

LATCHAM ART CENTRE PRESENTS



# like heirlooms

Morris Lum, Joy Wong, & Stephanie Yee

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Heirlooms are more than cherished physical objects passed down through generations. At their core, their value can be found in the intangible: how they help trigger memories and preserve histories, and how they embody gestures of love. For many Chinese Canadian communities, the intangible heirlooms of culture flourish where food calls people together.

For this exhibition, the artists present work that uses food ingredients, preparation techniques, and vivid images of shopping plazas that are central to Chinese diaspora communities in Canada. Together, they work within an expanded idea of “heirloom” to consider how aspects of food culture help us understand authenticity, care, and belonging.

家傳之寶不僅是世代傳承的珍貴實物，其核心價值亦可見於無形，包括如何觸動回憶與保存歷史，又是如何表達愛意。對許多加拿大華裔群體而言，祖傳文化的無形瑰寶，最能體現於凝聚眾人的美食上。

在本次展覽中，藝術家將展出以食材和廚藝孕育而成，佐以作為加國華僑社群生活重心之購物商場影像的藝術作品。三位藝術家聯袂呈現「家傳之寶」的宏大構想，訴說美食文化如何讓人理解正統、關愛與歸屬的概念。

Cover:

Top: Joy Wong, *untitled (cutout)*, 2023, SCOBY, thread, copper, wood, and acrylic paint. Photo by Laura Findlay.

Stephanie Yee, *Untitled*, 2024, Crystalized MSG. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Morris Lum, *Plaza at the Intersection of Highway 7 and Kennedy Rd, Markham*, 2009, Photography. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In a traditional sense, an heirloom is an object passed down through generations that holds immense personal value. Beyond the physical, they embody a connection to the past, the preservation of memories, and the continuity of traditions. For *like heirlooms*, artists Morris Lum, Joy Wong, and Stephanie Yee expand on this concept—widening its parameters beyond glimmering keepsakes—to consider the values that connect us to the past, and evolve as they are carried forward. For many Chinese Canadian communities, the heirlooms of culture flourish where food calls people together. Presenting photographs, paired with installation and sculptural works that use experimental materials, they focus on that which connects aspects of food culture with important intangible values. Their innovative use of materials and exploration of culturally significant spaces offer unique understanding of how traditions and values are preserved and transformed.

Morris Lum has been photographing Chinatown communities throughout Canada and the United States for over a decade, capturing their swift transformations, largely due to gentrification. His photographs in this exhibition were taken in 2009, predating his current focus on Chinatowns, but they similarly call to attention the importance of Chinese owned and operated businesses as community pillars. In these four panoramic images, the neon lights of Grand Lake Chinese Cuisine & Banquet (Unionville), Ambassador Chinese Cuisine (Richmond Hill), H&H Supermarket (Mississauga), and a grouping of independent stores in Toronto's Dundas St. and Spadina Ave. area, warm the sidewalks around them. During the day, these spaces do more than serve food. They are rich with customers that share cultural experiences, sparking conversations and connection. Regulars develop familiar relationships with one another over time, contributing to a sense of belonging



Morris Lum, *Plaza at the Intersection of Highway 7 and Kennedy Rd, Markham*, 2009, Photography.  
Photo courtesy of the artist



Joy Wong , *untitled (cutout)*, 2023, SCOBY, thread, copper, wood, and acrylic paint. Image by Laura Findlay

that reaches far beyond the parking lot. Shoppers and workers may share a language and experiences from their homeland that brings them closer together. With growing mutual comfortability, collective knowledge-sharing thrives. Outside of large city centres, stores like these foster interconnectedness among a decentralized Chinese Canadian community. In this sense, Lum's choice to take the photos of the businesses at night is apt: the darkness acknowledges a potential feeling of social isolation for racialized people in rural Canadian towns, but the neon signs function as beacons, calling people to create common bonds. Unfortunately, many of the businesses in these photographs have closed, and so Lum's photographs serve as records of the past while also exposing the tense relationship between safeguarding cultural heritage and the transformations brought about by migration and urban growth.

Joy Wong's recent sculptures use an unexpected material. A SCOBY, or symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast, is a cellulose mat formed when tea ferments into kombucha. It consists of many different microbes living together, transforming sugars into acids and fizzy carbonation. In her studio, long containers of tea are nurtured for weeks while they process their environment. When harvested, they're jelly-like and soft – skins of sorts – and these qualities help introduce ideas about the body and decay into her work. Making and harvesting SCOBY showcases the act of transformation, and it mirrors the cultural transformations that happen within Chinese diasporic communities in Canada while celebrating a history of fermentation processes found within many different Chinese cuisines. Beautifully, fermentation can also make some foods last longer, and so it embodies preservation at the same time, echoing the way cultural practices can evolve while retaining their essence.



Transformation, though, is only possible through care, and this is something that the living nature of Wong's sculptural material needs. Before harvesting, she must mother the growing SCOBY: feeding it sweetened tea, and regularly "burping" the fermenting vessel to release built-up gases. She's ensuring it has the right conditions to thrive. After harvesting, and then carefully draping and cutting shapes into them, another type of care must take over. As sculptures, the once supple material eventually darkens, turning brittle, and so preservation becomes key. So does an acceptance that this work is not archival. It won't last forever.

Fittingly, a SCOBY that is used to produce further SCOBYs is also referred to as a "mother," which brings up a key metaphor in Wong's practice. Recalling the word motherland and the SCOBY's spongy body, the word "mother" allows for conversations about the porosity of borders for migration, living away from one's ancestral homeland, and the importance of care. Importantly, Wong's art challenges viewers to think about the ways in which care and transformation are expressed, personally and between countries.

Stephanie Yee's artistic practice is rooted in storytelling, and often includes performance, writing, and installation. Her installation, *Tasty Rock Farm*, allows guests access to a fictional tourist attraction where monosodium glutamate (MSG) is harvested from nature.

Near the back wall of the gallery on the floor, an evaporation area holds drying MSG and welcomes visitors to this must-see tourist destination. Faux, glittering rocks are placed in clusters. Real Atlantic kelp and seaweed are draped along a drying beam. Among the lengths of kelp are white crystals, which hints at how MSG is

naturally occurring and can be found in many foods. In the corner of the gallery, a scaffolded bamboo shed acts as a storage and display area for the harvested material. Set within the context of the history and perception of MSG as related to Chinese Canadian culture, the artist is priming us to question stereotypes we have taken as fact.

MSG was isolated from foods in 1908 by Kikuane Ikeda, a Japanese biochemist who was trying to better understand the source of incredible flavour in his wife's dashi broth. However, it's essential to acknowledge the innumerable cooks that came before Ikeda. These were predominantly women of Asian heritage, who perfected techniques in their home kitchens to isolate the rich savory taste of umami, the flavor of glutamate. After Ikeda's efforts, the flavour enhancer grew in popularity in Asia and North America after the Second World War, until 1968 when a concerning letter was submitted to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, detailing an array of health issues supposedly related to excessive use of MSG in American Chinese food.<sup>1</sup> Despite many of the negative studies on MSG being discredited, "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome" prevailed in North American discourse until the 1990s, and its symptoms can still be heard in casual conversations today.<sup>2</sup> Writing on the subject, food historian Ian Mosby noted that the link between Chinese food and adverse reactions to MSG was the false assumption that Chinese cooks were more likely to misuse the ingredient than others:

"Arguably, the idea that Chinese chefs were using 'bizarre' quantities of MSG built upon long-held suspicions that Chinese culture and practices were somehow unclean, excessive, or inscrutable. From the late nineteenth century on, rumour and fear-mongering about supposed Chinese [deviant

practices] were frequently invoked to justify everything from limiting Chinese immigration, preventing restaurateurs from employing white women, to limiting Chinese businesses to Chinatowns and other designated areas. While this kind of racial discourse tended to move from the level of official government policy to rumour and popular culture in the post-WWII era, the rapid spread of the Chinese Restaurant Syndrome suggests that such ideas likely continued to inform popular understandings of Chinese culture and practices.”<sup>3</sup>

Using a combination of real and fabricated materials, Yee presents a space akin to a tourist site, where people often come to learn historic facts taken in without question. Though it is difficult for one artwork to address something as weighty as longstanding prejudice toward Chinese Canadians, Yee’s humorous installation has cracked that door open. *Tasty Rock Farm* is an environment



Stephanie Yee, Untitled, 2024, Crystallized MSG. Photo by Molly Steels.

where everything is up for questioning and wonder, facilitating a deeper contemplation of how cultural perceptions and knowledge are constructed and disseminated. It extends beyond a commentary on MSG to provoke deeper questions about authenticity. What makes Chinese food authentic is not merely its ingredients but the stories, traditions, and cultural contexts that are interwoven with local influences. Like Wong’s work, Yee presents authenticity as transformational, and like recipes that change with time, diasporic communities maintain their authenticity through the lived experiences and adaptations of their people. By challenging oversimplified notions of authenticity, Yee highlights the complex and fluid identities of Chinese Canadians, celebrating their resilience and continual transformation.

Through their diverse approaches, Morris Lum, Joy Wong, and Stephanie Yee highlight important aspects of an evolving cultural heritage. Their works remind us that heirlooms are not merely physical objects but also include memories, traditions, and shared experiences that transcend generations.

-T.D.



Joy Wong 黄祖欣

### Footnotes

1. Author Unknown. "From Fried Chicken to Margaritas, Chefs Are Reinventing MSG and Pushing against Anti-Asian Stigma | CBC Radio." CBC News, CBC/Radio Canada, 24 July 2021, [www.cbc.ca/radio/from-fried-chicken-to-margaritas-chefs-are-reinventing-msg-and-pushing-against-anti-asian-stigma-1.6110868](http://www.cbc.ca/radio/from-fried-chicken-to-margaritas-chefs-are-reinventing-msg-and-pushing-against-anti-asian-stigma-1.6110868).

2. Mosby, Ian. "'That Won-Ton Soup Headache': The Chinese Restaurant Syndrome, MSG and the Making of American Food, 1968–1980." OUP Academic, Oxford University Press, 2 Feb. 2009, [academic.oup.com/shm/article-abstract/22/1/133/1627040?redirectedFrom=fulltext](http://academic.oup.com/shm/article-abstract/22/1/133/1627040?redirectedFrom=fulltext).

In 2011, the author created a follow up article called "Revisiting the Chinese Restaurant Syndrome", which is also referenced and available here: <http://www.ianmosby.ca/revisiting-the-chinese-restaurant-syndrome/>

3. Ibid.

Joy Wong is an artist and educator based in Tkaronto/Toronto with Hong Kong/Cantonese settler heritage. Focusing on material connections with the shifting physicality of the body, they are interested in precarity and fluctuating surfaces, and have worked in print media, painting, fermentation, and poetry. Intrinsic to their material research are the impressions on the corporeal made from a queer and diasporic experience. Personal history informs research about what it means to reckon with a body in space, meditate on the abject, and navigate the meeting point of preservation and destruction.

Wong received their MFA from Western University in London, ON, where their thesis research was awarded a SSHRC grant. They were a finalist for the 2018 RBC Canadian Painting Competition and they were the 2019 Pope Artist in Residence at NSCAD. Wong has received grants from the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.



Stephanie Yee

Stephanie Yee (she/her) is a second-generation Chinese Canadian artist and cultural worker based in Pijinuiskaq, on the south shore of Nova Scotia. Her education includes a BFA in Intermedia from NSCAD University where she began her exploration into community. With a practice rooted in storytelling, her work manifests as gatherings, performance, writing, installation, video, and playing with food. Often beginning with familiar imagery, processes, and materials, Yee playfully interjects as a means of exploring and questioning preconceived notions.



Morris Lum

Morris Lum, (b. 1983, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago) is a Toronto-based photographer and artist whose work explores the hybrid identities of the Chinese Canadian community and the transformation of Chinatowns across the North America through photography, documentary practices and archival materials. Lum's work has been exhibited and screened across Canada, and the United States and has received numerous accolades including CONTACT Photography Festival Burtynsky Grant (2023) and the A&E Short Filmmakers Award (2010). Lum holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Documentary Media from Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson) and is an Assistant Professor in the Visual Studies department in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design.



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