



EAHR @ ARTEXTE

Uncovering
Asian Canadian
and
Black Canadian
Artistic Production

Published on the occasion of *EAHR @ ARTEXTE: Uncovering Asian Canadian and Black Canadian Artistic Production*, two vitrine exhibitions of holdings from the collection of Artexpte curated by the Ethnocultural Art Histories Research Group (EAHR) and presented at Artexpte and the Department of Art History, Concordia University, April 1-30, 2015.

[Dis]Identifications: Challenging Dominant Narratives of Black People in Canada
Exhibition: Artexpte, April 1-15, 2015; Concordia, April 16-30, 2015

Tracing Asian Canadian Art Histories and Aesthetic Alliances
Exhibition: Concordia, April 1-15, 2015; Artexpte, April 16-30, 2015

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EAHR @ ARTEXTE: Uncovering Asian Canadian and Black Canadian Artistic Production

Introduction

The Ethnocultural Art Histories Research group (EAHR) is a student-driven research community based in the Department of Art History at Concordia University. Established in the summer of 2011, EAHR promotes research that engages with issues of ethnic and cultural representation within the visual arts in Canada. Acknowledging the existence of systematic racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination and oppression, EAHR endeavours to create safe spaces for discussions on ethnocultural issues. The group strives to push back against the pervasive impacts of these ideologies through responsible and ethical research practices. EAHR members include graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni, and faculty from different Montreal universities. EAHR distinguishes itself through its active engagement with members and the community at large.

During the winter of 2015, EAHR participated in a four-month research residency at Artexte that sought to promote the representation and visibility of artists from different ethnocultural communities. EAHR researchers completed two projects focusing on art works and artists from Asian Canadian and Black Canadian communities—two communities that have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in Canada. These projects culminated in the creation of two comprehensive bibliographies to be made available on the Artexte website, two alternating vitrine exhibitions displayed at Artexte and the Department of Art History at Concordia University, April 1-30, 2015, and an accompanying exhibition catalogue publishing two curatorial essays by the residency participants. The exhibitions showcased critical materials discovered in Artexte's collection and sought to identify dominant themes and artistic strategies that would create alliances between the two communities.



The underrepresentation of Asian Canadian and Black Canadian artists and art histories within art museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions is reflected in scholarly writings which have for much of Canada's history established a national identity and art historical canon perpetuating a singular representation of "Canadianness." The resulting exhibitions and bibliographies of Artexte holdings compiled during this residency are meant to serve as tools for future students and researchers to destabilize this cultural canonization and subvert the historical erasure of the narratives of Asian Canadians and Black Canadians. In order to strengthen cultural relationships between ethnocultural communities in Canada through the representation of art and artists, documenting the histories and trajectories of their art needs to go beyond the academy. Further research and an expanded discourse surrounding these art histories facilitate a more extensive, nuanced, and pluralistic understanding of Canadian identities. At root, the pervasive misrepresentations and misconceptions of Asian Canadians and Black Canadians in visual culture calls for continued pushback. The research and exhibition of these documents are EAHR's small contribution to an ongoing, larger narrative of resistance.

Tracing Asian Canadian Art Histories and Aesthetic Alliances

Victoria Nolte, Tianmo Zhang,
Charissa von Harringa, and Delphine Larose

Facing the effects of the racist social and cultural paranoia that has been come to be known as “Yellow Peril,” the perceived threat of Asians as mortally dangerous to European civilization, Asians in Canada have endured the government’s implementation of discriminatory policies, such as the Chinese Head Tax (1885-1923), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947), and the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. A historically pervasive and deeply damaging colonial mindset, Yellow Peril has rendered Asian Canadians as hyphenated citizens and imposed various exclusions from cultural practices to institutional policies promoting a white Eurocentric Canadian national identity. While exclusionary laws are no longer in place, the effects of Yellow Peril remain continuously felt by Asian Canadians who continue to negotiate stereotypes that wrongfully portray them as “lower-class citizens.” Art by Asian Canadian artists also face stigmatization through the Orientalist optic as non-Asian audiences notoriously expect their work to embody a bridge between “East and West.” The barriers faced by Asian Canadians ultimately resulted in a history of marginalized readings of their artworks and a near invisibility within the Canadian art historical canon. These readings must be challenged in order to establish a pluralistic discourse of Canadian art.

In response to these troubling experiences, multimedia artist Paul Wong (b. 1954) curated the ground-breaking 1990 exhibition, *Yellow Peril Reconsidered*, at Vancouver’s On Edge gallery. One of the first major exhibitions in Canada entirely devoted to work by Asian Canadians, the exhibition, which featured photography, experimental video, and film, brought together the works of twenty-five artists of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Filipino descent. While *Yellow Peril Reconsidered* addressed shared experiences of the Asian diaspora, it emphasized the enormous diversity of Asian Canadian communities and formed strategic alliances between artists and other cultural producers. Reflecting upon these connections in his curatorial essay, Wong further

underscored that contemporary Asian Canadian art reflects a process of artistic exchange within communities, one that involves the borrowing of aesthetic and conceptual techniques deployed in response to diasporic experience, cultural histories, and strategies of resistance.¹ Following efforts to reconceptualize Asian Canadian from a transnational position, *Yellow Peril Reconsidered* sought to produce a partial tracing of Asian Canadian cultural production to identify key strategies among artists whose works engaged with notions of dual identities, cultures, and materialities. To encourage further critical discourse of Asian Canadian art and combat harmful tropes, our exhibition and documentation project, *Tracing Asian Canadian Art Histories and Aesthetic Alliances*, reorients an understanding of Asian Canadian as a material experience mindful of subjective dualities and continually *in translation*; a position critical of historical struggles against racist, sexist, and classist subjugations.

Toronto-based artist Louise Noguchi (b. 1958) directly confronts the viewer's notions of identity, perception, and reality in her 1995-96 series *Compilation Portraits* (figs.1 and 2). Through a gesture of tressing and "stitching," Noguchi interlaces fragmented views of her own face with the photographs of the faces of other people (of various ages, gender identities, and racial identities) she has collected from different sources. The result is a "blurring of gender, age, and culture [that] suggests the equivocal nature of identity, the complexity of who and what we are, the multiple twisting strands and shifting layers of selfhood."² Noguchi's multiple layering of subjects over her own portraits complicates a reading of her implied hyphenated identity as Japanese Canadian by visually configuring the space in-between as a site of nuanced duality.

Likewise, Vancouver-born, Chinese Canadian artist Ken Lum (b. 1956; now based in Philadelphia) negotiates the lines between perception and reality, albeit within a more global and public context. Lum's multimedia artistic practice merges various mediums (mainly photo and text) with an additional layer of humour and irony. His most recent work employs mirrors, an object that art critic Roland Schöny argues helps to "facilitate a real-time entanglement between the viewer and image."³ In Lum's installation *House of Realization* (2007-2011), visitors amble through a seemingly endless corridor of mirrors to reach the centre of the enclosed structure. In their journey, visitors experience a never-

¹ Paul Wong, ed., "Yellow Peril Reconsidered," *Yellow Peril Reconsidered: Photo, Film, Video* (Vancouver: On Edge, 1990), 12.

² Robin Laurence, "Art Offers Beguiling Enigma," *The Georgia Strait*, July 25-August 1, 1996.

³ Roland Schöny, "Mirrors as Reflections of Global Transformations," in *Ken Lum*, ed. Grant Arnold (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), 103.

ending multiplicity of reflected and refracted self-images that converge with those of other visitors and bystanders. These multiple “selves” serve as visual metaphors of translation: pluralistic sites that offer visitors the potential to mediate the politics of identity and diaspora.⁴ In this regard, the works of both Lum and Noguchi shift normative notions of gender, race, and culture, suggesting the instability and flexibility of seemingly foundational markers of one’s identity.

Similarly, the conceptual photography, video, text, and sculptural works of Vancouver-based, Korean Canadian artist Tim Lee (b. 1975) humorously translate and subvert the canonical construction of the artist as “white male genius.” Lee stages himself in the role of various cultural legends such as Stanley Kubrick, Neil Young, and Glenn Gould, to explore themes of translation, mass reproduction, ethnicity, and cultural identity. His works re-present “how an event, image, or musical score is transformed (or corrupted) through the process of being restaged or reinterpreted.”⁵ This process of reinterpretation is played out, for example, through the placing of his (racialized) body in the space of the photo frame, a gesture that exposes how canonical renderings of the artist genius have been exclusionary and problematic. In contrast, Vancouver-based, Malaysian-born artist Germaine Koh (b. 1967) explores the notion of translation through more material significances of the everyday. Invited to select an item from the collection of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto as inspiration for her conceptual work, ... (2000), Koh chose a set of pachinko balls, an ubiquitous object of everyday life in Japan. Found predominantly in arcade games, Koh re-presented the objects as thousands of ball bearings hung from the ceiling and scattered across the concrete floor of an open gallery space in drifting pattern formations.⁶ While Koh’s work differs from Lee’s in media and focuses on popular culture, both artists take up the idea of translation to visually communicate a diasporic space where materials and identities are in constant flux.

Signaling an extension of borders, Asian Canadian art and visual culture respond to the broader social-cultural discourse of diaspora (fig. 5).⁷ The artistic strategies of Asian Canadian artists, working through a

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 223; see also: Pnina Werbner, “Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora-Between Aesthetic and Real Politics,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9:1 (2001): 9.

⁵ Cohan and Leslie Gallery, “Tim Lee, The Art of Translation,” *Ricepaper: Asian Canadian Arts and Culture* 14:1 (2008): 49.

⁶ “Projects,” Germaine Koh, accessed March 13, 2015, http://germainekoh.com/ma/projects_detail.cfm?PageNum_rsDetail=4&pg=projects&projectID=54.

⁷ See Alice Ming Wai Jim and Alexandra Chang, “Asian/Americas: Converging Movements,” *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 1 (2015): 1-14.

diasporic frame, deploy the notion of cultural translation by evoking the experiences of displacement, urbanization, and ethnic marginalization and the continuous act of redefining culture from within. As an “inscription of difference,” translation is a critical strategy that aids in uniting individuals who share histories of movement, displacement, and colonization and decolonization.⁸ Often, these experiences are facilitated by notions of memory and the diametrically-opposed locations of “here”—the new place of settlement—and “there”—the homeland.⁹ Negotiating these terms, Montreal Chinese Canadian artist Karen Tam (b. 1977) employs Chinese signifiers as a subversive strategy to deconstruct Western conceptions of Asian cultural traditions. Her installation series, *Gold Mountain Restaurants* (2002–2010) recreates the interior settings of Chinese restaurants found in Western countries, incorporating the requisite familiar calligraphy decoration signs, lanterns, stools, and fish tanks, to play with Western readings of “Chineseness” (figs. 3 and 4). These objects are understood categorically as ethnic markers of Asian customary practices. In the staging of a public space of critique, as Lily Cho argues, Tam’s installation series “animates the Chinese restaurant as a diasporic counterpublic,” using the strategy of artifice to undermine cultural stereotypes.¹⁰ As postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha explains:

The question of identification is ... always the production of an ‘image’ of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness.¹¹

By constructing attributes of ‘Asianness’ according to Western misconceptions, Tam recontextualizes these fabricated stereotypes in a diasporic environment of public critique and asks: how did such constructions of Chineseness establish itself in the first place? And what do fabricated identities reveal about the larger cultural context artists find themselves in?

“To be understood, we must first be seen and be heard,” wrote Paul Wong in 1990 on the lack of critical discourse of Asian Canadian artists.¹² As

⁸ Hall, 228–231.

⁹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 247.

¹⁰ Lily Cho, *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 112.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2004), 64.

¹² Wong, 7.

this exhibition's partial tracing of contemporary Asian Canadian artists attests, this assertion remains crucial to the evolving study of Asian Canadian art and visual culture today. In order to understand the material position of Asian Canadian, critics and scholars must recognize that a diverse community of artists exists. Concerned with the ever present problems of cultural translation, reception, and subjective dualities that "Asian Canadian" denotes, the histories of Asian Canadian art are mediated through a myriad of strategies that work to forge alliances between different not only Asian Canadian cultural communities but also between other historically underrepresented and marginalized peoples in Canada.

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Figure 1. Louise Noguchi, *Compilation Portraits #15*, 1995, two woven black and white photographs (framed), 136.5 x 107 cm. Image printed with permission of the artist.

Figure 2. Louise Noguchi, *Compilation Portraits #25*, 1996, woven silver prints (framed), 73 x 63 cm. Image printed with permission of the artist.

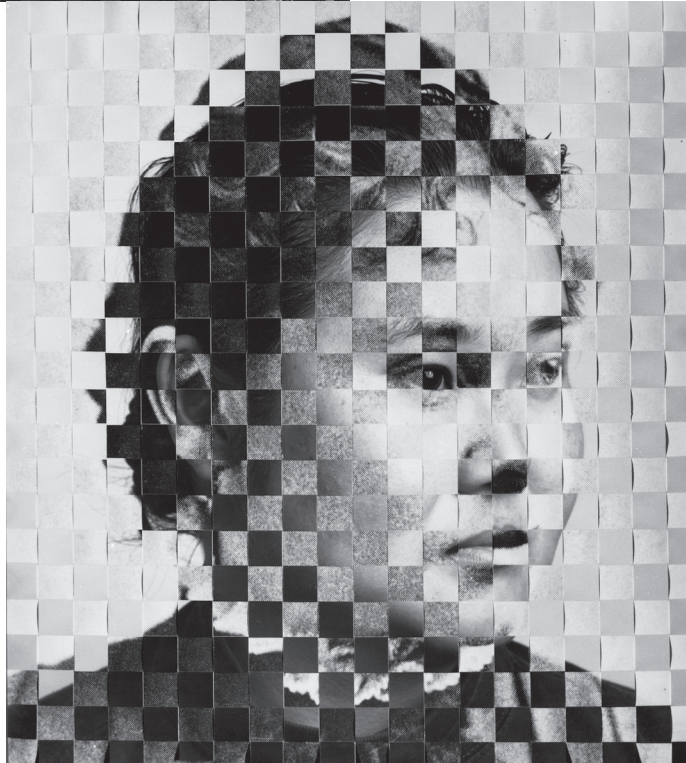




Figure 3. Karen Tam, *Gold Mountain Restaurant Montagne d'Or*, 2004, installation at MAI (Montréal arts, interculturels), 21.03 x 10.36 x 42.57m. Image printed with permission of the artist, copyright Mathieu Chartrand.

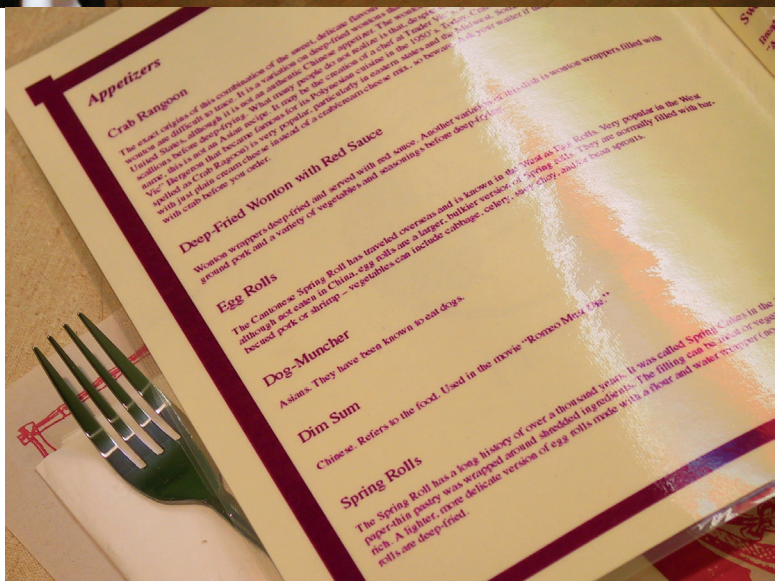


Figure 4. Karen Tam, *Gold Mountain Restaurant Montagne d'Or Menu*, 2004, menu from installation at MAI (Montréal arts, interculturels). Image printed with permission of the artist, copyright Karen Tam.



Figure 5. Jin-me Yoon, *Fugitive (Unbidden) #6*, 2004, colour photograph, 95 x 95 cm. Image printed with permission from Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

List of Items in Exhibition

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ASIAN NEW WORLD

VIDEO ART AND DOCUMENTARY

JUNE 5-8, 1987

CURATED BY PAUL WONG AND KAREN HENRY

FRIDAY, JUNE 5: IDENTITIES

All Orientals Look the Same, Valerie Soe
Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Asians, Richard Fung
New Year, Part I and II, Valerie Soe
Mochi Tsuko, Rii Karzaki

SATURDAY, JUNE 6: BITTER FRUITS

Chinese Cafes in Rural Saskatchewan, Tony Chan
Eight Pound Liveli-hood, Yuet-fung Ho
Soho Soap/Rain Damage, Shigeko Kubota
Monterey's Boat People, S. Nakasako/V. DiGirolamo

SUNDAY, JUNE 7: RECENT PAST

5000 Years of Good Advice, M. Liu/J. Samwald
Guadalcanal Requiem, Nam June Paik
Invisible Citizens: Japanese Americans, Keiko Tsuno

MONDAY, JUNE 8: MODERN MYTHS & RITUAL

La Ci Darem La Mano, Arturo Gubacub
Kapop, Bruce and Norman Yamamoto
Alo Alo Hani, Martin Gowers
Bye Bye Kipling, Nam June Paik
The Journey, Ruby Trully
Akumu, Fumiko Kiyooka
Drive, Lily Eng

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Poster for *Asian New World* film screening series, June 5-8, 1987. Curated by Karen Henry and Paul Wong. Image digitized by Jessica Hébert at Artexte, printed with permission of the poster's designer, Laiwan.

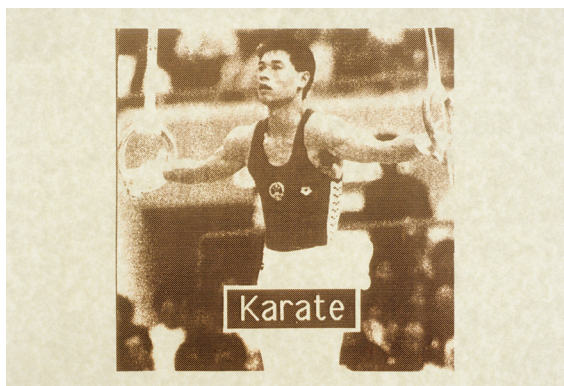
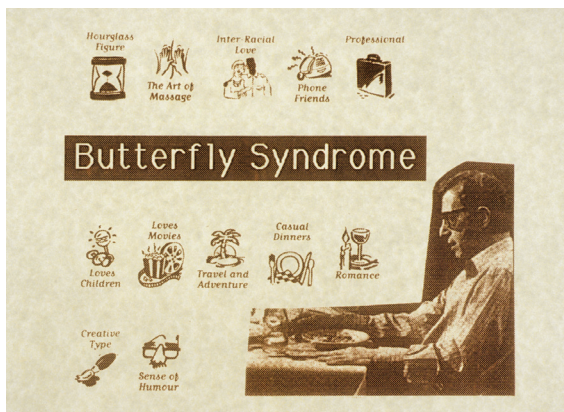
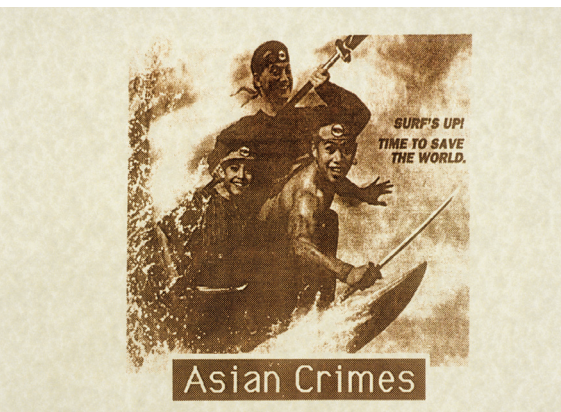
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Shelly Low, *Self Serve*, 2006, series of 3 digital prints. Installation view from FOFA Gallery vitrine, Concordia University. Image printed with permission from the artist.

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Ho Tam, interior pages from artist book *The Yellow Pages*, first edition handbound by the artist, 1993. Images printed with permission from the artist, <http://www.hotampress.com>.

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