

msvu art gallery

# ORIENTAL ORNAMENTAL



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**Karen Tam**

*Pagoda Pads: Opium Den*

**Jihee Min**

*Once Upon Camellia Blossoms*

MSVU Art Gallery

27 Mar – 6 Jun 2010

## msvu art gallery

Mount Saint Vincent University  
166 Bedford Highway  
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### **Oriental Ornamental**

Karen Tam and Jihee Min  
Peggy MacKinnon and Ingrid Jenkner, Curators

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ON THE COVER:  
Karen Tam, *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den* 2010

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## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Having received a proposal from Montreal-based artist Karen Tam describing her clever *Pagoda Pads* project, I set out to find another artist whose work would resonate with hers. I discovered that the work of the Korean-born Canadian artist Jihee Min would expand on Tam's critique of Orientalism in a manner that is congruent with the MSVU Art Gallery's emphasis on women as cultural subjects and producers. Bringing Peggy MacKinnon in as co-curator seemed a natural fit as she'd helped put together Tam's installation, *No MSG at Friendship Dinner*, at The Khyber (Halifax, NS, 2003). Thus, the amusing and unsettling *Oriental Ornamental* was shaped.

It has been a great pleasure to collaborate with Peggy MacKinnon, who has taken on many of the curatorial responsibilities for this exhibition, including her contribution of the catalogue essay, "Oriental Yours". I also wish to acknowledge the efforts of Stefan Hancherow, Art Gallery Technician, who supervised transportation, photography and installation;



Jihee Min, *Once Upon Camellia Blossoms* 2010

Katie Belcher, Program Coordinator, who produced didactic materials and publicity; and Traci Steylen, Art Gallery Secretary, who shouldered many of the administrative responsibilities.

The artists have been remarkably helpful both in providing information and installing their work. We are also grateful to the lenders, Dalhousie Art Gallery and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery (both Halifax, NS) and other community members for their generosity in preparing and lending components for Karen Tam's installation.

Finally, thanks are due to the Canada Council for the Arts, whose financial support made the exhibition and catalogue possible.

Ingrid Jenkner  
Director/Curator  
MSVU Art Gallery

Karen Tam, *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den* 2010



## ORIENTALLY YOURS

For most Westerners, the word “Oriental” evokes myriad associations—images and ideas that contribute to our understanding of East Asia, its history, culture and people. Many of these preconceptions about the East are an amalgamation of influences absorbed through generations of representation in Western literature, art and mass media. This “battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections”<sup>(1)</sup> forms part of the cultural phenomenon defined by cultural critic Edward Said as Orientalism.

As artists of Asian descent working and living in Canada, Karen Tam and Jihee Min create work that focuses on the social and personal manifestations of Orientalism. *Oriental Ornamental* brings together Tam’s *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den* and Min’s *Once Upon Camellia Blossoms*. In these interactive installations, the artists redeploy Asian stereotypes in ways that provoke questions about identity, place and constructed notions of Asian-ness.

1. Said, Edward, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979, 8.

Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961) was known to autograph her publicity pictures, “Orientally yours.”



The daughter of Montreal-based Chinese restaurateurs, Karen Tam began her investigation of the cultural significance of interior décor with exhibitions such as *No MSG at Friendship Dinner*, *Gold Mountain Restaurant* and *Shangri-la Café*. In these installations, the artist deconstructs and reconstructs the ubiquitous Chinese eatery as a means of exploring which elements signify meaning for the public and play a part in influencing Western perceptions of the Chinese.

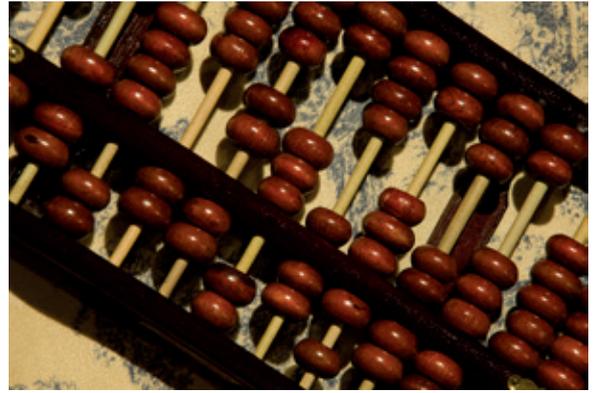


Tam's preoccupation with contemporary interiors continues with *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den*—the latest in her installation series of small modern-day Chinoiserie rooms that incorporate faux Oriental furniture and decorations. Presented as show rooms that demonstrate how to give one's home an "Oriental flair", the *Pagoda Pads* parody the ubiquitous Martha Stewart-style home decorating shows while drawing attention to the cultural belief systems underlying décor choice.





Using design strategies favoured by televised home decorating shows and magazines, Tam transforms the upper gallery into a Victorian opium den, complete with mats on which visitors can lounge. For this particular installation, she borrows the orange, red and blue colour scheme from the opium den scene in the 1946 edition of the Hergé comic book, *Tintin and the Blue Lotus*—a gesture toward representations of an imaginary China that have served as plot devices in post-colonial Western fiction.





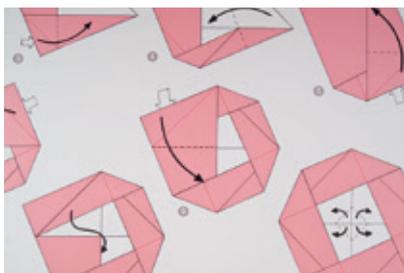
The installation includes music from Tam's CD, *Chinese Firecrackers*—an original recording featuring the artist and fellow musicians performing pastiches of popular Orientalist tunes from the early 20th century. In the final song, a woman's strident shouts refute the stereotypical image of the passive, eager-to-please Asian woman. The music draws the listener towards the beautiful and familiar, only to defy expectations by deviating from accepted form—a playful bait-and-switch that destabilizes preconceptions based on the idea of Oriental authenticity.



As a female artist of Korean descent, Jihee Min creates self-referential works that challenge both the stereotyped image of the Asian woman as submissive, demure and obedient, and the notion of Asian fetish. In the main gallery, she creates an attractive, feminine backdrop consisting of a huge field of over-sized silk camellia blossoms. When the viewer enters the scene, closer investigation reveals that the flowers' stamens are actually fleshy nylon phalluses and vulvas surrounded by tufts of dark hair



Preceding page: Jihee Min, *Once Upon Camellia Blossoms* 2010



donated to the artist by people of Asian descent. By re-appropriating the reds, pinks and fuchsias that have been used as signifiers of race and gender and re-contextualizing them in an explicitly sexual display, the artist both exposes and subverts essentializing beliefs about Asian women.







On the exhibition's opening night, Min sits on a stool wearing a long, black wig and camellia-pink dress. Gallery visitors fold origami camellia blossoms made from magazine advertisements depicting Asian women in eroticized scenarios and use them to adorn the wig. The wig and dress remain in the gallery for the rest of the exhibition—residual traces of the artist's physical presence that draw attention to her absence. Through this performance and its aftermath, Min both submits to and rejects the objectifying gaze, playing out her experience of the Western exoticization of Asian women.



Nothing but exotic and  
Blossoms of camellia  
Floating on a silky w





Gently confrontational yet humourously self-examining, *Oriental Ornamental* offers viewers the opportunity to explore the concept of Orientalism from both sides of the gaze. Each working in her own distinctive style, Jihee Min and Karen Tam combine space, objects and performance to create sites of cultural critique. The installations resonate on multiple levels, combining strong visual appeal with personal insights

into the racial coding, cultural constructions and gender stereotyping that feed into to Western ideas about Asia and Asians. Here, the visitor's individual experience is directly dependent on the expectations that (s)he brings into the exhibition, creating a psychological room of mirrors in which questions become their own answers.

Peggy MacKinnon



Karen Tam, *Pagoda Pads: Opium Den* 2010

