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Kendra Yee, *Pantry Shelf*

September 8th – October 21st, 2017

Kendra Yee's mixed-media installation, *Pantry Shelf*, includes a printed mat, a woven blanket, and a small army of ceramic figures lining a set of shelves and the floor. Each piece has been made with an acute attention to detail. They feature intricate faces and designs, balanced with bold colours and intuitive modeling. They espouse craftsmanship: clearly hand made, but also loved. This reveals a lot about Yee's practice; lovingly crafted characters that reveal a deep understanding of what makes a precious object sentimental and important.

Pantry Shelf explores Yee's Chinese heritage. Her great grandfather, Yuk Gip Yee immigrated to Canada during the early 20th century era of the Chinese head tax. The head tax had been started in 1885 as an attempt to discourage Chinese immigration. "Substantial increases of the head tax were implemented from \$50 to \$100 in 1900, then to \$500 in 1903".¹ The head tax wasn't repealed until 1923, when the Canadian government completely stopped allowing Chinese immigrants to enter the country. Yee's great grandfather came to Canada in the 1921, paying the full \$500. Landing in British Columbia, he eventually settled in Moose Jaw Saskatchewan, opening a restaurant with his son that

¹ Arlene Chan, *Righting Canada's Wrongs: The Chinese Head Tax and Anti-Chinese Immigration Policies in the Twentieth Century* (Manitoba, Canada: James Lorimer & Company, 2014), 6.

became a family business. He was only ever able to return to China a handful of times to see his wife again before she died in 1942.

As a side effect of the Canadian government's racist handling of Chinese immigrants, few records remain of Yee's great grandfather's travels. Her only line of investigation is built off of anecdotes from her family and a limited supply of documents such as passports. In addition to the scarcity of written records, many of them are written in traditional Chinese calligraphy, which Yee is unable to read. As a result there are many gaps in the narrative that are lost to time. Yee created *Pantry Shelf* as a means of understanding this part of her family history. The tiny figures represent at once knick-knacks at a variety store and characters from her family's story that she will never know or understand. Their small cartoony faces fill in the blanks in her history, replacing the loss and mystery of her family's past with comforting images that inspire happiness instead of dread.

Yee's mat piece exemplifies this narrative strategy. On a black ground, a dragon constructed from floating circles menacingly surrounds a tall figure. Both of these characters are rendered in bright reds and greens, creating a sharp contrast with the background. Detailed patterns and red Chinese calligraphy fill the top left corner. Beside, a copy of a stamp from her grandfather's passport reminds us of the politically and racially motivated burden Canada laid on many of its Chinese immigrants. While the harsh colours and oppressive darkness of the image bear on the viewer, the image is also imbued with playful wonder. The figure's clothing is beautifully detailed, a small light green dragon delicately printed onto their robes. The dragon, while implying a threat or fear, also conveys a sense of fun, through the use of a variety of patterns and tones. Its face appears

to be laughing or roaring. The decoration around the edges of the mat is sentimental as well, with detailed linework of flowers, water, and a shooting star.

A printed carpet hangs on the wall at the back of the installation, which uses a blend of history, imagination, and symbolism to communicate the complex narrative of the artist's family. On it, a sleeping figure on a bed floats with the stars above a white tree. The tree is simple in design, a circle with a stick protruding from the base, making it also appear as the silhouette of an oversimplified atomic bomb. Demons float around the tree, appearing to playfully guard it. Like the clay figures surrounding the installation, the demons aren't necessarily good or evil, simply avatars representing the complex tension between family pride from her great grandfather's resilience and sorrow at the torment her family has gone through. In Yee's words, the characters throughout her work are "[h]ow I interpret the journey with my own characters to fill in the gaps I'll never understand."² Beneath the tree, Yee has drawn mountains and a small convenience store behind a railroad track. The roads, mountains and railroads refer to the travel between Vancouver and Saskatchewan, but also serve as a bleak reminder of Canada's cruel use of Asian immigrants to build the railroads. Yee's family didn't work on the railroad themselves, but the devastating financial and physical torture placed on Asian Canadians as a result of the railroads is a devastating blow and a weighty symbol to draw upon.³

Pantry Shelf was named after Yee's grandfather's convenience store, which he opened shortly after opening the restaurant with his father. Pantry Shelf, the

² Kendra Yee (Artist) in discussion with the author, August 2017

³ Pierre Berton, *The Last Spike: The Great Railway, 1881-1885* (Canada: Anchor Canada, 2001), 205.

store, was deeply valued in the Moose Jaw area, and in 2004 earned Yee's grandparents a citizenship award for their significant contributions to the community. Because so much of Yee's family history is lost to history, it can be hard to imagine the exact experiences of Yuk Gip Yee and his son. While working on this writing, Yee gave me a detailed timeline of her family's experiences. It was clearly condensed from a large array of sources and documents, outlining her family's movements and the historical framework it happened in. While many years are clearly marked with specific events, decades go by with only a few vague notes to fill them in. This is the root of Yee's work, the unknowable parts, and the sadness that can bring. The works in *Pantry Shelf* recreate what Yee imagines the shop might have been. It is a simulation and a novel. It is a shrine and a diary, and through Yee's careful reimagining of her great grandfather's life, she is able to tell an otherwise incomplete story.

- Sam Roberts

Works Cited

Chan, Arlene. *Righting Canada's Wrongs: The Chinese Head Tax and Anti-Chinese Immigration Policies in the Twentieth Century*. Manitoba: James Lorimer & Company, 2014.

Berton, Pierre. *The Last Spike: The Great Railway, 1881-1885*. Canada: Anchor Canada, 2001.

Yee, Kendra (Artist) in discussion with the author, August 2017