



# M A T R I A R T

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# AT YOUR OWN PERIL

YELLOW PERIL: RECONSIDERED—AN EXHIBITION OVERVIEW



**Y**ellow Peril: Reconsidered is a national touring exhibit of 25 Asian Canadian artists working in film, video, and photography. It opened in Montreal earlier this year, has recently closed at Gallery 44 and V Tape in Toronto, and is going on to Winnipeg, Halifax, Vancouver, and Ottawa.

For those of us involved in assembling the exhibit **Yellow Peril: Reconsidered**, it was as much a process of self discovery as an effort to make what we already knew about ourselves known to others. We all felt a certain rage, rage at historical injustices such as the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act, or the World War II internment of Japanese Canadians, and the current hostility levelled at Hong Kong Chinese and those who look the part. We were also aware of the effects of media stereotyping on the mainstream perception of Asians. As artists we knew of the systemic exclusion of Asians from exhibition spaces, publications, and other forums made available only to white artists to communicate with the public, and with one another. Cautious of being grouped together and typecast, artists of Asian descent have, until recently, tended to dissociate themselves from one another, rather than meet together for the sake of dialogue and a sense of belonging however genuine or artificial.

By examining what had gone on in the past, it rapidly became evident to us that until this now, the artistic communities had little recognition of Asian Canadians as an indigenous group. On the other hand, certain practices with respect to "Orientals" have been all too common. As Paul Wong writes in the exhibition publication, these practices have included bringing Asians, especially dissident Asians from countries with non-democratic (read non-Western backed) forms of government into exhibition spaces to be embraced as both radical and genuine. It can also be seen in the unsolicited appropriation by non-Asians of the "interesting" elements of Asian cultures such as religious practices, music, or artifacts, and the perpetual exoticization of Asian habits, customs, and bodies.

Multiculturalism encourages pretty songs and dances that many of us have not practised for generations, but it does not address the problems of daily life for Asian Canadians. These problems are different from those of non-Asian Canadians and they are less likely to be addressed because the requisite sources are never consulted. I will admit, it has become a litany—not because the problems have gone away, but rather because it has been screamed into the wind for so long that one simply gets tired.

Brenda Joy Lem,  
**The Compact.**  
16 mm film, 1990

The works in the exhibit are our attempts to carve out a sense of identity, to unravel aspects of our lives that may not be evident to those looking at faces which they have pre-defined as inscrutable. There are recurring themes although their treatment is as diverse as the artists involved. I will deal in this article with works created by the exhibition's women artists.

For Asian women, issues of sexuality are very much connected to issues of race. Chick Rice in her photo series *Tommy 1978-88* is concerned with beauty. Tommy is a sometimes androgynous shadow. Posing as the death and body-obsessed writer Mishima, he is indisputedly masculine: in a photo from a previous series entitled *Animals and Vegetables*, he could easily be a woman. The photographer's identity is intimately tied up with that of the model. We are uncertain as to whether it is the depicted face or the camera's eye that makes us see what we do.

Helen Lee's film, *Sally's Beauty Spot* might be criticized for re-glamorizing Asian women's sexuality. However, it does position the subject in the hands of a young Korean Canadian woman rather than in those of a white male protagonist as in the case of *The World of Suzy Wong*, which Lee's film carefully, if somewhat safely deconstructs. Is that which is beautiful by necessity also sexually objectified? At the end of the film we see Sally modelling for a photo shoot. Although she is looking into the camera for most of the shots, is it a co-incidence that the one that "worked best" for promotional purposes showed her looking away?

Laiwan's phototext piece, *Ubiquitous China*, questions the (English) colonizer's tendency to sex-identify colonized nations, China specifically, as female.

Brenda Lem's film, *The Compact* addresses the daily difficulties of a "mixed race" couple. What happens when someone who is perfectly ordinary is exoticized? What kinds of notions does the exoticized self entertain about her identity? Lem's film also views cultural variation in familial values as the norm. One example is the separation of this from parents in Western societies. This is juxtaposed with the great importance placed on family belonging and the maintenance of traditional Chinese ties.

The video, *Silence into Silence* produced by L'Amitié Chinoise de Montréal and Le Videographe deals with conflicting values between generations. Should a different place necessitate different values, different priorities? In this video, a young woman wishes to remain behind in Montreal to pursue her career while her family moves to Edmonton to open a restaurant. There is an underlying assumption in this tape that the new (Western) way is better, that individualism is indeed a loftier ideal than filial piety. Although it does grant some understanding to the latter, it points to the complexity of an older generation's ideals. To its credit, it is produced in both Cantonese and English, thus speaking to the Asian community rather than lashing out in hurt and anger against an undefined white audience.

Midi Onodera in *The Displaced View* is also very conscious of

her audience. The subjects in her film speak both English and Japanese, but only the English segments are subtitled, thus inferring, technically at least, a Japanese speaking target audience. Onodera deals with her relationships with her mother and grandmother, the barriers imposed by language, and the other ways in which one can communicate. There is a strong underlying sense of loss of personal history with the passing of a generation. The film is a positive step in retaining as much as possible of this history.

Perhaps it is this sense of impending loss that triggers the rash of nostalgia that overtakes even those that have been here for several generations. Richard Fung calls those going through this process, "born-again Asians". Curious about one's past or trying to eke out a more satisfactory sense of self, one may attempt to "return" to Asia and be disappointed. It is neither more nor less beautiful or exotic than Canada, as Melanie Boyle's *I Have Always Loved the Romance of Travel* intones. Either place can be the subject of a tourist experience. Laiwan, in juxtaposing an image of China against one of a remarkably similar looking Canada both blurs and clarifies the relationship between the two. Asians living in the New World, can not define ourselves as belonging to either one place or the other, despite seemingly obvious geographic separations. Regardless of Laiwan's inability to speak or write Chinese, she is aware of having been colonized by the English and their language drives her to feel in some ways more akin to a tongue she does not even understand.

In Sharyn Yuen's *Jook Kaak*, the experience of "going back" is a real and sensory one evident in the gorgeous unevenness of her handmade paper and the human faces imprinted on it. The accompanying text is personal and concise. The experience remains tactile, close, imperfect, rough at the edges, but in the end fulfilling.

While many Asian Canadians face the difficulty of how to identify and preserve their heritage, there are many non-Asians that have attempted to do it for them. Jin-me Yoon's *(Inter)reference: (Im)permanent (Re)collection* imitates a museum piece—high art attempting to capture a lived experience in a box. It warns of the distortions that take place when members of one culture attempt to encapsulate the experience of members of another, an experience preserved in that "other" only as a fleeting memory.

We are just beginning to deal with our own issues. There is much anger and resentment at the white middle-class establishment. Our sexuality has unfairly been tied-up with what can only be termed racial (not cultural) identity. There is confusion over notions of the family, of values, morals, and ideals. There are language barriers that can not easily be reconciled. There is a sense of nostalgia for something lost. A nostalgia which is as artificial as the conditions, constructive though they might be, that give rise to it. **Yellow Peril: Reconsidered** offers no cure-all solutions, but it does present the state of the situation, offering an aerial view to clarify where dialogue has taken place and where the gaps are.

Larissa Lai