

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

a small but comfy house and maybe a dog

舒適的小屋，或許還有隻狗

Amy Ching-Yan Lam

林靜昕

with HaeAhn Woo Kwon

與權惠顏的合作展覽

Guest Curator: Su-Ying Lee

策展人：李疏影

Many will first notice a makeshift bathroom sink with a tall garbage bucket placed in front of it, catching a stream of water (Amy Ching-Yan Lam & HaeAhn Woo Kwon, *Needing and Wanting*, 2023). The fountain's placement near the entryway is intended to draw visitors in, according to feng shui advice. Though static, an ample golden hand, a little comical and slightly grotesque, holding a key ring of bright charms in its open palm (Amy Ching-Yan Lam & HaeAhn Woo Kwon, *Untitled*, 2023), quietly conveys the milieu the artists have created. Positioned in the reception area, extending from the vivid green title wall, the exposed palm and loose grip express unguarded generosity, as if to offer you the pink Hello Kitty key and its ornaments, personal objects from Amy Ching-Yan Lam's childhood. The gesture of giving keys to the house prompts us to consider how we relate to ownership, how property has been conceived, and what loosening our grip on these ideas could achieve.

The title of this exhibition comes from a text, "Me in the Future," that Amy Ching-Yan Lam wrote at age eleven and put in a time capsule, speculating by the age of twenty-five she'd be married, have a career, and "a small but comfy house and maybe a dog." Starting from these childhood fantasies of domestic love and financial stability, Lam presents artworks that explore how these dreams function within the wider context of colonial history. With humour and acuity, she examines the relationships between property, family, institutional power and collections, and theft.

Oopsie Compound (2023), a collaboration between Lam and artist HaeAhn Woo Kwon, introduces us to a dream of domestic comfort and care. A model for a multi-generational communal habitat, the *Compound* includes a theatre tucked into an empty purse, a library within a series of gourds, a dining room built around donuts, a teapot bathhouse, and a giant thong sandal-cum-sleeping platform—the

challenges of surviving under the conditions of colonialism and late-stage capitalism manifesting as a fantasy community. The cozy home is charmingly built with found objects and more of Lam's childhood toys; however, troubling conditions that provoke such fantasies and necessitate inventiveness are suggested by the materials. The cost of housing, in Canadian cities and beyond, is now at such an inaccessible level that the impossibility of living in spaces as small as a gourd or teapot signifies a cruel reality, as does the precariousness of sleeping on a glass shard protruding from a sandal.

Inviting personal objects, many of them one-of-a-kind, continue to orient us to the concerns of the exhibition, contributing a measure of wittiness to sometimes moving and weighty subject matter. From the time capsule comes the namesake title text and another piece of elementary school writing that amusingly demonstrates a continuity between who Lam was then, and now. In *The Student Voice*, a 1995 class exercise where the students created a speculative newspaper, we learn that the artist began concerning herself with restitution for British colonialism early on. Young Lam wrote an article describing herself, at age 31, as the leader of a women's rights group, effectively persuading Queen Elizabeth to allow her to take control of England and all its property, provided she would lead without corruption or violence, presumably instituting a radical departure from the reign of Lam's predecessors. Developed over the last several years, selected work in this exhibition takes off from a series of nations altering events to relate histories of British imperialism, colonial theft and collecting, and beliefs and practices around breed through

the life episodes of a small dog.

The spread of opium use, according to common racializing and exotifying misinformation, has been attributed to China. In truth, China was illegally flooded with opium by the British who meant to addict the population. This British tactic aimed to put China at its mercy, imagining that a dependent country would accept opium, rather than sterling, in exchange for its coveted tea. During the second resulting opium war (October 8, 1856–October 18, 1860), several Pekinese dogs were among the things that the British soldiers pillaged from the Summer Palace in Beijing. Gifted to aristocracy back in Britain, a craze for acquisition and breeding was set off with an obsession for "purity" as the owners sought to claim a lineage to the Chinese Imperial court, while also associating themselves with conquest. Queen Victoria, when gifted one of the dogs, named it Looty, after its mode of acquisition. Made for Queen Victoria, the painting by Friedrich Wilhelm Keyl inscribed "Looty" (1861) shows the stolen Pekinese posed on a red cushion, with a bouquet of flowers. Behind the dog, is a Japanese vase, drawing a relationship to the provenance of objects owned by the Queen, while also demonstrating that Looty, celebrated as the smallest and most beautiful animal England had known, was even smaller and more portable than a vase.

This little creature, and its breed, became a receptacle for the projection of the British aristocracy's own values and concerns for status, colonial subjugation, and control. In the animation *Looty Goes to Heaven* (2022), Lam (with Emerson Maxwell) gives the Pekinese the agency to rest luxuriously.

Looty, depicted with gorgeously soft, flowing fur, takes a languid nap in a field of poppies, somewhere away from British society's jockeying for position, as the sun rakes across her, falls and rises again. Her repose is undisturbed by the clamour of dog acquisition.

Hong Kong, where Lam's family immigrated to Canada from, was ceded to Britain by the Qing dynasty in 1842, at the end of the first opium war. Despite being a double British subject by way of the colonized territories of Hong Kong and Canada, the artist's request to borrow the painting of the Chinese dog for inclusion in this exhibition was denied by the Royal Collection Trust. The younger Lam would be disappointed to find the painting's stand-in, *Rejection Letter* (2022), enlarged and displayed, indicating that the royals would no less lend than relinquish their spoils. Virtually a counter-response, while visiting the British Museum, Lam employed a tactic from the Queen's own playbook. Currently on display at the Museum, the Rosetta Stone, a stele or slab, inscribed with ancient Egyptian and Greek inscriptions, was first taken from Egypt by the French and subsequently surrendered to the British (1801). Lam found a souvenir trinket representing the Stone in the Museum's gift shop and appropriated (i.e. shoplifted) the object. Now part of the artist's collection, it is on display in this exhibition.

Themes of housing culminate in the final gallery where Lam configured sofas, collected from her childhood home, in the shape of a sundial (*Couch Clock*, 2023). Visitors are invited to sit and linger. How her parents' sofas came to be relocated from their Calgary home can be understood

by reading selected pages from the series *Property Calendar* (2023). The calendars are inscribed with stories, conversations, and incidents involving real estate properties that Lam recorded from 2021 to 2022. In the news, on the street and between friends and family, crises of land development and adequate housing impact our day-to-day survival. Spectres of time and property are deepened by the bay windows that bring the element of light to the sundial and provide a real-time view of the progressing Richmond Centre condominium development. Framed by the Gallery windows, the construction spectacle looms larger than life. *Future-Friendly* (2023) is both the title of a photograph that hangs in the window and a condo marketing euphemism denoting wheelchair accessibility. Colonialism and capitalism reduce us to living in miniscule spaces like the *Oopsie Compound*. Likewise, minimizing the existence and needs of disabled people in the present, disability is marketed as deferrable to an abstract future where those who can afford outfitted condos can attain comfort.

In defense of holding collections, institutions promote themselves as protectors of material culture and histories, archivists and educators, displaying objects for public enjoyment. Lam's regard for context and community can be seen in her attention to Richmond Centre condominiums and her engagement with two nearby collections, advancing the mandate for public enjoyment. Giving wider exposure to the Richmond Public Library's Dr. Kwok-Chu Lee Collection of approximately 47,000 Chinese language books and objects, a number of books have been brought to the Gallery, representing a small portion of Dr. Lee's interests. Porcelain

Chinese zodiac sculptures, displayed for the first time, hold the centre of the sundial relating time to celestial movement. Unusually, selected artworks from the Richmond Art Gallery's own collection have been made available for the public to borrow. Lam has contributed a drawing of Looty to the temporary lending collection, which is on view in the Library and the Gallery.

Lam shares the personal, held softly in an unguarded palm. Her disclosures allow us, by proxy, to safely cringe and laugh about youthfulness and contemplate formative times in our lives. The artist reserved a letter she wrote to herself twenty-nine years ago, rediscovered sealed away in a time capsule, for a first reading aloud at the exhibition opening. What she found was a seven-page letter. Excerpting it for the audience, she read mentions of her "weird" teacher, complaints about her sister and someone named "Sandra" who "is nice at times and sometimes rude." A self-critical writer already, she wrote: "P.S. This is not my best work!!! P.P.S. This is supposed to be authentic."

— Su-Ying Lee

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