

Cultural Transfers 2018-2019

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Diasporas, Museums, and Knowledge Structures

“Re-visioning History: The Story of Chinese Artist Lee Nam in Karen Tam’s *Flying Cormorant Studio*”

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Karen Tam’s mixed media installation *Flying Cormorant Studio (For Lee Nam)* (2014-2017) evokes the life and work of Lee Nam, a diasporic Chinese artist who lived in Victoria, British Columbia in the 1930s. Lee is presently only known through his friendship with Emily Carr, who has been celebrated since her death in 1945 as a national icon, best known for her efforts to chronicle the life and ‘spirit’ of the West Coast in both her painting and her writing. Beyond Carr’s descriptions of his studio and observations of his work and his character, filtered through her settler colonial lens, the only material trace of Lee is a single painting in the British Columbia Museum and Archives.

Thinking through the presence and absence of a diasporic artist like Lee, this paper examines Tam’s installation and the histories it seeks to reinterpret, arguing for a method of writing the stories of artists excluded, erased, and/or vanished from historical record through their relations rather than artistic output. Employing Reiko Tomii’s rethinking of contemporaneity as a geohistorical concept (2016), as well as June Yap’s examination of historiographic aesthetics (2016), I consider how Tam maps the connections and resonances between Lee, his contemporaries, and different generations of diasporic artists working in the medium of Chinese brush painting. Through my analysis, I will further explore how Tam positions Chinese art as a source of modern encounter for Lee Nam and Emily Carr, suggesting that the interconnections between these artists were based on acknowledgments of their sense of occupying the same historical time in spite of their cultural and artistic differences.

“India:the Living Arts: Navigating the imaginations of museums and communities”
Dr. Stephen Inglis (Adjunct Research Professor, Contract Instructor Art History)

This major exhibition in 2000/2001 can now be assessed as a snapshot in the evolving relationships of Canadian institutions and immigrant communities. It also serves to document a phase in the direction of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History). This presentation identifies some of the thrills and spills of designating art as an expression of a nation and of an immigrant community.