

## Review: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

When Spencer Tracey says (In Stanley Kramer's 1967 film, *Guess who's Coming to Dinner*) *Are you saying they don't have any special sense of rhythm?* he is questioning any innate relation of ethnicity to cultural capacity or style.

Sydney Poitier, the black suitor replies, *You can do the Watusi, but we are the Watusi.* He brings back the question of the differential requirements to act out ethnicity — to meet the expectation of being something in what you do.

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is also a travelling exhibition featuring 12 Asian-Australian artists working in the Illawarra and southern Sydney. Better known artists share a space with lesser known — an egalitarian strategy for a inegalitarian game. The show is clearly meant to promote and develop a profile for Asian-Australian artists in the region, at the same time as questioning the category it presents. We cannot view the work purely aesthetically (as if we ever could) — art collides with the politics of community, making trouble for both. 'Exhibition looks at our Racist Views' proclaimed the *Illawarra Mercury* at the time of the opening, evaluating the artists in terms of how they 'examine the issues of prejudice and preconception.'

They don't really. Instead we encounter an array of strategies to make viable art from disparate backgrounds and trajectories — some artists are recent immigrants and others are second generation, some speak Asian languages and some don't.

The most overtly stated reference to the politics of multiculturalism is in Tiffany Lee Shoy's untitled offering — a suspended length of silk doubling as cheong sam and tablecloth, bearing Chinese plates with yellow banana lollies, icons of Australian childhoods. The banana allusion - white on the inside, yellow on the outside - is a common label for Aussie Asians, i.e. Asian-looking Aussies who have little Asianness other than what is imputed to them. Another young Australian-born artist, Aaron Seeto spoke to me of appropriating Asian-ness from the outside, rather like being a tourist of yourself, an impersonation. You might as well, since you can't escape the codings others read onto your body. There are pleasures and compensations in playing with being Asian — it may pay off in the art field where distinctiveness is everything. His *Ling-Ling Project*, named after a jade-like colour from a British Paints colour chart, uses Chinese red stamping ink on cardboard boxes which once contained Chinese food products. The spidery motifs, like the tiny figures inscribed on chopsticks, are surface readings of Chinese-ness — something taken from a menu. 'Born heres' can only adopt an external relation to Asian cultural and symbolic material. They were the ones most aligned to the curatorial theme of food, and the 'palatable' aspects of culture within multiculturalism — identity, reception and consumption. Laurens Tan's *Cafe Curtains* are photographs of Chinese restaurants in Wollongong. They are familiar and somewhat elegiac multicultural interfaces — sur-face images of older-style cafes mounted in a lightboard display characteristic of newer eateries.

Asian born, Asian trained artists cannot play momentarily with impersonation, they have to find an ongoing way of working, incorporating both continuities of former artistic dispositions and the ruptures of migration. The first picture I encountered was Jiawei Shen's *Standing Guard for our Great Motherland* depicting two heroic border guards on an observation tower against a backdrop of forbidding mountains. This epic image of the Cultural Revolution period brought its creator first fame, and then dishonour. Although living in Australia since 1989, Shen has adhered to oil painting and the academic realism in which he was trained in China, extending his technique beyond the partisan presentation of a single viewpoint, to metaphysical reflections on historical subjects and to new subjects for portraiture, such as the intercultural frisson of *Guo Jian and Ellie*. Dong Wang Fan's paintings and wood sculptures are deeply hybrid (a buzz-word I try to avoid), going well beyond mere quotation of historical styles. Dong dismantles and re-assembles the perspectival structures of representational styles — classical Chinese brush painting, ivory carving, Renaissance painters like Botticelli, textile prints and cyborg 'transformers', scrambling historical codes and points-of-view. These two Chinese artists have pursued quite divergent strategies in negotiating their artistic migrancy. Both are enunciative in different ways — they generate interpretations from disjunctive cultural material.

I contrast them with the calm force of the gridded paintings of Savanhdy Vongpoothorn, a Lao-Australian who arrived in Sydney at the age of eight. Her paintings may tangentially refer to Lao weaving patterns, but the layered, nuanced, striated surfaces resist any engagement with identifying signs; their focus is on an art of doing, a pleasure in the texture — drawing you into the material, making of the work, and then out again to register the effects of the light playing on these surfaces.

No unity is supplied by the co-presence of the works of these artists, only a space for reflection on differing aesthetic strategies for doing, and being, or not doing, or being . . . the Watusi.

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