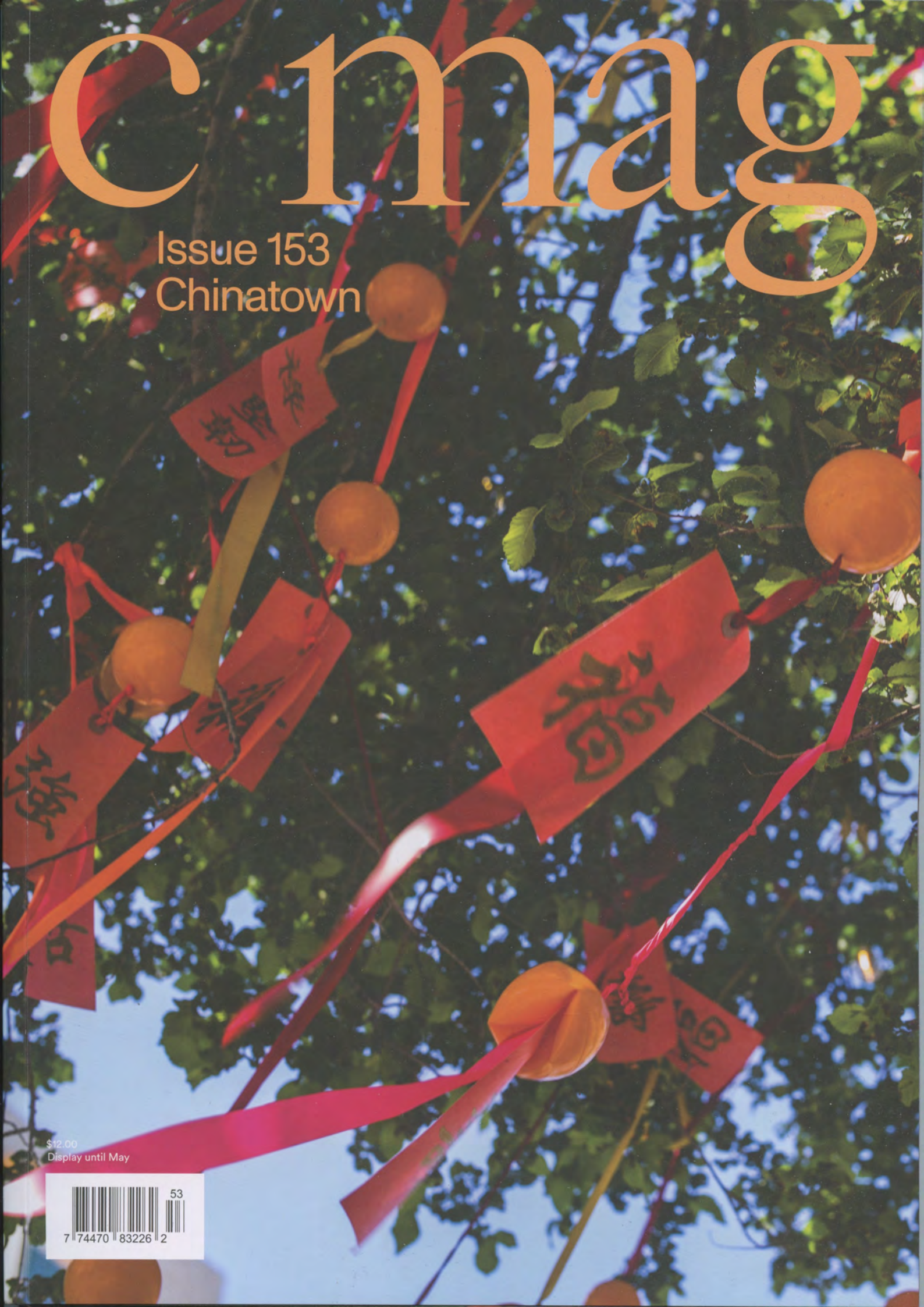

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The Spatial Imaginaries of Karen Tam 譚嘉文

by Charlene K. Lau

Karen Tam, *Dream of Flying Machines*, 2015, papier-mâché with Chinese newspapers, cardboard, watercolour, gouache, pigmented India ink, gold marker, 47 cm x 24.1 cm x 24.1 cm

PHOTO: KAREN TAM AND GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNUEAU; © KAREN TAM; COURTESY OF KAREN TAM AND GALERIE HUGUES CHARBONNUEAU

In the summer of 2021, at the corner of René-Lévesque and Saint-Laurent boulevards in Montreal's Chinatown, an empty lot lit up every night. A large tree stood in the centre, Karen Tam's *Arbre à souhaits* (Wishing tree) (2021), festooned with twinkling lights, orange plastic spheres, red ribbons, and 1,300 placards covered in handwritten Chinese characters representing seven wishes: longevity, health, fortune, prosperity, happiness, strength, and resilience. A stage encircled the tree, ringed with picnic tables and a series of kiosks. Entitled *Place des souhaits* (Wishing square) (2021), Tam's collaborative project with designer Jean de Lessard transformed the 35,000-square-foot (over 3,000-square-metre) lot into an intergenerational community space for performances, workshops, or simply a place to rest one's weary bones and eat some dumplings. Some nights, the stage played host to Chinese opera, decorated with a colourful forest of 1,000 flags, and on others, it became a night market or a casual meeting place.

A makeshift park at the border of Chinatown and the surrounding neighbouroods felt particularly dreamy amid the disturbing rise of anti-Asian violence, and the anticipation of a season of revelry and bacchanal following a long, difficult year. In 2002, SARS emptied out Chinatowns, and the COVID-19 pandemic also led to less people frequenting these neighbourhoods on a larger scale. The opening of Tam's installation at the start of the summer created a safe public space in Montreal's Chinatown to be seen, surrounded by community members, staking ground. With *Place des souhaits*, Tam and her collaborator de Lessard created a space for hosting artistic openness and intergenerational relationships, reinforcing the value of physical, public space as essential to cultural and social infrastructure. On a less formal level, the space felt like a soothing balm, lighting up an area that prides itself on resiliency and strength. The site-specific work synthesized much of what Tam's oeuvre has explored over the past two decades, connecting the spatial imaginaries of Chinatowns in Canada to the ongoing formation of Chinese diasporic identity.

The daughter of parents of the Cantonese diaspora, Tam spent many hours in her family's Chinese restaurant, Aux Sept Bonheurs (Seventh Heaven), in Montreal's east end. In family photographs, she is pint-sized, wearing a pink shirt, Mary-Janes, and barrettes in her hair, sitting in the side doorway to Aux Septs Bonheurs. In another, Tam as a toddler stands on the restaurant kitchen's cooktop gripping two wok handles with a big grin on her face, while her father, the chef, holds her in his arms. Tam still has the same warm and open smile, and upon meeting her for the first time on a video call, I'm immediately disarmed and feeling major sister vibes. She tells me that she grew up with a network of friends, family, and other restauranteurs who would help one another out; even after retiring and selling his business in 2004, Tam's father trained successive Chinese restauranteurs who took over Aux Septs Bonheurs.

I asked Tam if she worked in the family restaurant after school and on weekends, the fate of many immigrant kids. She only lasted one summer, before returning to her true callings: music and art. At one point, music almost superseded her artistic ambitions; a trained classical pianist, Tam decided a graduate degree in music would be her back-up plan if she wasn't accepted into the MFA in sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. But her career has always been a balance of priorities and happenstance; after completing her MFA, Tam took a research trip to the United Kingdom and happened to meet a professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, who persuaded her to pursue a PhD in cultural studies—something she had only considered for the golden years of her life.

This flow between disciplines and practices acts as a type of architecture for the way Tam approaches her artistic practice. While completing her PhD, she wrote essays and articles on *shanzhai* culture—a Chinese term to denote fake, counterfeit, or parody consumer products. Her dissertation examined the corporeal experience of space, referencing the development of the North American Chinese restaurant from the 19th century until the present, a project that challenged her to think culturally about her own artistic practice and, more broadly, how she employs historical con text in her large-scale installations. In some ways, a micro-sized form of Chinatown can be found in the diasporic Chinese family restaurant. Spatially, the Chinese restaurant envelops an imaginary of multiple diasporic Chinas, asking: who are these spaces for, and how are they reflected onto us?

Tam leans on her family's history in the restaurant industry to create site-specific work like *Place des souhaits*, referencing the cultural and social functions of these spaces. As much community centres as they are businesses, the two functions cannot be easily divorced from one another. Rarely are exchanges that occur in small, independently-owned businesses purely transactional; rather, they are cultural and social interactions, the connective tissue of everyday life. Sharing a meal with others might be one of the most sustaining and generative acts of care, taking the time with loved ones to nourish the mind and heart. All these types of essential, community-based activities are given the space to unfold in Tam's approach to public installation, transposing the interior socio-cultural dynamics of a family restaurant to an outdoor space and expanding opportunities for these kinships to flourish. By combining various elements of Chinese diasporic culture into one—shopkeeping, gatherings in public space, performance—*Place des souhaits* remakes the artwork as community space for a wider audience, including those who may not ever pass through the doors of a gallery or museum.

All-encompassing and meticulously researched, Tam's exhibitions are curatorial ventures that seem to negate institutional curation, blurring the lines between art production and the recitation of cultural history. Her work rarely focuses on her as a solo artist in the spotlight. Rather, she centres artists from the margins of Canadian art history, as in *With wings like clouds hung from the sky*大鵬就振翼 (2017–2022)—where Tam created an imagined artist studio for LEE Chao Nam 李趙南, a Chinese Canadian painter who lived in Victoria in the 1930s and was a contemporary and friend to Emily Carr. The work was sited at multiple institutions; conceived at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria presented an expanded iteration of the exhibition before it toured to the Richmond Art Gallery and made its final stop at the Varley Art Gallery in Markham. Taking its English and Chinese titles from a poem carved onto the walls of San Francisco's Angel Island detention/immigration centre, the exhibition looks at the life and art of Lee, whom Tam discovered while reading Carr's journals.[1] In each iteration, Tam shifted the exhibition according to its community context in each city, inviting local Chinese brush painters to show their works alongside those of Lee, Carr, QI Baishi, LUI Luk Chun 呂陸川, and other artists from the Chinese diaspora.

Karen Tam, *With wings like clouds hung from the sky*, 2017–2022, seal chops, drawings, historical artworks in the collection of The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, paintings by local ink-brush artists, piano, chairs, tables, desks, shelving units, porcelain vases, frames, brushes, mulberry paper, backing boards, rotary phone, clock, bamboo flute, fans, plant stands, fish bowl, abacus, photographs, rocks, felt pads, doilies, porcelain plates, fake flowers, cricket cages, Chinese almanac, paint tubes, ink, painting trays; installation view from "With wings like clouds hung from the sky," 2019, Richmond Art Gallery

PHOTO, ©, COURTESY OF: KAREN TAM

Acting as a cultural historian, Tam converses with these late artists to create new spaces untethered by the weight of our contemporary moment, linear history, and geographical borders. Through various strands of connection—artistic, community, geographic, and cultural—Tam assembles a lineage of ancestral art knowledges and inheritance, including her mother TAM YUEN Yin Law 譚阮嫣娜, a traditional Chinese painter in her own right, and a student of Lui, as well as the younger Tam herself. By placing her mother's painting of goldfish next to her mother's favourite painter Qi, and positioning a Carr in proximity, or mixing up the display of "local" artists with more "known" names, Tam questions what makes someone a so-called professional artist, itself a particularly contentious term in the contemporary professionalization of the arts, and another artist an amateur. Who gets to be shown, and who receives recognition? In each reinstallation of the exhibition, the works and spaces inhale and exhale new air, new contexts. The installation also breaks up the linear continuum of art history, creating discursive, visual space for the gaps in the history of art in Canada, and the art of the Chinese diaspora.

Tam's interest in showcasing the work of her forebearers and her peers has also shaped her curatorial practice. In 2021, she curated "Whose Chinatown?" for Griffin Projects in North Vancouver, which takes a more traditional route in its museological display, exploring the psychogeographic space of Chinatown. Incorporating the works of multiple artists, as well as living and past collectives—including art, zines, family heirlooms, imagery from personal and public archives, and family collections—the exhibition asks, "Who were the early Chinese-Canadian artists?" and explores Chinatown as a spatial imaginary. Rather than focus on marginalization as a productive end, Tam's exhibition is a haven for diasporic history and cultural production, contra to pop culture's image of Chinatown as a seedy site for gang violence, turf wars, and illegal gambling dens. The exhibition reflects Tam's interest in creating scholarly, visual histories that don't feel fussy or overly pedagogical. As both an artist and a curator, she exerts a quiet confidence over her subject matter, offering a speculative view on how the worlds of Chinese art and art of the Chinese diaspora in Canada might have interacted had they existed at the same time and place, allowing planes of history to collide in a space where kinship, shared vocation, and culture find home.

Tam's exploration of the concept of remaking and its meaning in her curatorial and artistic work can be linked back to the Chinese practice of *shanzhai*. In her essay "Dolce & Banana: A Shanzhai Creator's Manual" published in the anthology *The Changing Landscape of China's Consumerism* (2014), she notes that "Shanzhai can be used as an appropriative practice in contemporary art, and as a method of resistance, subversion, and critique."[2] The term *shanzhai* can be broadly defined as copying, counterfeiting, and appropriation, but Tam taps into the creativity and innovation embedded in this practice, a counter to what a Western worldview might consider unethical or trademark infringement. In 2012, Tam began making papier-mâché interpretations

Top: Karen Tam, *Arbre à souhaits/Chinatown Wishing Tree*, 2021, 1300 wishes written on Tyvek tags, plastic balls, flagging tape, 15.24 m x 6.09 m x 6.09 m; installation view from "Place des souhaits," 2021, Saint-Laurent and René-Lévesque, Montreal
PHOTO: KIM SOON TAM; ©, COURTESY OF: KAREN TAM

Bottom: Karen Tam, *Arbre à souhaits/Chinatown Wishing Tree* (detail), 2021, 1300 wishes written on Tyvek tags, plastic balls, flagging tape, 15.24 m x 6.09 m x 6.09 m
PHOTO: KIM SOON TAM; ©, COURTESY OF: KAREN TAM

of Chinese porcelain ware in her sculptural series *The Porcelain Collection* (2012–present), building up layers of strips of Chinese newspaper, the construction visible just under a painted surface. From the classic blue and white dragon motifs of *The Sporting Life (Golf)* and *The Sporting Life (Football)* (both 2015), to the multicolour *Dream of Flying Machines* (2015), a close inspection reveals their depictions may not be classic from a historical point of view but, rather, depict classical Chinese art as it could be interpreted today: a dragon next to a football or a golf club, rocket and satellites in the latter. By taking from one medium (porcelain) and using another (newspaper) with contemporary imagery, Tam narrows a cultural gap. She notes of this series, "I would probably never be able to acquire the originals, I can in my own way come closer to them through their likeness."[3] The works are exercises in a knowing through making, playing on the practice of *shanzhai* to create new objects that reference historical representations but are wholly authentic unto themselves.

These vessels can be viewed as a metaphor for the many identities that proliferate within the Chinese diaspora, each not quite like the other, an amalgam of "Chineseness" as a cultural imaginary and its specific context in diasporic form. The paper-mâché porcelain ware appear to approximate chinoiserie designs, though like their so-called originals, these too are one-of-a-kind and just as true as their forebears, touched and shaped by an artist's hand, not mere replications made in another medium. Viewed as reproductions or replications, the papier-mâché vases ultimately fail as utilitarian objects; after all, they cannot hold flowers or water. Rather, Tam's reinscription of certain Chinese motifs like mountains, meanders, or lotus blossoms carries on a lineage of visual culture beyond its roots, broadening their application via a simple, approachable method that can easily be replicated with an everyday material like paper.

The vessels are part of an ongoing series and still circulate in exhibitions today, much like the porcelain objects that inform them. They also move in and out of Tam's large-scale installations—appearing in her recreations of a curio shop, a storefront window, and a photography studio. Many of Tam's works, in fact, evolve as part of a series, with no definitive end date, referencing perhaps how cultural production has never been pure, but moves through the world constantly hyphenating, multiplying, and resituating itself in new contexts.

Tam's *shanzhai* methods also appear in *With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼. Collaborating with her mother and Lui, Tam painted 300 drawings of birds based on a Carr sketch, a call back to the erasure of Chinese diasporic artists like Lee. While learning through copying has a privileged place in Western art history—painters training in Europe were brought to galleries and salons to sketch the "masters"—the practice has acquired a negative connotation, synonymous with pirated, counterfeit goods, specifically those made in China. The adage that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery might apply here, but Tam's intention is more about parallels and retracing history rather than straightforward reenactment. Similarly, Tam's paintings of 12 men named Lee Nam attempt to locate a visage for Nam among the archives of Canada; her depictions speculate that one of these portraits is *the* Lee in question, and that in depicting him, he is truly seen and known. The knowing, it turns out, does emerge through successive iterations. After the third exhibition at the Richmond Art Gallery, a collector approached Tam with a painting of Lee's dated September 1933 (currently it is awaiting authentication), which will be reproduced in a forthcoming publication by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and Richmond Art Gallery. As fluid as the identities, lives, and brushstrokes that the exhibition records, *With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼 moves within its own sense of time, mixing the past with the present and future, creating new possibilities for overlap and connection.

Careful in her approach, Tam is not concerned with preserving history. Instead, she recognizes a connection to the past must be informed by engaging with local communities in a continual process of regeneration. From an artist's studio to domestic interiors, Chinese restaurants, karaoke lounges, and opium dens, Tam's serial works continually evolve with each iteration, shifting to accommodate their sites and never presenting a singular narrative. She invites artists historical and contemporary to join her in this remaking; each space is rooted in collaboration, connecting her with her ancestral past while propelling her work into the speculative future.

It's uncool to use the term "immersive" now—many times it's a stretch when used in the contemporary art lexicon—but it perfectly encapsulates Tam's highly detailed (and deeply *shanzhai*) installations. Visually, she transports the viewer into a time and space that existed long ago, will exist in the future, or never existed in the ways in which she envisions it, creating environments that are entities unto themselves, old and new, present and future all at once. While art historians might write histories from marginalization into the main narrative, Tam does this in the visual form of an exhibition display, creating an artist's exhibition within an exhibition, a never-ending salon. Her installations could be framed as *shanzhai* villages in their (re)creations of everyday life, no less sites of invention and reinvention than history itself with its revisions and evolving augmentations. In their doubling and imagining, Tam's works become new agents of history, authentic and original in their replication. As Tam notes, "If art is a product, then it will be shanzhai-ed."[4]

ENDNOTES

1 Of Lee, Carr wrote: "A young Chinese came to my door carrying a roll of painting. He had heard about the exhibition, had come to show his work to me—beautiful watercolours done in Oriental style. He was very anxious to carry his work further... I invited him to show in place of the flower painter and he hung a beautiful exhibition."

2 Karen Tam, "Dolce & Banana: A Shanzhai Creator's Manual," in *The Changing Landscape of China's Consumerism*, ed. Alison Hulme (New York: Chandos Publishing, 2014), 84.

3 "Sculpture," Karen Tam, accessed October 16, 2022, https://karentam.ca/sculpture.html

4 Tam, "Dolce & Banana," 85.