

MAY 22, 2026

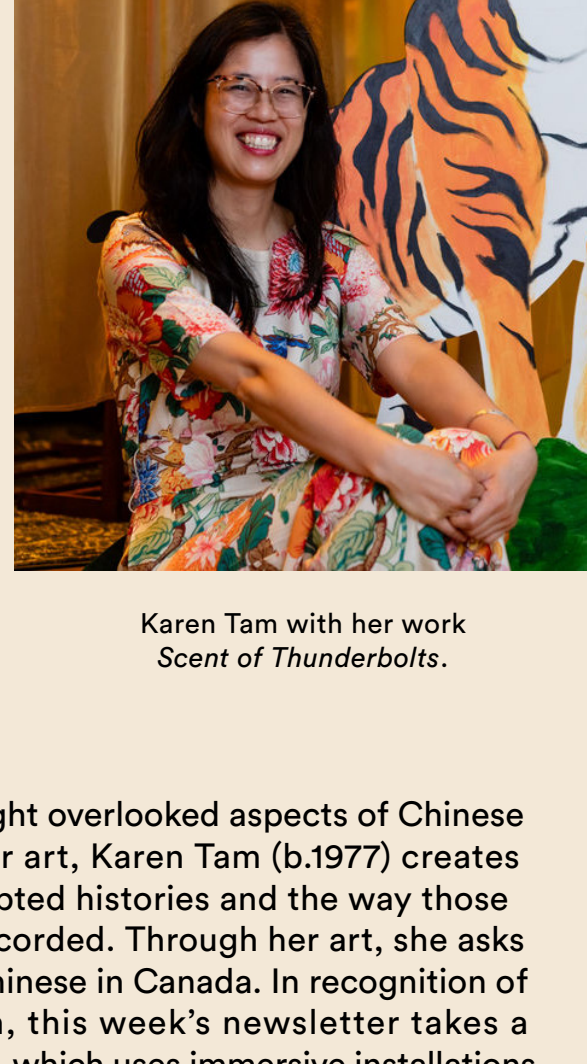
SPOTLIGHT: KAREN TAM

REWRITING CHINESE CANADIAN HISTORIES

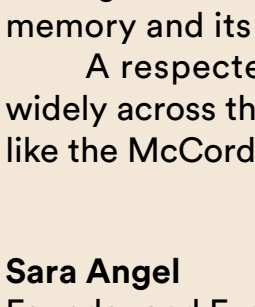
A look at the Montreal artist and her work.



Karen Tam, *Pavilion of the Auspicious Lions*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau. © Karen Tam.



Karen Tam with her work *Scent of Thunderbolts*.



By actively bringing to light overlooked aspects of Chinese Canadian culture in her art, Karen Tam (b.1977) creates counterpoints to accepted histories and the way those histories have been recorded. Through her art, she asks what it means to be Chinese in Canada. In recognition of Asian Heritage Month, this week's newsletter takes a closer look at Tam's work, which uses immersive installations, archival interventions, and sculptural pieces to examine how historical narratives of Chinese Canadian communities are shaped, circulated, and understood. Her work moves between personal memory and broader cultural frameworks, drawing on long-overlooked archives and familiar visual forms to reconsider how the past is constructed. Tam approaches history as active and evolving—influenced as much by what is preserved as by what must be reimaged. In this way, she offers a more layered understanding of cultural memory and its role in shaping contemporary experience.

A respected figure in contemporary Canadian art, Tam has exhibited widely across the country and internationally, including at notable institutions like the McCord Stewart Museum and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

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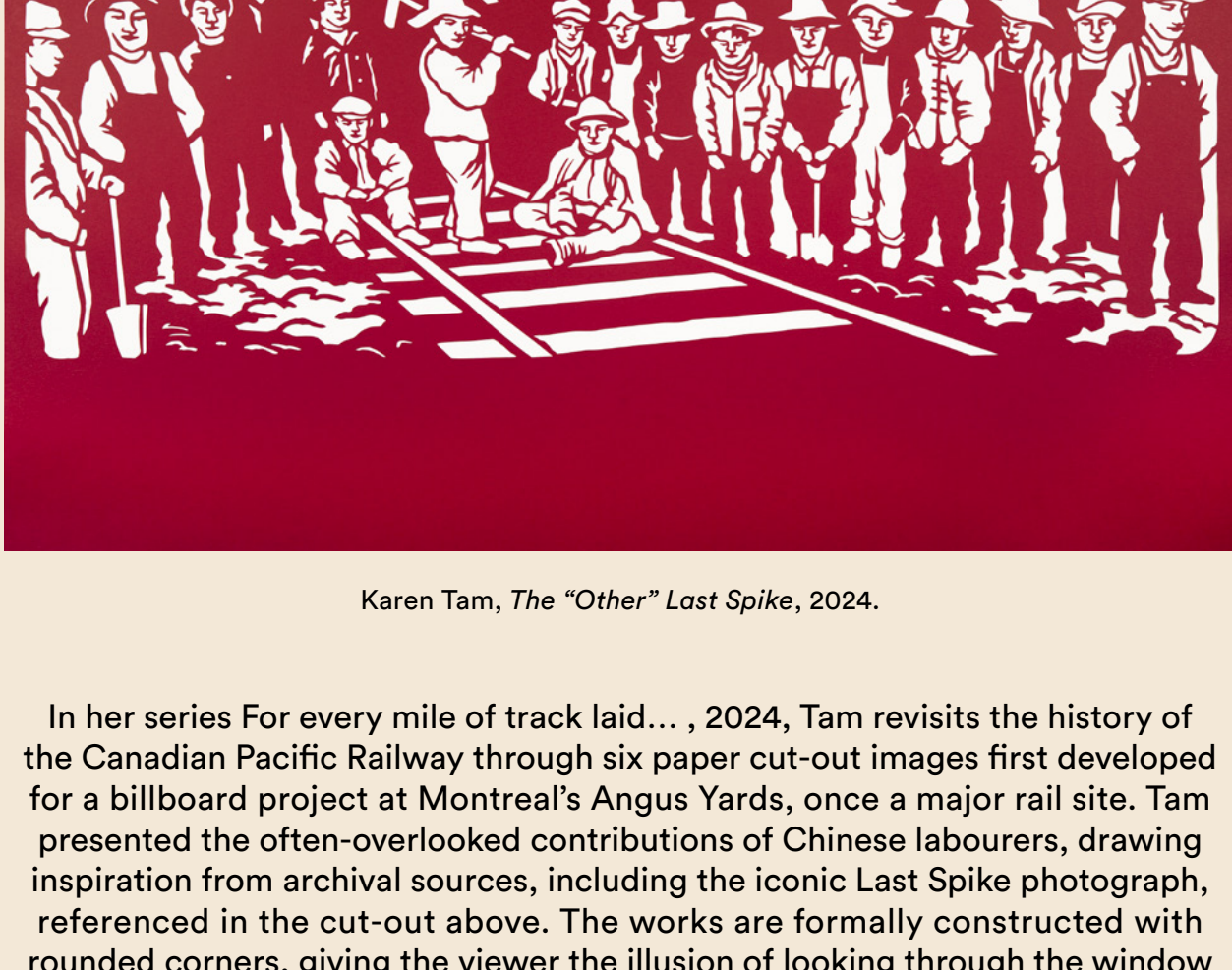
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENTS



Karen Tam, plan for *Pavilion of the Auspicious Lions*, 2025.

At Art Toronto this past October, Tam presented *Pavilion of the Auspicious Lions*, 2025, an installation that extended her ongoing exploration of culturally coded environments. Commissioned by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, the installation reflected on Hong Kong as both a familial touchpoint for the artist and a site shaped by exchange, trade, and colonial encounter. Drawing on her parents' migration from Mainland China to Hong Kong and then to Montreal, Tam incorporated personal elements such as family photographs and one of her mother's paintings. As she notes, "That movement—so common across many families—shaped the installation in new ways."

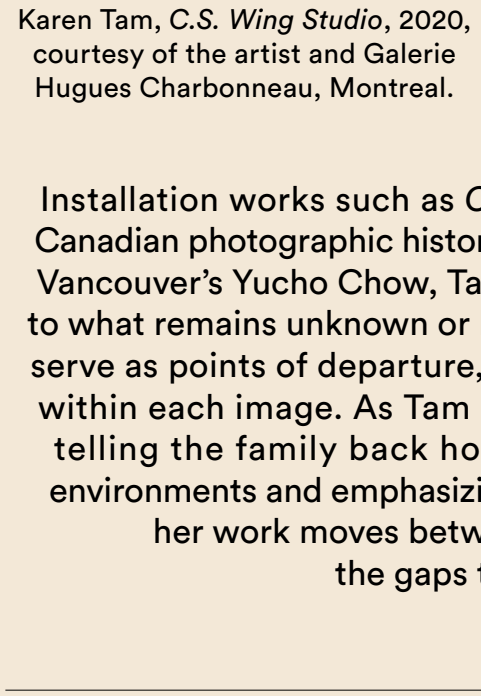
REWRITING A NATIONAL STORY



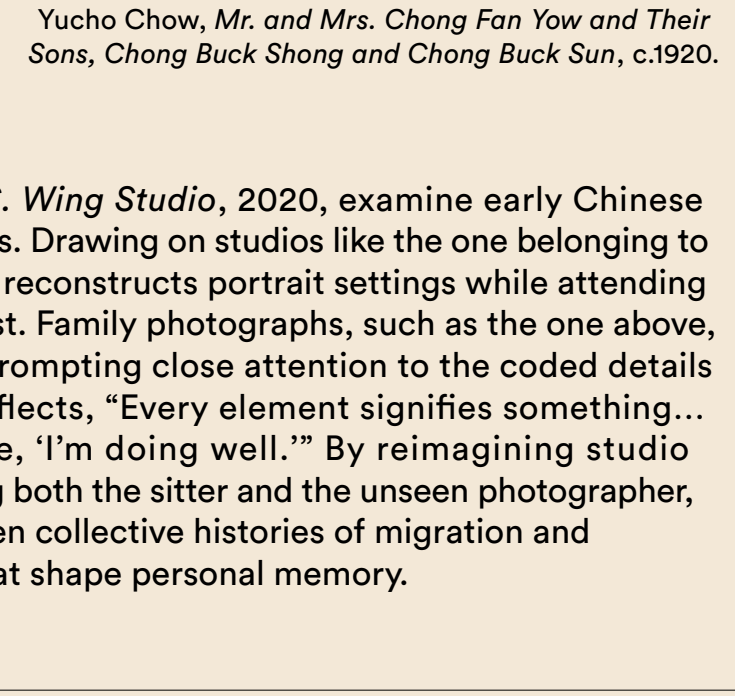
Karen Tam, *The "Other" Last Spike*, 2024.

In her series *For every mile of track laid...*, 2024, Tam revisits the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway through six paper cut-out images first developed for a billboard project at Montreal's Angus Yards, once a major rail site. Tam presented the often-overlooked contributions of Chinese labourers, drawing inspiration from archival sources, including the iconic Last Spike photograph, referenced in the cut-out above. The works are formally constructed with rounded corners, giving the viewer the illusion of looking through the window of a train moving across the landscape. This framing device makes visible the process of rewriting history, reimagining a familiar national image to include what has long been excluded.

LIVING HISTORIES



Karen Tam, *C.S. Wing Studio*, 2020, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montreal.



Yucho Chow, *Mr. and Mrs. Chong Fan Yow and Their Sons, Chong Buck Shong and Chong Buck Sun*, c.1920.

Installation works such as *C.S. Wing Studio*, 2020, examine early Chinese Canadian photographic histories. Drawing on studios like the one belonging to Vancouver's Yucho Chow, Tam reconstructs portrait settings while attending to what remains unknown or lost. Family photographs, such as the one above, serve as points of departure, prompting close attention to the coded details within each image. As Tam reflects, "Every element signifies something... telling the family back home, 'I'm doing well.'" By reimagining studio environments and emphasizing both the sitter and the unseen photographer, her work moves between collective histories of migration and the gaps that shape personal memory.

WORKING WITH THE ARCHIVE



Installation view of *Swallowing Mountains*, 2023, at the McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

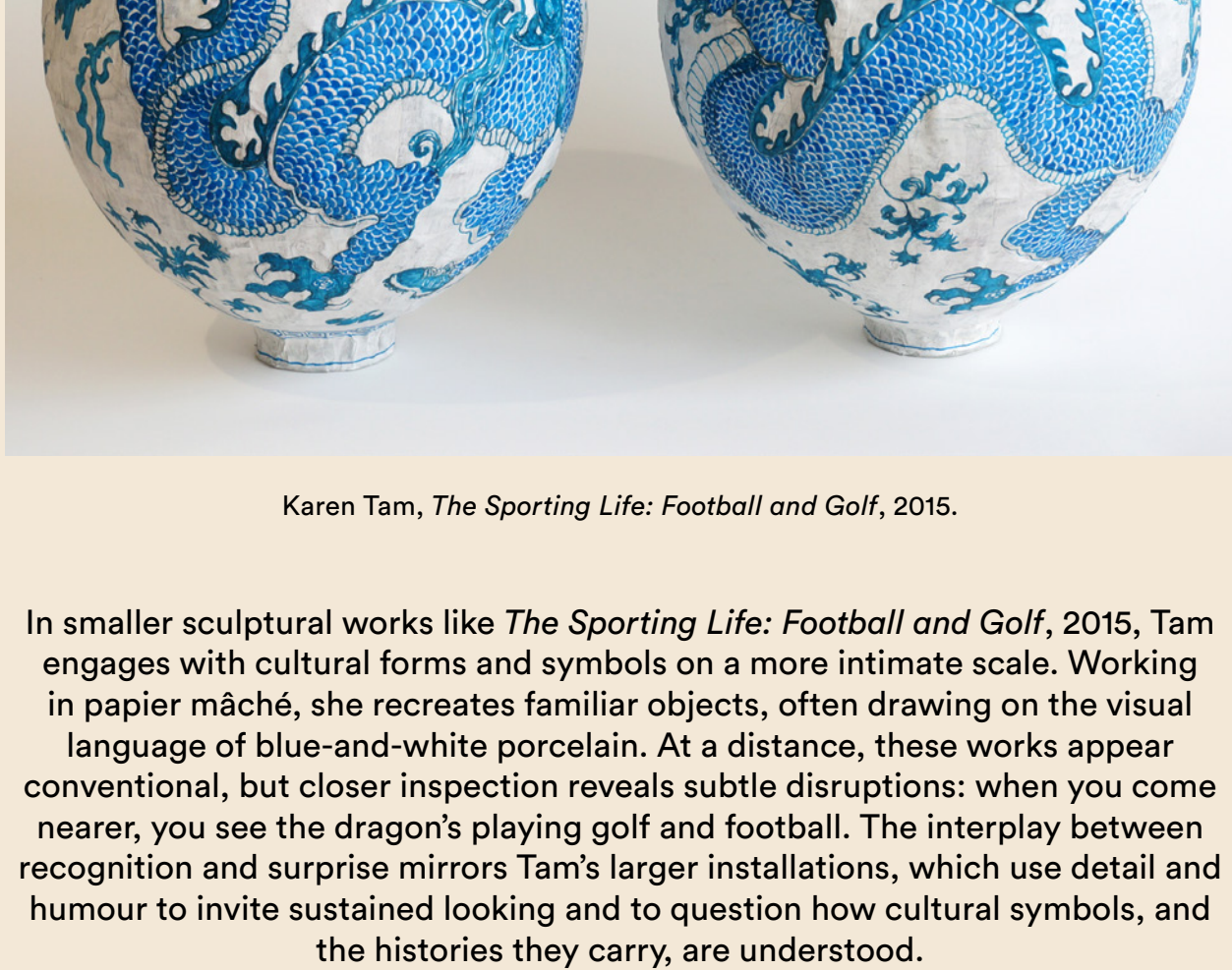
For the exhibition *Swallowing Mountains*, presented at the McCord Stewart Museum in 2023, Tam approached the archive not as a fixed record but as a point of departure. Working with materials from the museum's collection, she assembled what she describes as a "community album," bringing together photographs from institutional and family collections. Instead of attempting to resolve gaps, Tam accepted them as inherent, asking how her work might contribute to a broader future archive of Chinese life in Montreal. Through acts of reconstruction—animating images, isolating details, and reworking scenes—she connected historical fragments to present-day experience, extending the archive through interpretation as much as preservation.



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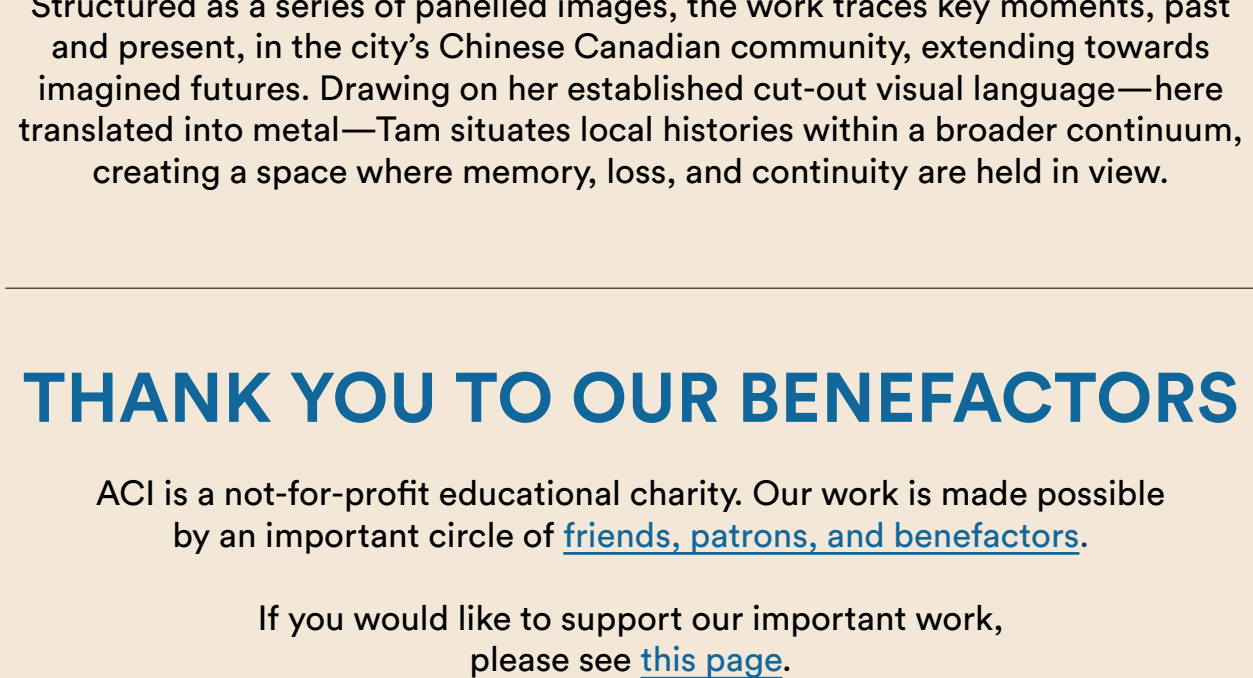
OBJECTS IN FOCUS



Karen Tam, *The Sporting Life: Football and Golf*, 2015.

In smaller sculptural works like *The Sporting Life: Football and Golf*, 2015, Tam engages with cultural forms and symbols on a more intimate scale. Working in papier mâché, she recreates familiar objects, often drawing on the visual language of blue-and-white porcelain. At a distance, these works appear conventional, but closer inspection reveals subtle disruptions: when you come nearer, you see the dragon's playing golf and football. The interplay between recognition and surprise mirrors Tam's larger installations, which use detail and humour to invite sustained looking and to question how cultural symbols, and the histories they carry, are understood.

WHAT LIES AHEAD



Karen Tam, conceptual rendering for New Westminster public artwork, 2026.

In a new public artwork for the city of New Westminster, Tam turns her attention to the layered histories of one of British Columbia's early Chinatowns. Structured as a series of panelled images, the work traces key moments, past and present, in the city's Chinese Canadian community, extending towards imagined futures. Drawing on her established cut-out visual language—here translated into metal—Tam situates local histories within a broader continuum, creating a space where memory, loss, and continuity are held in view.

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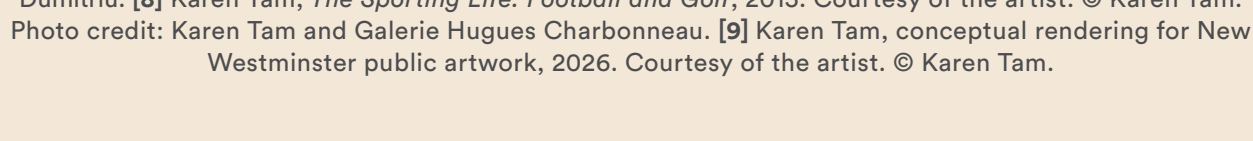


Image Credits: [1] Karen Tam, *Pavilion of the Auspicious Lions*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau. © Karen Tam. Photo credit: Galerie Hugues Charbonneau. [2] Karen Tam with her work *Scent of Thunderbolts*, 2025. Photo credit: Rebecca Tisdelle-Macias. [3] Karen Tam, plan for *Pavilion of the Auspicious Lions*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist. © Karen Tam. [4] Karen Tam, *The "Other" Last Spike*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. © Karen Tam. Photo credit: Laurence Hervieux-Gosselin. [5] Karen Tam, *C.S. Wing Studio*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montreal. © Karen Tam. Photo credit: Karen Tam. [6] Yucho Chow, *Mr. and Mrs. Chong Fan Yow and Their Sons, Chong Buck Shong and Chong Buck Sun*, c.1920. City of Vancouver Archives. [7] Installation view of *Swallowing Mountains*, 2023, at the McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal. Courtesy of the McCord Stewart Museum. Photo credit: Laura Dumitriu. [8] Karen Tam, *The Sporting Life: Football and Golf*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist. © Karen Tam. Photo credit: Karen Tam and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau. [9] Karen Tam, conceptual rendering for New Westminster public artwork, 2026. Courtesy of the artist. © Karen Tam.