

East goes East

“The representations of Orientalism in European culture amount to what we can call a discursive consistency...a form of cultural praxis, a system of opportunities for making statements about the Orient. My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence—in which I do not for a moment believe—but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting.”

Edward Said, *Orientalism*¹

I grew up on the outskirts of Saint John, and then began my art practice in the centre of it. The city for me came to be defined as conservative, blue-collar, United Empire Loyalist, gritty, and, thanks to Elsie Wayne, the charismatic longterm mayor, “the Greatest Little City in the East.” I often wondered then: What was Saint John being compared to? And just how far east was East? For example, isn't Halifax a greater “little city in the east”? Part of the genesis for ***East goes East*** is the questioning of that geographical thinking, the desire to look a little further east.

In recent years, Saint John itself has gone east, with its politicians making multiple trade trips to China, and an influx of foreign and Eastern students at UNBSJ. But those of us who are not from or do not travel to Asia, how do we envision it, or come to know of it? It is more often than not through representations that, as Edward Said asserts in his theory of Orientalism, have more to do with the originating culture than with their ostensive subject.²

East goes East is an art-based discussion aimed at unpacking presumptions, examining representations and investigating “authenticity”. It features three visiting artists, Kitsum Cheng, Karen Tam and Suzanne Caines, who tackle these ideas and address issues of tradition, culture and communication through their work. More importantly, in their projects they deal directly with people and communities. Third Space Gallery, at present, has no gallery space. Instead, the artists, their investigations and the public meet on neutral ground, a “third space”³, created from shared experiences, bringing into focus how integrated art and life can and should be.

East goes East begins with a group exhibition of artwork by Vancouver-based artist Kitsum Cheng, members of Third Space Gallery and local Chinese Canadians who responded to an open call for submissions. The artwork will be on view for ten days after which Cheng will lead a veneration ceremony that both symbolically and physically transforms the exhibition: the artworks will be burned to ashes.

Through her research on the subject Cheng has found that art is rarely considered for offerings in traditional burning ceremonies, which normally include symbolic paper money or objects to be used in the afterlife. Cheng is curious as to why art is rarely included in this “trajectory of giving”. She confounds the presumed order of things by burning artworks, posing fundamental questions about the nature, value and appropriate usage of art.

Cheng has been inspired by her own family traditions and by the recurring scenes of fire in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky⁴; for her fire is representative of spiritual purification and collectivism. For others, the burning of art can be seen as sacrilege, something that has more in common with book burnings or censorship. Its meaning is fluid and depends wholly on context and the subjectivity of the viewer. The leap of faith and the unknowable result hinges on the event, a community gathering where dialogue, discussion and sharing are the goals.

Through performances and video installations, Halifax-based artist Suzanne Caines searches for an “authentic” moment, investigating whether it can be found in encounters based on cultural and linguistic misunderstanding. For *Romance in China*, she approached strangers in parks in Beijing and recited love lines from Hollywood movies to them. Their responses, captured on video, are comic yet slightly uncomfortable to watch; the artist insists on keeping to the script, saying only her lines, while those she is speaking with seem bewildered, or amused, or nonplussed and ignore her entirely.

“The geography of the encounter will disrupt the meaning of each encounter,” Caines has said of this work. In a variation of *Romance in China* in Fredericton last year, she had actors play herself and the Chinese men in recreations of the original encounters. In Saint John, she will readopt her original role, seeking strangers or working with volunteers, to compare the differing reactions. “By doing this over and over again, I’m interested in what can be read as authentic in each of the reenactments. And is one more authentic than the other? And how can we judge that authenticity?”⁵

Saint John may be a self-proclaimed great city, but diverse it is not.⁶ (The Loyalist Man, a symbol of the city's attachment to the British Empire, only disappeared from its Welcome signs in the past decade.) However, the city does have restaurants serving a number of ethnic cuisines: Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Indian and a growing array of Chinese. These restaurants are sites of representations of particular cultures, and thus they raise the question of authenticity.

Montréal-based artist Karen Tam is best known for her playful yet comprehensive representations of typical North American Chinese restaurants, karaoke bars and opium dens. These often immense and incredibly detailed immersive installations not only tease out the assumptions of Westerners regarding China, but also illustrate that Western expectations of Chinese food, culture, and customs are often satisfied through a process of self-exoticism.

Tam's contributions to ***East goes East*** are the least overtly visible because they are the most entrenched in the everyday. Viewing of her interventions will require multiple visits to a variety of Chinese restaurants throughout Greater Saint John, where she has made subtle alterations to decor, custom menus, video series and music playlists. These interventions synthesize her experiences in Chinese Canadian restaurant culture (she grew up working in a family-run restaurant) with the history and culture of Chinese immigration in North America.

Tam's insertions into the daily routines of Chinese restaurants in Saint John include recipes that could be fiction but are in fact based on historical artifacts, such as “Buster Keaton Chop Suey.” Her expansive knowledge of the history of chop suey houses in North America also informs the playlists she has compiled, spanning contemporary Chinese pop and works from the American songbook that refer to China or Chinese dishes – such as Louis Armstrong's song “Chop Suey Cornet.” In addition, Tam is offering a workshop on traditional and contemporary Chinese paper cutting, a technique she employs often in her installations. The Chinese invented the technique, having invented paper as well. Tam creates large, dense, interwoven motifs that appropriate traditional imagery while inserting sometimes shocking references to racist attitudes.

In abandoning the traditional gallery space in favour of direct action, events and participation with various community groups, Third Space Gallery has demonstrated a commitment to crossing the boundaries between art and life, opening up new areas for discussion, and using art as a tool for social interaction. ***East goes East*** is less a traditional exhibition and more a gathering of artists and ideas with an emphasis on community and collaboration, while searching for art in the everyday. ***East goes East*** is not a representation; it is wholly present and embodied in the moment.

-Chris Lloyd, Montréal, 2011



Notes

- Edward Said, Orientalism, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) p. 273.
- Ibid., 203-5
- for more about the concept of the “third space” as it pertains to language, culture and post-colonialism, see Homi Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory”, in The Location of Culture, (London & New York, Routledge, 1994).
- Notably The Mirror (1975) and The Sacrifice (1986)
- Suzanne Caines, quoted in Kate Wallace “Lost and Found in Translation,” Telegraph Journal, July 31, 2010, S3.
- Canada's 2006 census demonstrated that Saint John is mainly populated by self-described “Canadians” and people of anglo-western European descent: 42.1 percent of Saint John’s population described their background as "Canadian", followed by English (35.6percent), Irish (33.6 percent), Scottish (27.3 percent), French (22.7 percent), German (6.0 percent) and Dutch (3.2 percent). Saint John claims to be Canada’s “most Irish” city. With regard to religion, 89.2 percent identify as Christian (including 47.6 percent Protestant and 40.3 percent Roman Catholic). Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism together comprise less than one percent.