, she wanted to "question people's notions of authenticity," says Tam. "And I wanted people to question their own biases or opinions of Chinese people and to make them aware of the history."

In her mock menu for Gold Mountain Restaurant, Tam inserts racist terms among her historical definitions of hybrid

foods like chop suey and chow mein.

"There've been legends that cat was used in chow mein," she says.

The racist terms include "Pancake: Asians. Facial characteristics" and "Kung-fu: Chinese. Chinese delivery person, mainly, 'Is that Kung-Fu with my Lo Mein?'"

Tam also has a sense of humour in her definitions: "Red, red, red! Using red in the décor. Red is associated with happiness and joy in Chinese culture, but it is also the colour for getting people to order more, eat faster and leave sooner for increased customer flow."

For two cents, the viewer can take a fortune sans cookie. "The part I like about the fortune cookie is the fortune and not the cookie," says Tam. "And usually it's stale."

Her fortunes range from the silly ("Put all your money and jewelry in the egg roll and nobody gets hurt"), to the racist, to the moving, with excerpts taken from poems scrawled on the walls at San Francisco's Angel Island Barracks by Chinese detainees in the early 20th century: "My mind is chaotic, like hemp fibres with constant thought of home; / Each meal is hard to swallow, because of sorrow."

Is it art or a restaurant? Karen Tam reconstructs a typical Chinese North American restaurant in *No MSG at Friendship Dinner* at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, to Oct. 11.

Tam is investigating, as catalogue essayist Peggy MacKinnon says, "the Chinese restaurant as a perceived locus of virulence within the larger social body."

Everything from the 1960s term Chinese restaurant syndrome, for reactions to monosodium glutamate (MSG) to public reaction to SARS in Canada, which sent the prime minister to eat in Toronto's Chinatown, are examples of perceived virulence.

Tam also wants to honour the restaurants, the history and the method of preparing foods like egg rolls and spring rolls by hand. Lots of restaurants are now saving time and money by buying manufactured egg rolls and other items. "It's not a lost art, but I want to document it."

Hybrid food is different in different cities, says Tam, a Concordia graduate who received her master's in fine art from the school of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In Chicago, Chinese food includes crab rangoon, a fried wonton filled with cream cheese, lobster or crab and spices, "and it's really good. I'm going to see if I can get my dad to include it at his restaurant."

In Montreal, a unique "fish-shrimp-cake thing" is served at banquets. In Halifax, "I think it's the bo-bo balls," she says.

Tam's non-eatery artwork includes cross-stitching patterns, and slogans on rice bags and making trees and other plants out of precisely folded paper.

She is off to Dublin in December for a four-month artist's

residency. She will, of course, be investigating Irish-Chinese food, as well as Chinoiserie imagery that was popular among Europeans. "I want to see what hybrid dishes are particular to Ireland. That'll be fun."

Mitch Robertson's probing of illusion versus reality is situated in the tourism industry.

He juxtaposes postcard views and his own photographs of the sites in his exhibit *Original Copy*, at ART'SPLACE, 396 St. George St., Annapolis Royal.

People may remember Robertson from his travelling trailer a few years ago that was a museum to his own life. He parked it in front of NSCAD. "In the motor home, I was the tourist attraction; now, I've dropped myself out of it," he says.

Robertson, who lives in Toronto, likes to travel, and this exhibit took him to primarily North American small towns and sites, including the world's largest dinosaur in Drumheller, Alta. "It had to be a place I hadn't been before."

Robertson travelled to the places he had never experienced before, bought a postcard of the attraction and then sought out the precise location from which the postcard was shot. He photographed the same image for a "truer" picture of the site.

Postcards recreate the ideal experience, he says. "It doesn't always look like that. The sky isn't necessarily blue. People might be in the way."

It's the difference between "what is fed to us and what we tend to see and how much we accept of this," he says.

"Like a fast-food menu, the food never looks the way it does in the picture, but we've come to accept it."

The biggest difference between a postcard and Robertson's version was the case of Washington Park in Michigan City, Ind. The postcard came from 1952 and Robertson's photograph from November 2001. "The whole building is gone and the once well-kept park is quite depressed-looking 50 years later," says Robertson. "I bought this postcard in town on a rack. There were lots of them, as if this was still an actual destination to see."

For *Original Copy*, he constructed a living room within the gallery; a slide projector projects the postcards on the wall.

The 40 blown-up vacation photographs, as 16-by-24 framed pictures, are hung on walls outside the living room like a film strip. "One blurs into another like a road trip does and bores the viewer just like when your uncle takes 40 pictures that could have been pared down to five."

A major exhibit of paintings by Elizabeth Cann (1901-1977) and Mabel Killam Day (1884-1960) is at Zwicker's Gallery in Halifax. Both Yarmouth-born artists have been left out of Canadian art history, though they each had a distinguished exhibition history. They returned to Nova Scotia during the Depression and were forgotten by the art establishment.

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