

Joni Low

“To reconstruct an object is to understand it and its materiality”: A conversation with Karen Tam on *Nous sommes tous des brigands/We are All Robbers*

Karen Tam is a Canadian artist whose practice focuses on constructions of cultures and communities. Her installation work recreates and reimagines spaces of cultural encounter, critically examining how Western perceptions of the East or the “Other” have formed and how diasporic cultures also formed in response, often through a critique of contemporary *chinoiserie*. Karen Tam allows materiality to speak where language has not, providing access to overlooked histories and inviting new interpretations of the past and present. Recent solo exhibitions include *SHEEN-wah-ZREE* (Musée d’art contemporain des Laurentides, Saint-Jérôme, Canada, 2016) and *With wings like clouds hung from the sky* (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada, 2017). Her current exhibition, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, curated by Marcel Blouin, will travel to four galleries and museums in Québec, Canada—from Saint-Hyacinthe and Rimouski to Sherbrooke and Loungueuil (2017–20).¹ Following a visit to the exhibition, and on the eve of the first presentation of her work in China at the He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, we sat down to converse about her artistic approach and the role of humour, play, and corporeality in her work, as well as cultural appropriation, exchange, and translation.

Joni Low: Karen, it’s been a pleasure following your work over many years, beginning with your *Gold Mountain Restaurants* installation at Centre A (Vancouver, 2007). Over the past decade you’ve continued to create immersive environments—from opium dens, karaoke lounges, and curio shops to historic artist’s studios—that explore how ideas of “Chineseness” were constructed in the twentieth-century North American imaginary and how this is manifested in visual culture. Your works often play with fiction, historical fact, and the fluidity of interpretation—allowing viewers to engage on multiple levels, from fascination and enjoyment to a more critical questioning of cultural representation, Orientalism, and cultural imperialism.

Could you share with me your most recent exhibition, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*? It looks retrospectively at your installation and sculptural practice, yet it also includes new works specifically about Québécois Jesuit missionaries’ encounters with, and ideas of, Chinese culture. What inspired your approach, and what research did you undertake?



Karen Tam: The *Nous sommes tous les brigands /We are All Robbers* exhibition was conceived as a series of installations inspired by the former Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites in Québec City. This museum was established in 1931 for the introduction and understanding of Chinese culture and art, and also to raise funds for the Jesuits' missionary work in China. For more than fifty years the museum disseminated these works of Chinese art; through their collection, exhibitions, and newsletters, the Jesuits wanted to counter negative preconceptions of China by Canadians at the time and to show China to the Québec public, or at least their version of China. Since 1918, Québec missionaries brought back Chinese objects and art from their overseas missions. These raised astonishment and provoked so many questions about China and the Chinese, leading to an early wish to assemble the objects in one place, and make them regularly accessible to the public. Father Joseph-Louis Lavoie, founder of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites and the missionary newsletter *Le Brigand*, had been a missionary in Xuzhou and later became the Procureur de la Mission à Québec de Chine to raise funds for its missions. He ordered furniture and bibelots from markets in Shanghai as well as the mission's orphanage workshop for the missionary exhibition of Montréal in 1930, which apparently thrilled the 200,000 visitors. When the exhibition closed, the Chinese artefacts were transported to Québec City, where he inaugurated his Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites. The museum exhibited its collection and photographs in sumptuous rooms, where it deployed the exoticism of China to seduce viewers. The Chinese objects collected were not necessarily fine art, but *chinoiserie*, crafted in the Chinese style for the Western market, and the rooms were "Chinese but not too much," as France Lord notes in her study of the collections and missionary exhibitions of the Québec Jesuits.²

Objects from the T'ou-Se-We orphanage art workshop in Zikawei for an exhibition in Montréal, 1930. Courtesy of Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

In 2011, while I was researching another project in the archives of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, I came across several photographs dating possibly from the late 1920s or early 1930s of a Chinese warehouse full of objects and furniture with a sign: “Pour l’exposition à Montréal,” and not much other information except that they were of the T’ou-Se-We (Tushan wan) orphanage art workshop in Zikawei (Xujiahui), Shanghai, and had been in the collection of Catholic missionaries. I was curious to know how my hometown of Montréal was involved and what exposition this was referring to. Would I be able to trace the journey of these artefacts and possibly discover where they ended up? Intrigued by the signage and objects in these photographs, I embarked upon a search for and investigation of a once-popular and now little-known museum, the Musée d’art chinois des Jésuites.

In 2014, when I moved back to Montréal from the United Kingdom, I was able to make more progress on this research, extensively visiting various archives and resources. Initially, I thought this exposition might have been held at the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts (then known as the Art Association of Montréal), but spending time in their archives and library did not allow me to uncover anything. Serge Granger’s book *Le lys et le lotus*³ provided clues on the connection between the Jésuits in Québec and missionary activities in China. In addition, several master’s dissertations, academic papers, and scholarly books on the topic were extremely informative. Following this trail, I approached the Archives of the Jesuits in Canada, as well as the Bibliothèque et archives nationales de Québec, where I found newspaper articles about the Musée d’art chinois des Jesuites and Father Lavoie’s memoirs, *Quand j’étais chinois/When I was Chinese*,⁴ about his time as a missionary in China. I also stumbled on a video clip by the Museum of Civilization in Québec City (MCQ), where Christian Denis, the curator of collections, introduces the viewer to objects that had been part of the Musée d’art chinois des Jesuites and their history (in 1990, the Jesuits donated the contents of their museum to the MCQ). Excitedly, I contacted Denis to discuss my project and to see if I could visit this collection with Marcel Blouin, the curator of the current exhibition and director of EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Saint-Hyacinthe. I also consulted the MCQ Archives, which had a wealth of documents, letters, moving images, and amazing photographs that came with the Jesuit donation and that have since shaped my approach to the exhibition and its installations. One of these documents was entitled “Liste des objets pour l’exposition à Montréal du Orphelinat de T’ou Se We” and included images of artefacts identical to those in the Frankfurt photographs that sparked this whole endeavour. There were also photographs of the exterior and interiors of the Musée d’art chinois des Jésuites. After viewing a selection of over 1800 objects with Christian Denis, we were able to persuade him and the MCQ to lend eleven objects and furniture from this collection, which would be incorporated into my installations. The Seminary of Saint-Hyacinthe, which had the complete set of issues of *Le Brigand*, were kind enough to lend the first two issues along with antique books relating to the missions in China.



Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

Joni Low: Is this a departure from your previous installations? What connections did you hope to make with local audiences?

Karen Tam: Similar to my previous installations, this project is heavily informed by historical and visual research into its subject. Here, I have created sculptures and installations that are contemporary, imagined exhibition displays of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites with artefacts from the original Jesuit collection (now housed by the MCQ) and *chinoiseries* lent by local communities and organizations. Through eleven installation “zones” I attempt to critically examine ethnic or cultural spaces, suggesting how revisiting the history and contexts of a collection such as this can contest and allow new readings and narratives in the discourse of race and cultural representation.

My previous installations looked at spaces of encounters, the Chinese diasporic spaces created by Chinese in the West and the role of self-representation and self-exoticization as means of survival and even as political acts. *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers* differs slightly in that it is exploring an exotic Chinese space created in the West by non-Chinese individuals—Jesuit missionaries who shaped the interpretation, understanding, and, perhaps, even perpetuated stereotypes of Chinese culture and the Chinese community in Québec. Through my collaboration on this exhibition with Marcel Blouin, the ongoing conversations between ourselves and with each community we visited in Québec during this travelling exhibition—and our perceptions as a Québec-born francophone curator and a Québec-born artist of Chinese descent—are constantly challenged and evolving.

And as this exhibition is touring to communities that are predominantly non-Asian, I am curious to learn what knowledge and/or preconceptions people have of Chinese culture and the Chinese community —positive, negative, informed, based on stereotypes, etc. I want to start a dialogue and open up the conversation with the audience about our individual biases through the exhibition, whether simply with them moving in the

space, becoming fascinated with the historical objects from the MCQ, or perplexed with the mixture of found, borrowed, and fabricated artefacts, or even recognizing an event they had participated in as children. It has been a wonderful exercise in engagement with people in the local communities, museums and their staff, religious organizations, and my family and friends, especially with the *Atelier de chinoiseries DIY/DIY Chinoiserie Workshops* and *Acheter un petit chinois!/Buy a Chinese Baby!* installation zones, where the public was invited to participate in workshops or to lend their own collection of *chinoiseries*.

Joni Low: I noticed some of the installation zones are punctuated by ornamental gates, which you've carved. Upon entering, there are the *Village de pagodes/Village of Pagodas*, *Kiosque des gestes oubliés/Kiosk of Forgotten Gestures*, and *La boutique des brigands/The Robbers' Shop*, which include a range of "fake" and "real" *Chinoiserie* objects—some historical, others created by you. Could you lead us through these first installations and your thinking behind the juxtapositions of the replica and the real? The 3D printed ivory pagodas across from the wooden ones from the Musée de la Civilisation, Québec City, were a lovely surprise—it encouraged me to pause before taking things at face value, like a sort of detective travelling through time.

Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Ornamental Gates*, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.



Karen Tam: The series of eleven installation zones within this exhibition were envisioned to allow viewers to wander a similar meandering route that led me to locate the source and story behind the photographs I found in Frankfurt, but also to journey back and forth between the past and present.

Viewers first enter the space by walking under one of the three *Portes ornamentales/Ornamental Gates*, which are simplified versions of a *paifang* or *pailou*, a traditional Chinese architectural arch or gateway that (outside of China) is found in many Chinatowns. They greet visitors to Chinatown, yet, at the same time, demarcate the limits and boundaries of Chinatowns. A similar monumental *arc de triomphe* was constructed at the entrance of the

Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites. My versions of the gates are decorated with wood cutouts with imagery of ginseng, soybeans, and grapes, commodities currently traded between China and Canada. The former two are exported to China, while the grape reference signifies the fledgling wine industry in China.

Past the first gate is the *Village des pagodes/Village of Pagodas*, an installation of various miniature and model pagodas made of plastic, wood, metal, and cardstock. The image of the pagoda is recognizably Chinese and is associated with Chinese culture, having been used in fairs and exhibitions. One such example were the model pagodas shown at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, made by the Tushan wan orphanage workshop run by the Jesuits in China. The orphanage workshop also provided model pagodas and other objects to the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites. Among my set of pagodas are wooden models from the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites; two small "fake" ivory ones (referencing the ivory models of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites) with logos of Chinese companies; a cardstock one in the form of the pagoda in Montréal's Chinatown (in the Parc de la Pagode), which was constructed in 1967 as part of the City of Montréal's plans to revitalize Chinatown and torn down when the land was expropriated by the government; two wooden pagoda-



Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Village des pagodes/Village of Pagodas*, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

shaped display units; and a few readymade 3D metal model versions. Plastic toy soldiers depicting military figures from the Boxer Rebellion, WWII era, and modern Chinese Army are found throughout the model pagodas, acting both as guardians and bandits of culture.

Following the pagodas is the *Kiosque des gestes oubliées/Kiosk of Forgotten Gestures*, which includes original objects from the collection of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites along with other readymades, found items, and fabricated sculptures. Questioning the display and interpretation of culture



Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Kiosque des gestes oubliés/Kiosk of Forgotten Gestures*, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

and community, this installation recreates and combines how Québec Jesuits and other religious groups constructed their missionary kiosks and exhibits on China. Missionary exhibitions brought together dozens of religious communities to promote their missionary activities, past and present. Through the created exotic spectacles and celebration, they aimed to arouse feelings of pity and indignation in the viewers who would feel compelled to contribute financially to the missions. In the space of the *Kiosk* is a recording of *Music for Robbers*, six musical pieces I have arranged or composed, three of which are based on Orientalist Tin Pan Alley songs found in the monthly periodical *Canada qui chante* (published between 1927 and 1930), and from which I have removed the Orientalist lyrics, thinking about what is included and what is left out in any representation of culture. The other three works are jazzed-up sections of Charles d'Ambleville and Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot's "Messes des Jésuits des Pekin," written in the seventeenth

Left: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Kiosque des gestes oubliés/Kiosk of Forgotten Gestures* (detail), EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.



Right: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Kiosque des gestes oubliés/Kiosk of Forgotten Gestures* (detail), EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.





century for liturgical use in Beijing. The original mass did include Chinese chants, perhaps as an attempt to introduce musical familiarity to a Chinese congregation of the seventeenth century.

Around the corner is *La boutique des brigands/The Robber's Shop*, an installation of vitrines and display units that reflects the gift shop of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites and those found in other museums. Commerce in Chinese bibelots sold at the Musée was a success to the extent that in 1934, Father Joseph-Louise Lavoie opened a boutique attached to the museum and sent shopping lists to his colleagues in Shanghai for specific items to stock the museum and its curio shop. He did not choose the objects for their aesthetic value, nor was he concerned with authenticity, rarity, or antiquity. These knickknacks would please or be useful to the buyer, and they included objects such as a peasant's outfit, fans, back scratchers, cigarette holders, etc. Visitors to the museum could leave with an object "Made in China"—evidence not of a visit to China but to a Chinese museum. The connotations with the "Made in China" label at the time is markedly different from today's association with it as representing knockoffs and cheap and poor quality. These earlier exotic souvenirs became material proof of contribution to the Jesuits' missionary work.

In my installations, real furniture and artefacts sit side-by-side with replicas from other sources and are further jumbled with my own fabricated pieces to create a new "old" version of a historical space; the mixing of old and new, real and fake, questions notions of authenticity. At first glance, all seems to fit together, but as the viewer looks closer, she or he may become perplexed, spend more time within the space, and begin questioning every object encountered within the exhibition.

Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers* (detail), 2017, installation view with *La boutique des brigands/The Robber's Shop*, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

Joni Low: How does the phenomenon of “replicas” and “imitation” sit within the longer trajectory of art making in Chinese history? What fascinates you about the concept of authenticity? It’s almost as if the objects themselves perform and masquerade different degrees of the idea of an exotic “East.” But it’s not quite satire; there’s a sincerity to it. Are these cultural misunderstandings generative in some ways?

Karen Tam: Learning through copying and producing study-copies was considered part of the tradition of Chinese painting and calligraphy, and in the pre-photographic age this was really the only means of reproducing, circulating, and disseminating masterpieces. Reproductions of great works were treasured along with their originals, and the ability to achieve a perfect semblance of an artwork was considered a gentlemanly pastime and a matter of virtuosity and pride. Works of art can be viewed as ongoing creations that develop from the original and change stylistically over time. Having multiple versions is standard in Chinese painting, and one should expect there to be multiple versions of great works. One of the things that interests me about authenticity and copies is how the act of making fakes and copies blurs what is real and what is fiction. Replicas in installations bring us closer to the historical through the objects’ materiality. To understand an object is to reconstruct it, or, to put it another way, to reconstruct an object is to understand it and its materiality. My own understanding of an object and a particular place comes out of making, handling, and reproducing them using

Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Acheter un petit Chinois!/Buy a Chinese Baby!*, EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.



similar techniques and methods of fabrication to the original. I am less interested in what is original and authentic than the ways interactions and exchanges can form new histories and realities.

Joni Low: *Acheter un petit Chinois!/Buy a Chinese Baby!* is an installation within the exhibition that involved a public call. Can you expand on this work? And also the history of this phenomenon in Québec—which, despite its

good intentions to help, had patronizing and colonial overtones (in the practice of “collecting the Other,” certainly) and was a benefit to religious organizations? What have been some of the responses so far, at EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe and the Musée régional de Rimouski, to revisiting this history? What made you decide to have their collected *chinoiserie* presented back to the community? And why do you feel it’s important to remember the visual culture associated with the *Acheter un petit Chinois* phenomenon?

Karen Tam: This installation is a community space constructed of borrowed knick-knacks collected from an open call to the public for any Chinese



Left: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/ We are All Robbers* (detail), 2017, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

Right: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/ We are All Robbers* (detail), 2017, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

trinkets or *chinoiseries* they might have as well as items related to the *petit Chinois* campaign, which was run by Québec missionaries in the late 1950s and 60s, and which encouraged school children to *acheter les petit chinois à 25 sous* (buy a Chinese baby for 25 cents) to finance their Chinese missions. In return, they received a photograph of “their” orphan and had the privilege of giving the orphan a Christian name, despite the fact that it was almost a decade after Catholic orphanages were closed by the People’s Republic of China. Later, when the mission moved to Africa, the orphans there were referred to as *les petits Chinois d’Afrique*.

The venues in Saint-Hyacinthe and Rimouski put out calls in their communities, and a number of individuals in both places responded by generously lending their *chinoiseries* and sharing the stories behind them. A few individuals, including a nun, contributed to *Acheter un petit Chinois! Buy a Chinese Baby!* with the orphan cards they had saved all those years ago. EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe and the Musée régionale de Rimouski also approached local religious organizations to borrow items related to this campaign as well as artefacts they acquired during their missionary work in China. The *chinoiserie* submissions I received included albums of photographs, copies of *Le Brigand*, cards/ photographs from this campaign, a collection of porcelain erotica, a set of mahjong, an embroidered jacket, and a silk painting depicting Jesus and Mary with Chinese features. People who lent me the cards with their orphan’s photograph and Christian names happily reminisced how as children they would compete with each other to collect as many of these orphan cards as they could.

I wanted to see what kind of *chinoiserie* objects people kept at home and how they themselves relate to China or to Chinese culture. I decided to present these objects back to the communities as one form of engagement, and by placing their *chinoiserie* in an exhibition context, I am asking them to reflect and question their reason for collecting and holding on to them. Perhaps in seeing their bibelots on display, mirroring (on a smaller scale) the Jesuits’ museum and its collection, they have another way of accessing the history I am examining. It is important to highlight this type of visual culture because over time even the smallest knickknack can influence the way one views or experiences a different culture. Following each exhibition, the *chinoiserie* materials are documented and returned to their owners.

Joni Low: You’ve written previously about how some cultural representations were incongruous with the sociopolitical realities of the

time. For example, the romanticization of the Orient in museum displays ran parallel to the Chinese Exclusion Act in Canada, which banned almost all Chinese immigration from 1923 to 1947. Also, the missionary exhibitions organized by the Québec Jesuits such as the one at Montréal's Expo '67 depicted a positive, romantic, and timeless image of Chinese civilization, while in reality mainland China was experiencing the Cultural Revolution. Could you talk a bit more about these incongruities? When do the fissures in such myths become most visible for you? As these contrasts are not always immediately apparent in your installations, is it the audience's responsibility to seek out the deeper historical context, rather than your providing it directly—or to have a conversation about it?

Karen Tam: Despite the Jesuit museum's initial aim to counter prejudices against Chinese people, the image of China represented by Father Lavoie through the displays celebrating a "civilized" China was a distorted one and quite different at the time from the daily life of workers and peasants from Xuzhou. I would add too, that it was far from the reality of the Chinese communities within Québec and Montréal, as, during this era, the Chinese in Canada experienced much discrimination, facing anti-Chinese sentiments and racist legislation such as head taxes and the Chinese Exclusion Act. These types of fissures or disconnects are what interest me most, as they are examples of colonial attitudes and mentalities that exist even today—particularly the lack of recognition for the contradictions between the fascination with a different culture while simultaneously rejecting and fearing its peoples.

I believe it is partly the audience's responsibility, as active viewers or participants, to seek out the contexts around my installations and exhibition. I can provide some of the references, but the viewer has to do a bit of work, too. I am asking viewers to spend time within the space, and through their interaction and experience of the installations, I hope that they also question the same disconnects in history that I see. The materiality and historicity of the objects and installations themselves can help us examine the power of the Orientalist gaze. In the absence of the body on display, the objects in the exhibition become "epidermalized" or raced by their location, use, presentation, or affiliation with a racially defined community as art historian Jennifer Gonzalez writes.⁵ They are transformed into objects of desire, and in the absence of the racialized body, they stand in for and attest to its presence.

Joni Low: I was really taken with your ambitious installation, *From De Yiwu á vous/From Yiwu to You*—an entire wall mural that tells a visual story of global exchange and cultural influence that stretches back to the Silk Road (c. first century B.C.), and is not simply a binary of East-West trade. Could you share more about your choice of medium, the significance of the material history it references, the imagery used, and what understandings you hope to convey?







Karen Tam: *From De Yiwu à vous/Yiwu to You* is a room installation that will eventually span close to 12.5 m in length, made up of blue-and-white hexagon cyanotypes. For the galleries in Saint-Hyacinthe and Rimouski, I presented two walls with this work, which will grow as the exhibition travels. I chose to use cyanotype to resemble Dutch Delftware tiles and to also reference the origins of blue-and-white porcelain. The blue pigment from cobalt oxide was first widely used in Chinese porcelain in the fourteenth century, after cobalt pigment began to be imported from Persia. The origin of this decorative style is thought to lie in Iraq, where craftsmen in Basra tried to imitate imported white Chinese stoneware and added decorative motifs using the blue pigment. In addition, I am referencing historic European porcelain rooms—which were lined with wall-mounted collections of porcelain—that were inspired by a period of increasing trade with China and whose wealthy inhabitants could indulge themselves in exoticized East Asian motifs. The imagery for this work references trade, travel, consumerism, and exchange, which took place, and still does, from China’s east coast (for example, Yiwu Market, Zhejiang province) to the rest of the world via the historic and modern Silk Roads, along the Taklamakan Desert, Gobi Desert, Dunhuang, the Karakoram Highway (also known as the China-Pakistan Friendship Highway), and other points on the route, in hopes of contesting the current popular belief and media stories that claims trade with China has always been one-sided. I am blending historical events and figures with current events and modern technology. The cyanotype landscape is populated by figures such as Mu Guiying (a legendary woman warrior and prominent figure in the *Generals of the Yang Family* stories from the Northern Song dynasty); a horse and rider originally painted by the Italian Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione, who became court painter to three emperors of the Qing Dynasty; animals such as Bactrian camels and birds of prey; constellations from the Dunhuang star chart; tourists bussed to the Crescent Lake at Dunhuang; consumer goods in the stalls of Yiwu Market; wind turbines in the Gobi Desert; the Jade Rabbit lunar

Previous page: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *De Yiwu à vous/From Yiwu to You* (detail), EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *De Yiwu à vous/From Yiwu to You*, EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

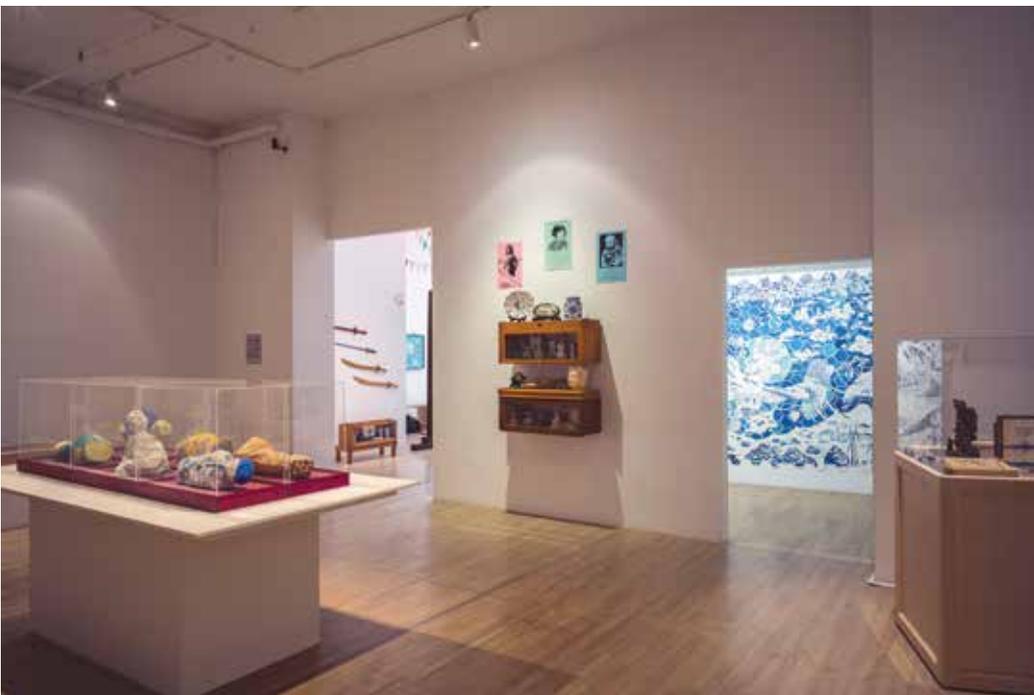
rover; drones and hypersonic planes; and silkworms, mulberry plants, grapes, and hami melons from Xinjiang.

Joni Low: You've described your artistic approach as looking at "how the corporeal experience of space allows one to understand its history and community." There is definitely an embodied encounter in these installations that creates a feeling of being within and amid, rather than a distanced spectatorship. And there are more subtle artistic strategies such as the music you've composed for the installation, which plays innocuously in the background, while carrying meanings and origins that you are subtly critiquing. There's a spirit of play and narrative openness, despite much of it being historically based, which allows these histories to exist in a very active, present, and intimate way. Can you share more about this approach and what led you to work with the spectrum of senses?

Karen Tam: Architect Juhani Pallasmaa's writings (2005)⁶ on a haptic architecture that induces the body and the senses into a fuller experience of space has been helpful in exploring how, as we move through a space (and within an installation) and interact with its objects, our haptic senses are stimulated and the past reconstructed, even if only partially. By creating, recreating, or even reimagining historical Westernized Chinese cultural spaces in my installations, I hope to evoke the memories, recollections, and past associations one may have had with similar places. I suggest ways of experiencing time by triggering our ability to enter a remembered or imagined place by playing with sightlines and the placement of objects; by using sound, music, architectural features, smell; and by opening up the spaces for viewers to touch and manipulate objects, as well as other non-verbal cues.

Moving through the installations and the exhibition, the architecture and space interacts with the viewer's body and she or he becomes an active participant; bending one's head down as one walks past the ornamental gates; kneeling to see the miniature metal pagodas; looking up to the bunting that zigzags across the space; sitting at the *Atelier de chinoiseries DIY/DIY Chinoiserie Workshop* table and following the instructions to make one's own *chinoiserie* paper cutout; reading and flipping the pages of a copy of *Le Brigand*; hearing the music I arranged and composed based on Orientalist Tin Pan Alley tunes and a Jesuit mass while peering around the corner; entering a room and being surrounded by blue-and-white landscape . . . connecting emotionally and corporeally to a space comes from touching an object and turning it around in one's hands, seeing it, and moving one's body around it in that space.

Joni Low: At the same time, there is a subtle critique of museum display within your installations. How do you differentiate your installations from historic displays that seek to explain a given culture—compartmentalized as a room, a world, something exoticized? Does it matter to you if the



reception of your work doesn't move beyond that of fetishization, a cliché, or stereotype? Why or why not?

Karen Tam: In recreating the interior spaces of the past as installations, I want to reveal their importance in producing a specific Chinese spatiality, confronting or perpetuating myths and stereotypes; to engage and problematize history, memory, and their representations. I am critiquing the types of colonial or historical displays in museums that exoticize another culture. Through the use of cultural exotica, the unfamiliar, strange, and foreign become domesticated, commodified, and performed for Western consumption. As I mentioned earlier, the existence of the Musée d'art chinois des Jésuites is not widely known. By creating installations based

Top: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/ We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Atelier de chinoiseries DIY/DIY Chinoiserie Workshop* at right, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

Bottom: Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/ We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

upon this historic institution, I aim to question a prevalent tendency to view Chinese communities and culture through objects, commodities, and its material culture. I counter its erasure in history, yet, with a gesture toward revisiting and resisting its patronizing and colonial activities. How do my installations and recreations differ from dioramas, themed parks, “living museums”, and historical displays? They are not a search for the real, the authentic, or even for a stable history and reality, as in my opinion these do not really exist. They function closer to a theatre or film set except there are no actors (nor reenactment performers in period costumes with prepared lines and accents), only the visitors who activate the spaces. It is the viewer who performs. The installations do not pretend to be the real places they depict. By re-presenting and taking the viewers to a place they may already know or are familiar with (a museum display of Chinese objects), and by practicing a theory of exotica, I am asking them to reconsider their relationship and engagement with the Other and with diasporic spaces.

Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.



I would be disappointed if my work is received with the same lens of fetishization that perpetuates the Orientalist attitudes that I am critiquing. I hope that there are enough access points in the exhibition for the viewers to enter into a conversation with me or between themselves where they question their own assumptions and do not just accept the museum or exhibition displays and their content at face value.

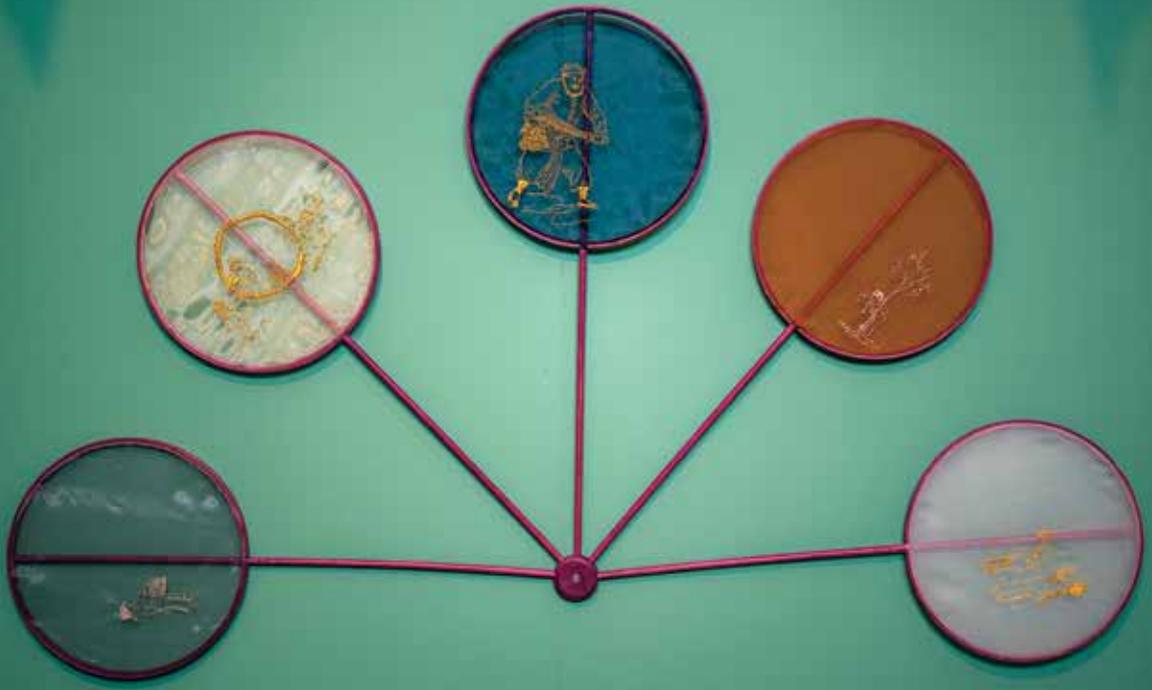
Joni Low: You are also a scholar of cultural studies. What is the relationship between your academic work and artistic practice? Was there a moment in your practice when you let go of the idea of historical veracity? When does research give way to the imagination for you?

Karen Tam: Researching, writing, making, and reflections have shaped my artistic practice over the past few years, yet the art has equally fed my academic work. While I do not directly reference theories and

research materials in my artwork, they are at the back of my mind. In my installations and sculptures that replicate existing objects or recreate Chinese restaurants, curio shops, and the interior displays of a museum of Chinese art, they offer what Andreas Huyssen (1995) term, an “active remembrance” of these sites.⁷ The aim, however, is neither authenticity nor minute historical accuracy, but, rather, a certain level of fidelity that stays true to these spaces in the evocations, mentality, and attitudes. Perhaps by recreating these spaces, an essence of the original places, their history and their aura may be embedded within the experience. I am thinking about Jean Baudrillard, when he writes that if things are to signify the real, they must appear to be real, and in this simulacrum it is not the object’s actual authenticity that is important but the information it holds and presents (1994).⁸ So, yes, I do at one point in the development of each installation and project let go of historical veracity once I feel I have gathered enough background and research material to make way for the imagination. This occurs particularly when certain facts or stories cannot be verified or are lost, and this opens up the work. There is the freedom to imagine how something might have been, to bring out something that had previously been overlooked or hidden.

Joni Low: Where do you feel your work sits in relation to the wider conversations about cultural appropriation? While you engage with visual materials that reflect a history of colonialism, racism, and cultural misunderstanding, your work is inviting, compassionate, and playful rather than divisive or shaming.

Karen Tam: Cultural appropriation is such a complex beast. I think that, like many people, I hold contradictory viewpoints on this issue because of the grey areas. My work probably reflects this ongoing struggle to form a coherent stance on this. I do believe that instances of cultural appropriation have to be called out for what they are and that we do not have the right to indiscriminately use the words, images, and stories of others. Acts of cultural hijacking do not occur when someone else’s productions are modified or altered by others, since those always belong to the original creator, but when authenticity and authorship is claimed in a way that denies the agency of the creator. At the same time, I recognize that we all engage in forms of cultural exchange in our daily lives and that we are very much influenced by one another’s cultures and traditions. Appropriation is also a way of critiquing and subverting the original purpose of things. My projects challenge the superficial knowledge of historical cultural sites formulated from sampling Chinese culture as voyeurs and tourists, as well as appropriations of the East by the West historically (for example, Ezra Pound’s poetry, Franz Kline’s paintings based on his study of Chinese calligraphy, *chinoiserie* objects and architecture, the Musée d’art Chinois des Jésuites) and how this is considered acceptable while appropriation and imitation by a Chinese artist is seen as cheap and not considered serious or important. I use mimicry in my work as a strategy in a similar fashion to how ethnic minority groups mimic dominant society and its cultural habits



Karen Tam, *Nous sommes tous les brigands/We are All Robbers*, 2017, installation view with *Quand j'étais chinois/When I was Chinese*, EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe. Courtesy of the artist and EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec.

in order to understand the “not Other.” I have found that using humour to draw viewers into the work and engage them is a great way to diffuse tensions and not have them feel they are being accused of racism. Instead, we can laugh at ourselves and take up a more conciliatory and constructive approach, and, in the process, we can counter and reshape meanings and images linked with one’s own cultural identity.

Joni Low: What is the larger story behind the exhibition’s title and its suggestive meanings for the present? Does it relate to questions around cultural exchange and appropriation?

Karen Tam: As we discussed, the exhibition title, *Nous sommes tous des brigands/We are All Robbers*, recalls *Le Brigand*, the Jesuit newsletter founded by Father Lavoie and who was its editor-in-chief until 1945. Along with the museum, *Le Brigand* was the principal publicity or propaganda vehicle of the Québec Jesuits’ activities in China. *Le Brigand* entertained its readers with news about Chinese culture and informed them about the activities of the Canadian Jesuits in Xuzhou and about the use of their financial contributions. Father Lavoie had been a victim of brigandage in China, and he writes that the decision to choose the name “brigand” was only possible from someone who had been in China. He saw the mission and the church as similar to Chinese brigands in the way that they share the same instincts and manners, with its faithful as its “victims.” He describes the Chinese brigand’s methods of working, including coming to your home at night, always courteous—politeness on one hand and a revolver in the other hand—to make you understand he is the master.

At the same time, the title does relate to issues around cultural exchange, appropriation, and authenticity. Instead of pointing the finger at the viewer or one particular group and accusing them of cultural appropriation, I am playfully suggesting that we should be inclusive in this charge and say that we collectively are all practicing varying forms of theft, of borrowing and cultural exchange; that we are all robbers. I am also referencing the *shanzhai* or copycat culture in China where *shanzhai* produced for the local Chinese market are not just direct copies but products created and adapted to local needs, desires, and demands. This *shanzhai* creativity can be viewed as being on the frontier of innovation, as a disruptive grassroots business model, and as a possible appropriative practice and a method of subversion and critique in contemporary art. The term *shanzhai* literally means “mountain stronghold” and historically referred to bandits who opposed and evaded corrupt authorities. This *shanzhai* copycat phenomenon is not a recent development in China, nor has it been strictly one-way. Since the seventeenth century, if we look at the West and its fascination and fad for all things Chinese, a reverse trend took place in the form of Orientalism and *chinoiserie*. My art installations recreating Chinese restaurants, karaoke lounges, opium dens, curio shops, artist studios, and now a museum of Chinese art, can be seen as *shanzhai*, or double *shanzhai* themselves. Double *shanzhai* in the sense that they are copies of sites that are themselves reproductions and reinterpretations of spaces with origins in China. In a way these hybrid spaces parallel the movement of Chinese migrants and goods to the West and how Chinese culture is transplanted and translated.

Notes

1. Presenting galleries include: Expression, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Saint-Hyacinthe, QC (Winter 2017–2018); Musée régional de Rimouski, Rimouski, QC (Spring 2018); Plein sud, centre d'art actuel à Longueuil, Longueuil, QC (Spring 2019); and Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, QC (Autumn 2019).
2. France Lord, “The Silent Eloquence of Things: The Missionary Collections and Exhibitions of the Society of Jesus in Quebec, 1843–1946,” in *Canadian Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples: Representing Religion at Home and Abroad*, Alwyn Austin and Jamie S. Scott, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 223–24.
3. Serge Granger, *Le Lys et le lotus, Les relations du Québec avec la Chine de 1650 à 1950* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2005).
4. Joseph-Louis Lavoie, *Quand j'étais chinois* (Montréal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1961).
5. Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
6. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2005).
7. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995).
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).