

Home Cooking **John Yau**

He is with his grandmother by the seaside. A few crumbs of a scalloped-shaped madeleine dipped in lime blossom tea is all the unnamed narrator of the first volume of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past (or In Search of Lost Time) needs for a flood of involuntary memories to begin.

This "Proustian moment" – this vivid linking of taste and memory – is basic to being human. What triggers the memories depends on what you ate as a child, where you grew up, foods you and your family shared on holidays, what was given to you as a special treat, all of which translates into the tastes and smells that lodged themselves in your hippocampus and the role they play in autobiographical memory.

Thinking about the links between the "Proustian moment" and the memories stirred up by the taste of different dishes that I ate as a child, I began daydreaming about an exhibition on the theme of food, focusing on Asian American artists. Not only does the taste and smell of something trigger particular memories, but they also remind us of how much has changed in the intervening years. Proust's narrator is transported back to a lost moment of his childhood, but what about a lost world for those of us living in the Diaspora, which is what all the artists in this exhibition have in common.

Isn't eating a certain food a way to connect to one's culture, continue a tradition, remember a world that no longer exists, and be transported to a moment tinged with nostalgia and filled with melancholia, while living in a country that regards you as an "outsider?"

The idea for this exhibition gained a more specific shape after I wrote about the ceramic sculptures of Stephanie H. Shih and Jiha Moon. When I looked at Shih's dumplings and Moon's fortune cookies, four things struck me. One is the origin story of fortune cookies, which can trace its beginnings to 19th-century Japan and early 20th-century America. The vanilla and butter flavoring developed in San Francisco replaced the original sesame and miso combination. Although it is ubiquitous in Chinese restaurants, it originated in Japan.

The second realization came in the form of a question: are dumplings the Asian equivalent of a sandwich? Is there an Asian country that does not have its own version of a dumpling? Do Shih and Moon's use of clay share something with Wayne Thiebaud's equivalent of creamy oil paint and cake frosting?

The third thought I had was that Shih and Moon had collapsed vessel and food, or container and ingredients, in the medium of clay, which is intrinsic to the creation of vessels. Dig into human history and you learn that every culture has used clay to make a vessel.

Finally, dealing with an undistinguished form, such as a fortune cookie or a dumpling, seemed to me a smart commentary on Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." By making their works by hand, Moon and Shih are pushing back against the idea of mechanical reproduction, which can be considered a masculine view of art.

Isn't cooking the family meal considered women's work? By making food the subject of their work, aren't the artists challenging that commonplace viewpoint?

Once the idea for this exhibition began percolating, I started looking for other examples by Asian American artists. I soon discovered the delicate pastels done on different colored paint samples that Mie Yim posted on Instagram. The more I looked the more I was reminded of all the different ethnic foods that came from Asia, from the well known (tamari shoyu) to the little known (durian ice cream).

LAISUN KEANE
460C Harrison Ave C8A
Boston MA 02118
T: 978 495 6697
E: info@laisunkeane.com
www.laisunkeane.com

—
LaiSun Keane

As with the history of the fortune cookie in America, I also thought about the different cultural interactions that resulted in the creation of a specific food, such as tempura, whose name comes from the Latin ad tempora cuaresme, which means 'in the time of Lent.' The Portuguese who lived in a designated area of Nagasaki when Japan had closed itself off from the West introduced the dish in the 16th century. Made of vegetables dipped in batter, it was something the Portuguese could dine on during Lent when meat was not to be eaten.

Shih's sculptures of different sauces reminded me that there are many competing theories about the etymology of the word "ketchup," including that it comes from the Cantonese ("keh jup") or the Malay (kicap which is pronounced "kichap", and sometimes spelled kecap or ketjap).

Amidst all this, I also remembered the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, and the different news reports claiming that the source of the virus was a wet market in Wuhan, China, where the townspeople went to buy animals—including bats—to cook and eat.

The ravenous figure we see in Nguyen's painting, "...he gnawed the steak off its T-bone..." (2021) is her edgy response to that story.

During the time that I was working on this exhibition, there was an exponential rise in Asian hate crimes. On March 17, 2021—a little more than a year after the lockdown was put into effect—a man shot and killed six women of Asian descent in Atlanta, Georgia.

The New York Police Department's July 2021 report found a 363 % increase in hate crimes that targeted Asian New Yorkers. While the rampant increases in Asian hate crimes and an exhibition of 11 Asian American artists around the subject of food is not linked, they are not separate either.

When I ended up with a list of 10 artists and noticed that they were all women, I decided that I had to invite Charles Yuen, an artist whose work I have long admired and have written about, to be part of the exhibition. When I chose Tea Dream (2018) to be in the exhibition, Yuen sent me an email:

I painted this at a residency in Anhui, China. In a giant greenhouse.

Would Yuen have been inspired to paint Tea Dream in his studio in Brooklyn?

A few of the artists I spoke to told me that they had not made work with food as the subject and began talking about the challenge, which they all welcomed. For many, the theme of the exhibition prompted a "Proustian memory."

Ying Li told me that she had not made a painting about food, but would do one for the exhibition. In an email she sent to LaiSun Keane, giving the background to one of the works in the exhibition, Li wrote:

Watermelon 1968

When John invited me to participate in this show and told me the theme of the show was Asian food; that triggered my memory and brought me right back to my childhood in China. I grew up in China under the communist regime. In 1968, soon after the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" started, I was separated from my parents and sent to rural farmland in Anhui Province and forced to labor and be "re-educated". Food was scarce at the time. Before I was sent away my mother managed to get a big watermelon. She cut it in half, my sister and I each had a half. We ate it with a spoon. Watermelon 1968 is the memory of that moment. (August 19, 2021)

LAISUN KEANE
460C Harrison Ave C8A
Boston MA 02118
T: 978 495 6697
E: info@laisunkeane.com
www.laisunkeane.com

—
LaiSun Keane

Chie Fueki who grew up in Brazil and Tammy Nguyen who grew up in California also told me stories about different foods they ate when they were children, and said they would make a work for the exhibition. Everyone I talked to had a story about the role that home cooking played in his or her life.

In the case of Susan Chen, whose debut show in New York I reviewed and whose studio in Connecticut I later visited, I remembered a painting, *Arnie's* (2020), that depicted four young Asian Americans, one of whom was masked, eating seafood at a table outside, by the beach. We began talking about Chinese take-out and the ubiquitous white box and what she felt about ordering it. I invited her to make something new.

When I saw Crys Yin's two works on paper, each depicting slabs of red meat wrapped in plastic, I was reminded me of the H-Mart shelves near where I live. Although I have never met Yin, I decided on the strength of what I saw to contact her.

This was also true of Ahrong Kim, whose ceramic sculptures of a woman's head as the base I saw in her debut exhibition with Kristen Lorello. Writing about her wall-mounted sculptures of Mickey Mouse heads, each of which is painted or decorated differently, from the red and yellow insignia of Superman to a banana (which is a derogatory term signifying an Asian who is yellow on the outside and white on the inside), I commented:

It is a vision that I think other Asians and Asian Americans can identify with as it underscores that one's daily life is fraught with misperceptions and a sense of melancholy. The fact that Kim includes some signs of cheerfulness adds a sense of optimism.

As the show finally began to come together, I decided to invite Lily Wong, an MFA student at Hunter College, whose use of yellow in her thesis paintings grabbed my attention. I wanted the exhibition to span generations and cultures, because I felt that it got closer to the realities of the Asian American experience, which is that we all took very different routes to get here.

When Ying Li immigrated to America in 1983, she had mastered painting in the approved Socialist Realist style and taught art at Anhui Teachers University (1977-83)

In America, she started all over again by getting an M.F.A. from Parsons School of Design, NY in 1987, all while transforming herself into the painter that she is today.

Ahrong Kim, who grew up in South Korea, got her BFA in Ceramics from Kon Kuk University. After graduating, she came to America to earn her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design.

As I did not know what the artists would do in response to the show's theme, I had to trust them. It is like going to a new friend's house for dinner. The anticipation, curiosity, and excitement start before you arrive.

In an age of name brands, signature styles, and the promotion of personalities, I decided that "Home Cooking" should not try to align with those standards. I wanted to celebrate a hands-on approach as well as begin to honor the Asian American artists working in the United States today, a fact that has been largely overlooked by the art world's institutions, particularly on the East Coast.

Home Cooking

Curated by **John Yau**

On view: October 23 - December 5, 2021

LaiSun Keane

460C Harrison Ave C8A

Boston MA 02118