

Chinoiserie as Critique: Lap-See Lam Stephanie Cristello

In the English language, “key” and “quay” are homonyms. One unlocks entries (into hallways, symbols, treasure chests), while the other docks ships, allowing them to either burden or unload their hulls of goods and passengers. For the dreamer whose mind carries scenes of travel, the two words are indistinguishable: the faraway opens through the sea. Continents separated by divides (at the hands of volcanoes, earthquakes, meteors) evolved differently—Western antiquity belonged to the Greeks and Romans, while in the East, ancient civilizations developed for more than four thousand years. They were strangers until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the imperial impulse of the West led to colonization and mercantile trade routes. By the late nineteenth century, the decorative-arts style known as chinoiserie was a pan-European phenomenon. The “China craze” embodied a collective desire for an imagined aesthetic—a series of translations and misunderstandings so deep that the original and the copy were no longer discernible.¹ Divorced from history, the veneer became the object. Like Albrecht Dürer’s *Rhinoceros* (1515), drawn from verbal descriptions of an animal the artist had never seen, authentic images became enmeshed in the fault lines of “exotic” representation.

In the work of Lap-See Lam, remnants of the style that developed in the eighteenth century following the opening of channels between Canton and her native Sweden are approached through two other words, “consumption” and “taste”—terms invoked to describe the aesthetics of chinoiserie as well as the sensory experience of cuisine. In Europe, mania surrounding the exotic was described in terms of hunger, craving, something to devour. An insatiable desire to conquer—if not land and people, then cultural symbols. Such is the case with the dragon, whose mythological figure manifests as a central motif in the artist’s upcoming solo exhibition, *Dreamers’ Quay*, *Dreamers’ Key* at Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm. The newly commissioned works—ranging from film to virtual reality, sculpture, and installation—present a final act in a multiyear trilogy whose other parts are *Mother’s Tongue* (in collaboration with Wing-Yee Wu, 2018) and *Phantom Banquet* (2019–21). The works chronicle fictional narratives set within the emblematic environment of Chinese restaurants in Sweden, establishments whose interior design and architecture (in Sweden as throughout Europe and the Americas) are influenced by fantasies of chinoiserie. In *Dreamers’ Quay*, *Dreamers’ Key*, the eponymous film consists of a 360-degree projection of a shadow play.²

The narrative begins in 1978 in Choy’s Garden. The protagonist, a teenage girl named A’Yan, is subsumed into a time-traveling portal in the kitchen of her family’s restaurant. We follow her across three locations influenced by the sea trade: the Chinese Pavilion at Drottningholm in the year 1753, a Dragon Ship at Gothenburg from 1991 until 2018, and an East India Company vessel at sea in 1786. Like Kurt Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), A’Yan is unstuck in time. We witness an elective history. The film’s scenography—3D scans of real locations compiled and spliced together to create the fictional set—is digitally rendered and reduced to sepia-toned

black and white, mimicking silhouettes cast by flickering candlelight. The script’s mentions of various goods—porcelain figurines, enameled vases, china plates, room-dividing screens—are not pictured. Instead, we imagine them.

Imagination is, after all, how the aesthetic of chinoiserie took root in European production. Décor is not always trivial; in the case of chinoiserie, ornamentation is an echo chamber carrying the cast of the European cultures that appropriated Chinese motifs. For the French, it melded with Rococo; for the British, with the Gothic.³ In Lam’s vision, chinoiserie manifests as critique by imparting the same gaps in vision, the same misunderstandings, which result from imposing capricious dreams of what one thinks *should be*, in the very approach of the work. Though certain architectural elements from the artist’s chosen sites remain recognizable, what we can see is equally defined by what we cannot—the glitches and holes. Contrary to the hybrids that resulted from European guesswork of an aesthetic removed from cultural history, Lam’s work embraces absences between fragments as tangible portents.

In his poem about Dürer’s *Rhinoceros*, the Swedish poet Lars Gustafsson writes of the animal trapped “in the picture’s terrible net / and this time forever.”⁴ Certain errors endure. For Lam, this is where the definitions of quay and key align. As I write this text (Halloween 2021), the interior of the abandoned Floating Restaurant Sea Palace in Gothenburg is being rented as a haunted house. Docked at the harbor, the dragon ship is a host to props of horror—far away from the creature’s holy origins in Chinese symbolism. Gustafsson’s poem ends with what the rhinoceros becomes: “Your own dragon. Ready for anything.”⁵ Prepared to sail, perhaps, into the degrees of dreaming required to excavate and reclaim aesthetics damaged by the misconstructions of history.

- 1 David L. Porter, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 404.
- 2 Shadow-play theater originated in Central Asia during the first millennium BCE, and gained popularity in France in the eighteenth century as *ombres chinoises*.
- 3 Porter, “Monstrous Beauty,” 404.
- 4 Lars Gustafsson, “Albrecht Dürer’s Rhinoceros, 1515,” trans. Yvonne L. Sandstroem, *Southwest Review* 76, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 139.
- 5 Gustafsson, “Albrecht Dürer’s Rhinoceros, 1515,” 140.

99 Lap-See Lam, *Phantom Banquet Ghost*, 2019, *Dreamers’ Quay*, *Dreamers’ Key* installation view at Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin / Mexico City. Photo: Oskar Omne

100 Lap-See Lam, *Singing Chef Suit*, 2022. Commissioned by Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin / Mexico City. Photo: Oskar Omne

101 Lap-See Lam, *Gröna Lund / research material*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin / Mexico City. Photo: Oskar Omne / Bonniers Konsthall

102 Lap-See Lam, *Singing Chef Suit*, 2022. Commissioned by Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin / Mexico City. Photo: Oskar Omne

103 Lap-See Lam, *Singing Chef Suit* (detail), 2022. Commissioned by Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm.

Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm / Berlin / Mexico City. Photo: Oskar Omne





