



**Project
Space**



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Arezu Salamzadeh

Fortune Flavors the Bold

January 18 - February 16, 2019

In Arezu Salamzadeh's exhibition, *Fortune Flavors the Bold*, gallery attendees become customers visiting a curio shop for various knick-knacks that promise good luck and prosperity. Welcomed by lucky cats with quirky faces and mischievous grins, visitors are given cause to question why the space feels both familiar yet uncanny. Rather than the usual manufactured objects found in many Chinatown shops, the miniature dragons, ginseng, dried fish, lucky candy in this store are handmade, and painted in sharp, vibrant colours. Challenging what is considered real and superficial, Salamzadeh's work allows for the active recognition of threefold transformations – of the familiar lucky objects, of a traditional gallery space, and the viewers' interacting with the environment as a customer. Underneath the humorous and lighthearted work, this installation reveals the darker edges of nostalgia, allowing visitors to enter the artist's headspace and partake in the sharing of good fortune.

Simply put, visiting *Fortune Flavors the Bold* is similar to the experience of opening a fortune cookie and reading an ironic but relatable, useful quote.

LUCKY CATS AND OTHER MISCHIEVOUS CHARACTERS

“For me growing up, the lucky cats didn't symbolize welcoming fortune or customers; they were ornamentation almost.”¹

¹ Arezu Salamzadeh, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

Walking into the space is surreal; it is a mishmash of attributes from both Chinese public spaces and private dwellings. Pulled from curio shops are the signature lucky cats and symbolic colour choices of red, gold, white, and green. Similar to Chinese medicinal stores, ginseng and ginger are sold by the pound in glass urns and wooden crates. Like certain family homes, shoes must be taken off before entering the (red glitter foam) tiled room.

Throughout the space there are multitudes of objects that bring good fortune:

- Lucky Cats with their right paw up to invite wealth or left paw up to attract customers
- Dragons that symbolize power, strength, wisdom, and good luck
- Ginseng roots prized for their health and longevity properties
- Red Pockets, tokens of giving or receiving good luck for the new year
- Lunar New Year candy, which supposedly, if eaten, will bring an influx of fortune in the coming year.

Within the abundance of sculptures, each ceramic has their quirk that makes them one of a kind. For instance, lucky cats wear a humanoid face that beckon customers to stay awhile in Salamzadeh's fabricated environment. However, when the gaze of the cats become too unsettling, the customer's eyes, averted, will inevitably be drawn to other curiosities featured in the immersive room, including red pocket-lined walls and baskets stuffed with real and artificial candy.

Modelled on common items found in her home or seen in her childhood, each piece has been laboriously moulded or cast, painted and fired by the artist. They are not ornamental figures, but neither are they the same symbols that bring wealth to the owner. By recreating commercialized items that have come to represent Chinese culture, the artist reclaims these symbolic objects, questioning what is more authentic, valuable, and lucky.

RECLAMATION AND NOSTALGIA

“I had an immense fear that anything I did would bring me bad luck.”²

Salamzadeh recognizes that much of her understanding of Chinese culture stems from observing her mother’s practice of using herbal medicine and performing superstitious acts. The fear of unseen consequences occurring due to real-world actions was always present.³ For the artist, these superstitions were both a fundamental connection to her culture and a barrier to understanding what it meant for her to be “Chinese.”

Fortune Flavors the Bold is a personal reconciliation of childhood fears. The ceramics, with their bright colours and familiar forms, are sincere gestures seeking to find answers. What fortune do commercially lucky objects bring? Does an abundance of lucky objects translate to having more luck? What kind of luck do these hand-kneaded pieces give? Lastly, what is the standard of fortune or what is considered luck? These symbolic creatures of the artist’s design recontextualize fortune. Through the maker’s hand, they allow Salamzadeh to break outside the mould of Chinese superstitious expectations and guidelines, relearning and reshaping what luck is for herself.

ON IDIOMS

“A lot of Chinese superstitions I heard growing up come from idioms and possibly the other way around too...The fact I can’t speak the language further removes me from this culture.”⁴

The title of the exhibition is a play on the expression, ‘fortune *favours* the bold.’ This old Latin proverb was historically used to encourage groups of militia to act fearlessly, as courageous actions attain more success and reward.

² Arezu Salamzadeh, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

³ Arezu Salamzadeh, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

⁴ Arezu Salamzadeh, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.

With an extra 'L' in the idiomatic title, Salamzadeh points back to the immigrant experience. It recalls how food has always been an access point for understanding intangible familial, cultural practices -- whether that be visits to medicinal shops to buy herbs or consistently having citrus fruits during Lunar New Year. In addition, this idiom is not so unlike many first-generation Asian immigrant mentalities where hard work equals future prosperity. But it does beg the question: if we are consistently working for the future, is this still considered good fortune for the present?

INHERITANCE

“Are these items lucky?”⁵

Another artist, Cat Lamora, had previously shared with me an idiom her grandma told her when she left Korea for Canada. Loosely translated from Korean, the saying goes, “become a big enough bowl to encompass the mountains.” By becoming a bigger bowl, one creates more capacity to carry fearlessly the complexities of identity that consistently feel like they’re pitted against one another. In the same way, Salamzadeh’s act of creating this exhibition is boldly coming into herself by growing assured of her heritage. *Fortune Flavors the Bold* is the physical creation of an internal sentiment to find home — even one that is just a feeling. Shared fortune comes from remembering our roots, acknowledging the current ways they intertwine in our lived experiences and widening the scope for future possibilities. Salamzadeh’s exhibition is an invitation to enter a playful transformative space that allows for introspections on diasporic narratives and positionings.

May we also become big enough bowls to encompass our roots. Perhaps, *Fortune Flavors the Bold* will leave you with the same cheeky grin on your face as one of the Salamzadeh’s lucky cats.

- Abby Ho

⁵ Arezu Salamzadeh, in conversation with the author, January 9th, 2019.