

## Karen Tam: With wings like clouds hung from the sky 大鵬就振翼

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# Karen Tam

## *With wings like clouds hung from the sky*

## 大鵬就振翼

Zoë Chan

Can you rewrite history? How do you talk about an artist about whom there exists very little information? Is it possible to bring such an artist posthumously into the artistic canon? Should you even try? Karen Tam overturns such worries with supreme self-assurance and extreme empathy in her new exhibition *With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼,<sup>1</sup> curated by Haema Sivanesan. Stemming from her curiosity about Lee Nam—an artist mentioned in Emily Carr’s writings about her time spent in Victoria—Tam contends that this virtually unknown artist deserves our attention, or rather, *could have been* deserving of our attention. Despite the dearth of information available on Nam, however, Tam does not let this absence overwhelm the exhibition. She fills the lacuna in a series of playful ways, including calling on collaborators to contribute to the exhibition, and allowing her imagination free rein. Like a biopic director working in a revisionist vein, she nimbly mixes fact and fiction in order to flesh out who this artist might have been.

Nam is alluded to only briefly in Carr’s *The House of All Sorts* (1944), a memoir published shortly before her death, though he also turns up in her journals. From the memoir, we glean that he was accomplished and ambitious enough to approach her with his work. She decided to present his paintings in a one-off Salon des Refusés-style group show that she was organizing in response to the rejection of her own paintings by the Island Arts and Crafts Society in Victoria (which she bitterly blasted as “an extremely exclusive set” who showed “little tinkling landscapes weakly executed in water colours”).<sup>2</sup> Not only were its members conservative in their tastes, they were also outright bigoted, and they refused to let Nam take their art classes, much less show his work, because he was a Chinese immigrant.

Ostracized as an unconventional and not-yet-successful female artist within a dully provincial Victoria, Carr may have considered Nam a “fellow outsider” and artistic peer, as the curatorial text introducing Tam’s exhibition suggests. The text also mentions that Carr, having observed Nam’s brush painting technique, started using paint thinned with gasoline on paper to allow for a quicker application of colour, marking a shift toward the expressive style, with its many “swirls, flutters, streaks, sweeps, and dabs,” that she would become known for in her later career.<sup>3</sup> Despite her genuine interest in Nam’s paintings, parallels can be made with the primitivist proclivities of other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century artists (Gauguin, Picasso, et al.) who appropriated motifs and mark-making from African, Asian, and Oceanic material culture as a way of revitalizing their art practices and rebelling against art academicism. (Indeed, Carr’s depictions of Haida totem poles have been critiqued as problematic acts of cultural appropriation.)

Unlike Nam, Carr began having her work shown by prestigious galleries and gained recognition by the mid-1930s, eventually attaining her current iconic status in twentieth-century Canadian painting—her artworks represented in countless exhibitions and collections and selling posthumously for millions of dollars by the 2000s. Did she champion Nam’s work or his influence on her work as her own success grew? Tam chooses not to dwell directly on

Carr's privilege and other inequities, and focuses instead on conjuring up what Carr called Nam's "beautiful watercolours done in Oriental style."<sup>4</sup>

*With wings like clouds from the sky* 大鵬就振翼 opens with a small drawing of chickens attributed to either Carr or Nam. This diminutive work acts as a kind of catalyst for dozens of other drawings of roosters and chickens done in black and red ink and hung from the ceiling. The mark-making is vigorous and energetic in style—from the paintings fluttering above, viewers can easily imagine the hustle-and-bustle of a feathered brood. They were made in the Chinese brush painting style epitomized by the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679–1701), a handbook that details how to draw everything from bamboo trees and orchids to birds and mammals in the styles of various masters. In addition to outlining specific painting techniques, the manual frames these techniques within such fundamental philosophical and spiritual concepts as Yin and Yang, Tao, and Qi. Even today, this early Qing dynasty tome remains a teaching tool for beginners. In her introduction to a book featuring a selection of excerpts from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual*, Mai-Mai Sze acknowledges that the Chinese tradition of painting may have a reputation in some circles of being rigidly transmitted, but argues that "its prime characteristic is adaptability. It is not inflexible, or it never could have survived. [...] Each generation might be said to have used the tradition in its own way, modifying it to suit its needs."<sup>5</sup>

Tam pays tribute to Nam by vividly imagining his Chinatown studio in an installation titled *Flying Cormorant Studio (for Lee Nam)*: a comfortable room filled with books on Chinese and European painting, stacks of unframed drawings, scroll paintings on the walls, jars of brushes and ink sticks, seals, and even a piano. She envisions him

as an active teacher with his own art school and students: a table is set up for viewers to make their own drawings in response to a video, which features Tam's drawing teacher, Lui Luk Chun (whose works are also hung about the studio), demonstrating how to paint a chicken. These are added to other paintings hung from the ceiling—an installation that steadily grows throughout the exhibition's duration.

Resigning herself to the paucity of information available on Nam (one of the more poignant parts of the exhibition is a series of ghostly drawings by Tam based on archival documentation of immigrants to Canada with the same name as Nam during the early twentieth century), Tam's apparent aim leans perhaps more toward critiquing the system that obstructed his artistic ambitions. She also responds to the discrimination faced by Nam (and other immigrants past and present) by showcasing on the gallery walls landscape paintings made in Chinese ink wash style, including a selection of works by Chinese-Canadian artists living in Victoria, works from the gallery's collection, and, pointedly, a few of Carr's paintings. In this way, she both imagines the scope of Nam's unrealized legacy and underscores the malleability of Chinese brush painting as described by Sze by positioning its contemporary iterations within a Canadian context.

Since the start of her career Tam has examined histories of orientalism, racism, and discrimination faced by many Chinese immigrants. Her sense of play and her emphasis on the viewer's participation and pleasure distinguish her treatment of the complex questions percolating through her art practice. Grounded in Tam's refusal to sacrifice aesthetic concerns over content, her visually seductive work compels viewers to consider, for instance, the contributions of Chinese immigrants to mainstream Canadian cuisine in her detail-perfect *Gold Mountain Restaurant* installations,



**Karen Tam, with contributions by Lui Luk Chun, Kileasa Wong, Andy Lou, Richard Wong, Lifu**

*With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼, installation view, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2017.

Photo : Mike McLean, courtesy of the artist and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria



or to reflect on the impacts of imperialism in her blue and white papier-mâché “porcelain” series. It is the light touch juxtaposed with heavy subject matter—in this case the marginalization of a Chinese-Canadian artist full of potential and his near erasure from history—that makes *With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼 unique in tone. And within the current geopolitical climate, in which anti-immigrant discourse is on the rise, this exhibition feels particularly vital in its response to the historical void around an artist like Lee Nam.

*The author thanks Antonio Loro for his helpful feedback on this essay.* ●

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1 — The exhibition was presented at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, from June 3, until September 4, 2017.

2 — Emily Carr, *The House of All Sorts* (1944) (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004), 116–17.

3 — Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting, Second Edition* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1988), 162.

4 — *Ibid.*, 117.

5 — Mai-Mai Sze, *The Way of Chinese Painting: Its Ideas and Techniques—With Selections from the Seventeenth-Century Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 4.




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*With wings like clouds hung from the sky* 大鵬就振翼, installation view and detail, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2017.

Photos: Mike McLean, courtesy of the artist and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria