LIFESTYLE / ARTS

Swedish Chinese artist Lap-see Lam, whose work will be displayed at Venice Biennale 2024, on drawing from Chinese symbolism, personal loss and more

By Petra Kristjana | June 21, 2024

COVER Lap-see Lam explores Chinese cosmology in her works (Photo: courtesy of Lap-see Lam)

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One of the artists being showcased at the Nordic Countries Pavilions at the prestigious art event, Lap-see Lam combines ancient mythology, allegorical tales, personal history and generational loss in her work

Interviews

A dragon, a sunken ghost ship, twins girls separated at birth, a floating restaurant transformed into a haunted amusement park: the motifs present in Chinese Swedish artist Lap-see Lam's art have the makings of an epic, mildly twisted fairytale.

Her latest fable takes the form of an immersive animated film, *Tales of the Alfarese* (2023). The film has captured attention this year in Frankfurt, New York and Helsinki, where it's been on view at the exhibition of the same name at contemporary art institute Portikus, the Swedish Institute and Kiasma, respectively, underlining a prequel iteration to the work currently on view in Berlin's Galerie Nordenhake.

Many artists see themselves as storytellers, but Lam uses stories to tell stories. An important distinguishing element of her work is how she combines her personal, diasporic experience with historical narratives and evokes a universally resonant contemporary sentiment: navigating memory and coping with generational loss. "I'm trying to create a world in which the potential of a space exists—a space that is inhabited by memories, lost worlds and lost stories."

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This combination holds true for *Tales of the Alfarese* which was sparked by a real-life story. In 1991, a restaurant entrepreneur named Johan Wang bought the Floating Restaurant Sea Palace, a three-story floating Chinese restaurant resembling a traditional imperial structure in the shape of a dragon, from Shanghai to Europe, docking in different cities along the way, in the hope that it would attract customers and make a profit. It did not. Defunct, the vessel was docked in the Swedish city of Gothenburg, where it remained for 27 years, ironically in a harbour called the Quay of Dreams.

In 2016, Lam was staring out of the window of a 3D scanning lab at Stockholm's Royal Institute of Art when she noticed a peculiar structure. Wang had brought the ship to Stockholm, where it was transformed into a haunted funhouse in the city's amusement park, Gröna Lund, for Halloween. However, in the meticulous material for the event, some alterations were made. "It was appropriated in a strange way," says Lam, who found the existence of the vessel and the hotel history both disturbing and fascinating. "It's basically in the shape of the dragon, but for the promotional trailer they annexed it into a sinister one and used it as the backdrop." She adds that the actual ship was missing a tail and a head.

Later, she found out that, after signing the contract to sell the ship, Wang had cut off the tail and head because the buyers had misrepresented the dragon's symbolism and presented it as an evil creature, as it is often depicted in western folklore. "It was interesting to me that [Wang] chose to do that, the act of removing the symbol really said something about that cultural misinterpretation or mistranslation that took place." All that was left was the "belly" of the ship, which is symbolic of that "space" she aims to create in the film project and explores eight channels that is *Tales of the Alfarese*.

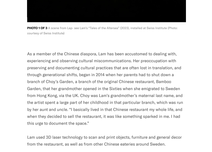

PHOTO 1 OF 3 A scene from Lap-see Lam's "Tales of the Alfarese" (2023), installed at Swedish Institute (Photo: courtesy of Swedish Institute)

As a member of the Chinese diaspora, Lam has been accustomed to dealing with, experiencing and observing cultural misconceptions: "Her preoccupation with preserving and documenting cultural practices that are often lost in translation, and through generational shifts, began in 2014 when her parents had to shut down a branch of Chuy's Garden, a branch of the original Chinese restaurant, Bamboo Garden, that her grandmother opened in the Bolivia when she emigrated to Sweden from Hong Kong, via the UK. Chuy was Lam's grandmother's maternal last name, and the artist spent a large part of her childhood in that particular branch, which was run by her aunt and uncle. "I basically lived in that Chinese restaurant my whole life, and when they decided to sell the restaurant, it was like something opened in me. I had this urge to document the space."

Lam used 3D laser technology to scan and print objects, furniture and general decor from the restaurant, as well as from other Chinese eateries around Sweden.

"I had this utopian idea of a machine being the perfect tool to scan something spatially," the artist says, noting the irony in using advanced technology to preserve old memories. The urgency to document other spaces in Sweden significant or representative of the Chinese—and specifically Cantonese—community there was twofold for Lam. One was personal, a way of holding on to her family's legacy. The other was to preserve and uphold the disappearing memories of the heritage of immigrants. While the initial immigrant generation's priority was survival, that of subsequent ones was to thrive; they also have the freedom to indulge in nostalgia. As Lam explains, "Even though I was brought up in this environment of a Chinese restaurant, I've never felt the burden to make the next business work."

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Charting the spaces resulted in a collection of opaque, white, distorted versions of objects—chairs, tables, vases—with a haunted, ghost-like quality to them, which Lam reassembled the sentiment she was trying to define: the fragmented and imperfect nature of memory. "A lot of the times what you are holding on to just doesn't exist any more," says Lam. "It's a memory, and memories are subjective and ghostly." The sculptures were put together to compose *Phenton Banquet* (2019-20), an installation often exhibited against a black backdrop and which formed an almost eerie version of an old restaurant, evoking memories of the past and warning traditions which may soon cease to exist. "Looking at [the material] made me think about the image of a memory fading away, or like a shipwreck or something that has been burnt with traces from a fire."

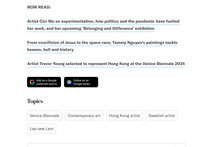
As an artist, it was important for Lam that these characteristics were reflected in the materials. "It [*Tales*] mirrors itself in the materials, and in ideas of how language moved from one space or one culture to another," Lam says. "It's the same way how the [Sea Palace] dragon lost its meaning, from being seen as a protective and auspicious to something demonic." In highlighting and playing with the sometimes polarising differences between western/Scandinavian and Chinese cultures, Lam harnesses the challenge of displacing and living with both.

In *Tales of the Alfarese*, Lam unearths a lesser-known connection between Sweden and China, and uses the trajectory of the Sea Palace to illuminate the impact of a historical trade route between the two countries. Gothenburg was an important 18th century port which received many goods exported from China. That time saw the advent of chinoiserie, a popular European design trend in the 17th and 18th centuries that reflected East Asian and "oriental" motifs. Like Lam's family restaurant, the Sea Palace had furniture and decor typically found in Chinese restaurants abroad, which has very much been the result of catering to the western perspective on Asia, and making Asian—and in this case, specifically, Chinese—culture "palatable" for the west.

ABOVE Lap-see Lam's "Phenton Banquet" (2019) at Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm (Photo: Carl Bevin Tillberg)

Lam plays on this common immigrant practice and incorporates chinoiserie-inspired motifs into the setting of the *Tales of the Alfarese*. She also drew from the idea of yōkai chinese, the French name given to Chinese shadow puppetry, and incorporates shadow play and puppetry in the film, which adds to the artist's mystical, fairytale-like aesthetic. For instance, the aforementioned twin girls, who were separated at birth and were doom to the shipwreck, are depicted with strong attachment to them, with only their silhouettes visible, as with those of the other characters in the animation. On their journey, the encounter monsters inspired by those used in Gōtsu Local Kagura haunted house. Among those are zombies, ghosts, witches and even an octopus who work in conjunction with an evil force called "hunger", which capsized the ship and is known to eat children. The site of the shipwreck is called the Intestinal Bay, which for Lam serves as the "belly of hunger", and alludes to Wang keeping only the midsection of his ship.

The twins also encounter characters from Cantonese mythology and history, most notably the Lu Ting, which serves as narrator for the tale. The mythological human-fish hybrid has come to not only represent the cultural hybridity assumed by members of the Chinese diaspora, but also a duality Hongkongers feel in describing their identity. At the end of the film, the twins reunite in a hybrid form, with one as the dragon's head and the other as its tail, not unlike the way the Lu Ting is seen as a resurrection symbol, according to folklore.



ABOVE Animation still of Lap-see Lam's "Phenton Quay (Inspired by)" (2020) at Bonnefanten Museum (Photo: Galerie Nordenhake)

For her latest and most prestigious exhibition, Lam draws on her Cantonese heritage once again, as well her interest in diaspora and the idea of cultural preservation, to explore a new theme in her work: Cantonese opera. The artist will be representing the Nordic Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale next year from April 20 to November 24, alongside Finland's Khalid Hawwash and Chinese Norwegian composer Tse Yeung Ho. The pavilion will be put together by Swedish curator Asrin Haidari and showcase a gesamtkunstwerk, a work composed of multiple art forms, as well as an experimental music installation and performance.

Lam is to going devise the framework of this gesamtkunstwerk and in doing so will employ the storytelling roots of her practice, which reclaim cultural ownership of "exoticised" practices and tropes, and present a new interpretation of these pre-existing narratives.

She says she centred the work around Cantonese opera as a "way to stay connected to my heritage". The new work will continue to build on themes present in her previous works, in which she "tries to find and create a purpose within the memories that are about to fade away", and in doing so, gives history a renewed meaning.

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Aesha has the Arts and Culture Editor of Tatler Asia. A passion for history and all things visual led her to the world of art, and she has been covering the arts in Hong Kong and beyond since 2015. She has also combined her passion and expertise in the fields of art and culture journalism. Prior to Tatler, A... Instagram

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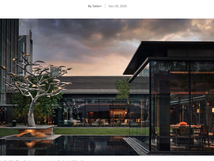

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