

Works highlight prejudices

Exhibition looks at our racist views

By ANDREA KUHN

The notion we are sometimes more racist than we care to admit is confronted in a new exhibition.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is the work of a group of 12 Asian artists who examine the issues of prejudice and preconception.

"It is a very acute and reactive idea," said curator and artist Laurens Tan.

"The title was initially to start the artists thinking but in the end they voted to keep it."

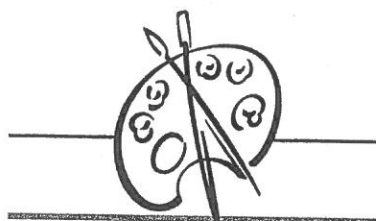
The exhibition, which has taken its title from the 1967 Stanley Kramer film *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, combines themes of racial prejudice and examines culture through food.

The movie depicts the dilemma of parents (Spencer Tracey and Katherine Hepburn) at their daughter's choice of fiancé.

The smart young professional sounds an ideal match for their cherished offspring - until he arrives at their home and they are stunned to see he is African-American.

"I think the interesting thing is the whole way we realign ourselves to this dilemma," said Tan.

"I suppose it is essentially saying



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each other. A lot of racism is simply out of ignorance."

Tan's own background is derived from a fusion of cultures.

The Dutch-born artist has spent the past 36 years in Australia but he has also lived in Holland, Singapore and California.

"I suppose I have been thinking about the whole notion of being Chinese," he said. "For example, I have been into Chinese restaurants and it's expected of me that I can speak Chinese, which I don't."

The language of the dinner table also forms an important part of the exhibition. Very often our first encounter with another culture is through their food, or a westernised version of their food.

For example, dishes such as "chow mein" become part of our vocabulary long before basic courtesies in the language, such as hello.

"Nowadays sweet and sour pork is no more foreign than fish and chips," said Tan, "although some dishes are made up and you would not get them in China."

The other artists - Tom Dion, Don Wang Fan, Jiyang Jin, Ying Guo, Tiffany Lee-Shoy, Montri Muenouy, Aaron Seeto, Jiawei Shen, Ngoc Trinh, Savanhdary Vongpoothorn and Lan Wang - come from migrant and Australian backgrounds.

Their experience is as diverse, and ranges from emerging talent such as Aaron Seeto, winner of the 1999 National Graduate Award in photography, to six times Archibald Prize finalist Jiawei Shen.

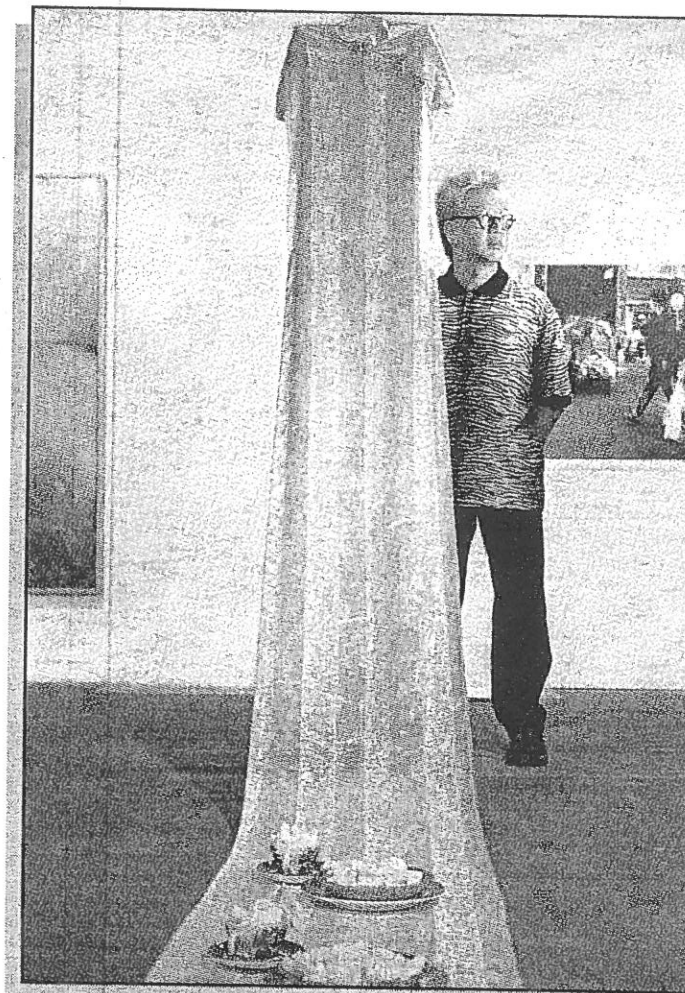
He came to Australia in 1989, having already established a significant profile in his homeland of China. He has also exhibited at the Guggenheim in New York and Bilbao in Spain.

His portrayal of the Red Guard attracted much controversy in the communist country. It was praised by Madame Mao Zedong, but when she fell out of favour part of his painting was destroyed.

Tiffany Lee Shoy, whose work *Untitled* is pictured, feels Australian involvement of other cultures is sometimes too selective, embracing only aspects that are easily palatable.

The work, which is a suspended cheong sam robe and plates of yellow sweets, depicts her discovery of the term "Banana". It has been used to describe an Asian person who has been raised in Western society, therefore considered yellow on the outside, white on the inside.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner runs at the Project Centre for Contemporary Art, Keira Lane, Wollongong, until November 14.



Artist Laurens Tan with one of the works from the *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* exhibition

Picture: SYLVIA VINCENT