

The Constructed Reality of Immigrants: Fang Tong's Contrived Photography

In one of her photographs, Fang Tong is seen sitting alone on a luxurious red couch in a living room decorated for Christmas. The striped wallpaper is in a bright green colour, complementary to her festive red dress. Fang Tong appears to be watching TV, but upon closer inspection, what appears to be an ordinary domestic scene appears off kilter: her gaze drifts away from the TV screen and disengages with the room; her upright sitting posture seems awkward against the comfy couch; her significant other as suggested by two glasses of wine on the table, seems missing. Overall, she is at odds with her surroundings. What is more askew is that the scene is deliberately revealed to be a setup on a theatre stage. The camera has zoomed out to include the red drapery backdrop and the wooden floor of the stage, which encapsulate the edges of the living room props.

This self-portrait image, titled *Lonely Christmas*, is from her photographic series *Soap Opera* (2016). Since she moved to Vancouver in 2006, Fang Tong has been exploring what she describes as “cinematic style” photography. In her practice, all things are conspicuously contrived—three mahjong players waiting for the fourth, a Chinese married couple are on the same bed but playing on cell phones separately, a teenage girl doing her social media podcast, an Asian woman on a date with a white man at a restaurant, and an upset bride in a bathroom. All the people in her images are actors, and they are set in meticulously detailed backgrounds. Each component has been carefully chosen and placed delicately in the scene under fine tuned photographic lighting in order to render a perfect scenario for what she describes as “the emotions.”

Her photographs make no effort to conceal these contrivances; rather, it is such artificiality that makes the photographs interesting. There has been a long tradition by avant-garde artists of using photography to reveal the illusion of image making, and Fang Tong exposes her process of illusion making in several ways. First, the cinematic effect in her images draws the viewer into accepting the illusions. Then, a self-reflexive artificiality contradicts those illusions and creates a distancing effect, redirecting one's attention to the act of representation over what is being represented.



Fang Tong, *Lonely Christmas*, 2016, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

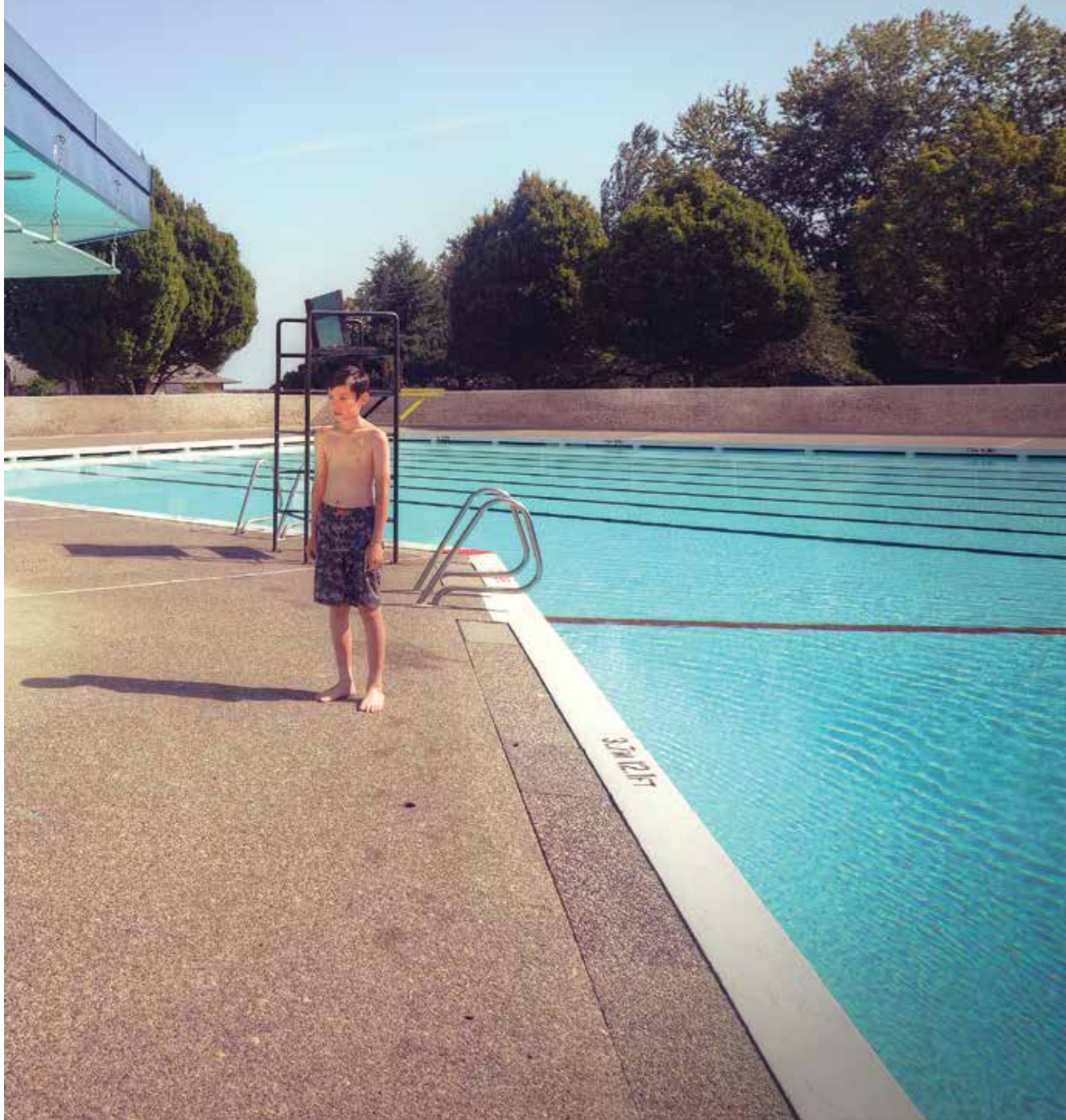
The viewer can easily notice Fang Tong's acting in *Lonely Christmas*, so the immediate question that arises is: Is this her persona? What is the difference between her presentation and herself? Which one is more real? The relationship between representing and the represented becomes an interesting entangling of perspectives.

For Fang Tong, the distance between the artificial setup of the images and the supposed reality the images represents taps into the viewer's subconscious. In a photograph titled *Love Illusions* (2014), a beautiful young woman is standing shyly against the wall at a swimming pool, while a prepubescent boy blatantly gazes upon her body from a distance. The perfect lighting and the flawless positioning of the bodies in relation to the ambience of the scene imply the artificial intentions of it. The composition accentuates the tension of the awkward encounter between this duo. Fang Tong explained to me that this is a dramatic moment within a larger narrative, but the viewer is given no clue about what happens before or after. What one is able to feel are emotions, which compellingly invite the viewer to contemplate the scene and come up with his or her own narrative. This ambiguity creates abstraction within the image, and this is where the subconscious comes into play. Therefore, Fang Tong regards her contrived images as surreal.

Every detail Fang Tong places in the background of her compositions is a symbol of the character's psyche, as if in a visual logic of psychoanalysis; thus everything is tightly connected into a concise expression of emotion. This emotion goes deeper than the verbal impulse; as a viewer standing in front of *Love Illusions*, I can feel something is there, but I find it difficult to articulate what I feel.



Fang Tong, *Love Illusions*, 2014, injet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.





As an immigrant from China, Fang Tong started her art practice in the 1990s in Shanghai. She studied oil painting at the Fine Arts Institute of Shanghai University and furthered her studies in the *École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris. She relocated to Vancouver in 2007, and in her daily job she created surrealistic illustrations for the gaming industry, which prompted her to think about the relationship between realism and surrealism. In an interview with me, Fang Tong stated: “I have always had a love for the real and surreal, which produces a sense of freedom.” She also mentioned as an inspiration Gregory Crewdson, an American photographer who is known for his contrived photography.

Fang Tong, *The Waiting Game*, 2016, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Since Fang Tong lives in Vancouver, her practice may appear to resonate with the photoconceptualism of what is known as the Vancouver School, generally identified with the work of Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham, and Ken Lum. The idea of creating cinematic simulacra is also familiar in Cindy Sherman’s film stills. Stylistically speaking, what stands out in the work of Fang Tong are her bold colour schemes, meticulous detail, the stereotypical models she chooses and their makeup, and, particularly, the emphatic tension between the characters. The confidence expressed in her renderings resembles the style found in *VOGUE* magazine fashion photographs.

While Fang Tong’s methodology is not new to the art world, her thematic choices are distinct. Fang Tong’s work covers a wide range of characters and subject matter, but for the sake of this essay, I would like to highlight the aspect of new immigrants. *Chen Family* (2016), for example, shows a Chinese immigrant family in a Vancouver mansion, in which three generations live together but are psychologically distant from each other; the Caucasian wife is turning away from the seemingly unhappy parent-in-laws, and the ambivalent attitude of the Chinese husband and the daughter add to this strained family dynamic. *Growing Pains* (2015) depicts a disconnection between an immigrant mother and her Canadian-born teenager. *Gilded 1*



Fang Tong, *Chen Family*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

reveals a lonely Chinese woman outside a luxurious house, appearing to be lost in its opulence. These photographs speak to certain truth within the lives of many immigrants.

Fang Tong, *Growing Pains*, 2015, inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The discord surrounding these Chinese immigrant characters is reinforced through the use of subtle symbolism. For instance, the striped background in *Lonely Christmas* and the gridded door in *Growing Pains* are a recurrent motif in her works, suggesting prison bars that confine the characters. The theatrical effect in these photographs enables the characters to appear larger than life, which serves to amplify the sense of emotion.

What makes Fang Tong's reconstructed photographs even more interesting is when viewers who are new immigrants are factored in. At the opening of her solo exhibition at the Vancouver Lipont Art Centre in the suburb of Richmond (April 1 to April 27, 2017), there were all kinds of visitors socializing just like at any other art opening in Vancouver, except that there were also a significant number of Chinese from new immigrant neighbourhood communities; in Richmond, forty-nine percent of the population is of Chinese descent.¹ Many were commenting on the characters in the photographs, but I observed that they rarely seemed to note the contrivances within the images. For the fun of it, Fang Tong brought in the entire collection of Christmas props from *Lonely Christmas* and set them up to the left of the main gallery entrance facing the photograph of *Lonely Christmas*, on the wall to the right. She invited visitors to sit on the red couch under studio lighting. People were delighted. They lined up and took turns having their pictures taken. They were apparently fascinated with the materialization of elements in the photograph and enjoyed the disparity



Fang Tong, *Gilded 1*, 2015,
inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

between a winter setting in the photograph and the spring weather they were enjoying during the exhibition, but I did not hear any questions about the artist's obvious intent to emphasize the constructed reality in the images. While waiting in queue, I asked a Chinese gentleman standing behind me whether or not he noticed anything unusual, such as the stage backdrop surrounding the Christmas room in the photograph and the photographing of a Christmas scene in spring. He uncaringly answered: "So What? What's wrong with that? This is our real life in Canada." It seems possible that things that are constructed in the photographs are normalized by the viewers as something equally convincing to what they find in their own daily reality, to the point of expressing a reluctance to differentiate the two.

It's quite possible that a comment such as this gentleman made might be quite common among visitors who do not look close enough, but it occurred to me that the simple acceptance of these representations, despite the visual cues that should make them question it, is more likely to happen to people with recent immigration experience.

Experiencing a social and cultural gap is common among newcomers to Canada. The sense of tension, awkwardness, disconnection, foreignness, and distance in many of Fang Tong's photographs could be understood as the reflection of this gap. A further inquiry into the immigrant experience would be to ask how they make sense of local cultures despite the foreignness of them. They certainly have to attempt to normalize the gap at some point in their immigrant transition. To try and unpack this transitional process is puzzling but interesting. What does this transition in life mean to their cultural identities? Is there a cognitive dissonance between the past self, back home, and the present self, in Canada's West Coast? If cultural sensibilities have changed through this transition, which one feels more real and which one feels less so? As an immigrant myself, I don't have an answer. It is safe to say that for some this dramatic change in life must evoke some sort of surreal feeling, perhaps not unlike that expressed in Fang Tong's photographs.

Fang Tong, *Gilded 2*, 2015,
inkjet print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Indeed, Fang Tong's photographs convey this sensation of the gap in the experience of new Chinese immigrants. In *Gilded 2*, the Chinese woman sitting in her opulent mansion, although appearing to be foreign, conveys a strong sense of ownership. In *Lonely Christmas*, Fang Tong's persona within the Christmas room, although at odds with the spirit of the scene, manages to blend in with the color scheme of the room via her red dress. This gap is not to be taken simplistically as a barrier that separates new immigrants from their new country. It involves a complex feeling of normalization, denial, reconciliation, and other intimate feelings as represented in the photographs.



These immigrants are, either voluntarily or involuntarily, uprooted from the social fabric of their former homes and implanted into a new cultural environment. Back home, things that constitute everyday reality occur as second nature; in Canada, however, the things they encounter every day are not necessarily like those they experienced in their pre-immigration life and, thus, may produce a cognitive dissonance. Small talk with someone in English is not always fluid, not to mention the kind of challenges the couples in *Chen Family* experience living with their daughter-in-law, in this context herself seemingly a cultural other. New immigrants might not feel that they have an organic presence with their new surroundings, so reality might not have a solid grounding.

In *Gilded 1*, the Chinese woman who is humbly standing outside her mansion seems belittled and bewildered by the scale of her house. Discord is apparent. Supposedly, such a possession might be important to her new identity in Canada, but how confident does she feel about her identity based on the foreignness of the house she owns? Is this place truly a reality for her? Or is it simply a representation of her new life in Canada, which conceivably could be disconnected from who she really is?

I have no idea what might go through the mind of this woman represented in Fang Tong's photograph in order to make sense of her new life. For the gentleman I questioned, he was willing to believe in things that are constructed as reality in his life: "What's wrong with that?" He chose to dismiss the critical facts of disparity and incongruence. I would like to think that for some this is a necessary mental process to make sense of a life in transition.

Notes

¹ Source: Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, https://richmond.ca/_shared/assets/2006_Ethnicity20987.pdf/.