

CUE

ART FOUNDATION

French Clements

Not Too Real: Karen Tam and the New Chinoiserie

(An essay on Karen Tam's solo exhibition curated by Mary Jane Jacob
on view January 31 - March 8, 2008)

Although Karen Tam says her work draws upon an imaginary China, she's practically lived there too, growing up above her parents' Chinese restaurant in Montreal. She completed schoolwork in the restaurant's back room as her father prepared a variety of food—chicken balls, egg rolls, chop suey—rarely eaten in the family's apartment. Generations of previous Chinese immigrants to the West had fine-tuned these hybrid recipes, guaranteed to be more popular than the original. Tam recalls a friend in Canada who opened a pure Szechuan restaurant, only to fold soon after for lack of business. She jokes, "It was too real!"

Such dissimulations drive Tam to create Chinese replicas of her own, lately through an installation series called *Pagoda Pads*. As shown at the CUE Art Foundation, the work comprises four partitioned rooms ("like Ikea," she says), each culling from China's history. Central to Tam's show is the imitative décor known as chinoiserie, an emblem for centuries of East-West miscegenation and now resurgent through televised home makeovers, bland how-to books and plenty of markets beyond Ikea or Target. In paraphrasing China's long-established visual clichés, Tam forces a reconsideration of their validity and invites an examination of their source and effect.

Tam's interiors, no matter how elaborate, harbor a forlorn austerity. As with her previous installation series, which recreated the bare trappings of North American Chinese restaurants, no one should feel completely at ease here. This disquiet is the sense—often barely felt—of a great assumption, which Tam makes physical. Her living room, in blank white (China's color of mourning), holds little more than a tea set, candles and a smiling Buddha. Either a funeral went unattended or an interior decorator ran out of better ideas. Tam's lacquered bedroom, laced with incense and fake poppies, directly recalls movies where silky, mysterious women caress a feeble opium addict. But lying just behind are the Opium Wars, in which the British, later with the French, exploited their monopoly on opium to force open China's ports to Western trade, flooding the market with Western products and crippling the Chinese economy. Implicit too is the struggle's inversion, wherein the modern West dots its intensifying dependency on Chinese production with hollow rebukes over human rights or consumer (but not producer) safety.

A soft comment on this game is the child's playroom, stuffed with toys Tam salvaged from the latest recall frenzy. Tam includes Tintin's opium-den adventures in *The Blue Lotus*—still in print, however out of step—and what she calls a "chinky skateboarder" bought last year at a Barcelona restaurant owned, Tam says, by Chinese immigrants. According to the watchdog group Public Citizen, 74 percent of America's toys now come from China, a 60 percent increase since 1970. It's an exchange that, as Tam says, now appears to offer China and its economy more benefits than it offers the West.

Across the gallery Tam's self-produced album *Chinese Firecrackers* plays. Its pentatonic songs hold roots in a generation of 19th-century Chinese immigrant culture that, through merging Western

expectations with native traditions, also created chop suey. When Tin Pan Alley and light-opera composers popularized their own happy-go-lucky versions decades later, they girded the construction of a fantasy. Over centuries, this dream of commodification has burrowed deeper into Western minds, palates and eyes than the intricate original ever could. It's quite a convincing surrogate.

Somewhere between this surrogate and its original lies Tam's imaginary China, summarized in a potent fourth section of *Pagoda Pads* titled "Kitschy Kitchen Mao." Tam's satirical bent is at its peak as she renders saccharine and outdated any ideas of a global village based on trust, free trade and a Western-style consideration for intellectual property. Across from Mao-era appliances, her version of a karaoke video rattles on, with Tam's odd bootleg-style footage and a familiar melody sung in a left-field language. Even the devices it plays on come from a factory whose workers, Westerners keep reading, can't afford to buy what they make. A pink vinyl tablecloth, knifed into a lacy, cut-paper style, catalogs the Western associations that "Made in China" held in 2007. In 10 dense square feet, Tam interlocks grim or hilarious silhouettes from numerous headline scares, with bamboo shoots and scorpions for ambience: a little bunny alludes to the White Rabbit candy (you could eat the wrapper too!), found to contain formaldehyde; the beleaguered owner of a Chinese factory for Mattel who hung himself in his building following a lead-paint panic. (Lead paint costs two-thirds less than unleaded.) Ringing the tablecloth's border are Chinese characters for long life and wealth and a pseudo-Starbucks logo reading STAR TEA—an acronym for "eat rats." Tam is fascinated by knock-offs and pirating, and says that in China, artisans will produce an antique to order, asking only how old—Ming? Tang? Mao?—it should look. Throughout the show, Tam's copies, American copies and China's copies of itself give one another credence, and all multiply into a confusion of sourcelessness. The space may as well be lined in mirrors.

These distortions feed, and are fed by, a pattern of misrepresentative commercial exchange between the East and West. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, written around 77 A.D., the geographer details, incorrectly, the harvest of silk from boiled tree leaves, and marvels at the laboriousness with which Chinese industry has extended to Rome. Even then, China was defined by its commodities: the northwestern region was called Serica, from the ancient West's word for silk. As Western imaginations continued to underestimate this Flowery Kingdom, China launched ambitious plans to conquer Japan. Medieval contemporaries of Marco Polo grew to mistrust his reports on principle, and even as the Silk Road progressed, Western understanding of the East couldn't keep pace with the desire for its products.

In the 17th century, French designers fell for the charms of Chinese porcelain, and failing to learn its secret formulas, created their own florid revision of the pottery. Soon, European salons were covered in chinoiserie fabrics, furnishings and architecture. Most notable is England's bulbous Royal Pavilion at Brighton, whose confectionery assemblage, though in an Indian mode, hasn't deterred Tam—and a world of less critically minded designers apt to conflate one Asian knock-off with another—from paying tribute. A devout bargain-hunter, Tam bought several of her show's pieces at Pearl River Mart, a New York City favorite for present-day chinoiserie like rice paper lamps and massive urns. In addition to Chinatown, her sources include Dollarama, Wal-Mart, and Ikea.

In the mid-19th century, Chinese immigrants arrived on North American shores, where, for low pay, they took jobs on the railroads and in mines. Anti-immigrant sentiment grew, especially during the Depression, and North American lawmakers passed legislation aimed blatantly at disenfranchising Chinese immigrants, such as Canada's 1885 Head Tax, a sizable fee discouraging Chinese immigrants from entering the country. The tax was ended only in 1923, when the country banned Chinese immigration entirely. Nascent Chinatowns, their residents forced into poverty and desperation, became

ghettoized and gained a reputation as harbors for vice.

Under this dispiriting climate, China's malicious portrayals in Western popular culture were born. Xenophobia found an accepted outlet in novels like *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, from 1913, whose title character was described as the "yellow peril incarnate in one man... with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan." The series' English creator, Sax Rohmer, wrote in his autobiography, "I made my name on Fu Manchu because I know nothing about the Chinese...I do know something about Chinatown." Even of those non-Chinese with a less assumptive approach, Tam says, "They admire the culture, but they're unwilling to deal with the community." She cites Canada's Head Tax Redress Campaign, through which each living immigrant (and their spouse) who paid the tax receives \$20,000 in restitution. Though few survivors remain, advocates for the redress campaign found numerous opponents. Tam's installation, in this context, gives adamant presence, and plainspoken rebuttal, to what she calls the inheritance of inequality.

Tam defines intolerance, past or present, as a construct of misplaced intentions. "There's always going to be misunderstanding, no matter what," she says. Her work traces the slippage she sees as slightly incongruent planes of culture move atop one another. Explaining the dynamic further, she mentions the racist political cartoons that, in 2005, buried Denmark and Islam in a heap of blame. "Both sides were right, and both sides were wrong," she says. As public perception thus polarizes any ambiguous subject, China's booming industry is now a scapegoat for the perceived ills of globalization. Product-recall figures, for instance, show that the country holds a share roughly proportionate to that of other producing countries, while America's global economic policy only appears to enforce its own instability to the benefit of China. In short, Tam, says, the West is getting a raw deal, unwittingly so. It wouldn't be the first time the West has dawdled in recognizing that China is more than a Flowery Kingdom. "Globalization can only work in China's favor," Tam says. "It can only dominate...there's been globalization since the Silk Road."

Still, if the misunderstanding mutual to East and West is rooted in their commercially constructed identities, are there misgivings over restaurants like the Tams,' muting one culture while playing up a second? Of course not, she says, because one cuisine is no better than another. Just as restaurant patrons also felt no betrayal or loss in eating semi-Chinese food, neither does the average Western consumer, daily and innocently subsisting on China's efforts. Ultimately, in the choice between one China and another, past versus future, Tam holds no preference, no original to be held up as ideal. As she says, "fake isn't fake," it's just another kind of authentic, shifting to merge with that of still other cultures. "It is what it is."

Quotes are from interviews and correspondence with the author.

French Clements , MA, January 2008

This essay was written as part of the **Young Art Critics Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, **French Clements** was born in San Jose, CA and trained as a dancer for 10 years in San Francisco and in New York, where he received his degree from Fordham University and The Ailey School. After an internship at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, he moved to Massachusetts, where he was the press representative for the country's longest running

dance festival, Jacob's Pillow. Now, in addition to teaching ballet, he writes about dance and the arts for publications including *Berkshire Living* and the *Berkshire Eagle*. He also writes about dance for Williams College in Williamstown, MA. The mentor was **Lilly Wei**, a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who contributes to many publications in the United States and abroad. She has written regularly for *Art in America* since 1982 and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews* and *Art Asia Pacific*.

AICA (International Association of Art Critics) was formed in order to revive the critical discourse that had suffered under Fascism and the war, and which was under pressure in nations around the world. It was founded in 1948/1949 in Paris and originally affiliated with UNESCO as an NGO ("non-governmental organization"). At present there are 72 member nations representing more than 4,000 art critics. **AICA USA**, headquartered in New York, is the largest national section, with a membership of over 400 distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians around the country. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information.

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