

Frieze

Representing the Violent Histories of the International Drug Trade

BY DIANA HAMILTON

Artist Candice Lin connects the conditions of slave labour involved in building the drug trade's infrastructure to the continued Orientalizing representations of the drugs themselves

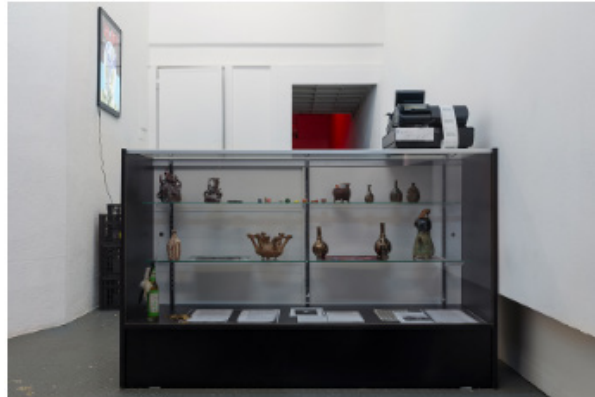


Among the plastic packets of dried herbs hanging in the eponymous, central work of Candice Lin's first solo show in New York, 'Spice', 'Clipper' is the most subdued. Compared to its image of a ship at sea (tagline: 'Gets you there fast.'), the other pouches – with labels familiar to anyone who has bought weed – are trippier: 'super strong MONGOL VIRUS', reads one, with a bearded man in military garb surrounded by flames and holding a dead horse. In another, the words 'Poison Pig' appear on a rainbow backdrop, the animal's mouth foaming under its spiral eyes.

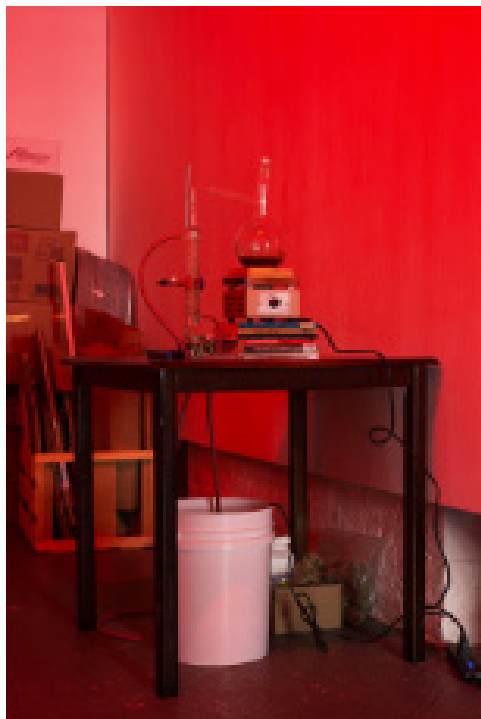


But the 19th-century clipper, the kind once used to transport opium, gets to the heart of Lin's installation, which takes as its materials the racialized histories, productions and circulations of drugs, particularly those 'construed as an Asiatic threat to vulnerable, predominantly white Americans' (per the press release). In a glass display case which functions as the installation's check-out counter, a copy of a daguerreotype of US abolitionist

and statesman Frederick Douglass notes that the scar across his face was the result of ‘an attack by white apprentices’ while he worked in a Baltimore shipyard, where vessels of this sort were built to be faster than the larger cargo ships that carried legal goods.



Douglass’s image appears alongside annotated pages from Arthur Waley’s *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (1958) – a book that opens with an account of ‘Commissioner Lin,’ an official in Canton responsible for suppressing the opium trade who, the author notes, was never permitted to ‘come to life as a human being’ in earlier books on the subject – and a number of ceramic figures suggestive of items in a headshop. *Animal Cigarette Holder* (2019) is stuffed with five hand-rolled cigarettes and a number of red-tipped matchsticks; it sits beside a variety of pipes. Lin draws visual and material connections between the conditions of slave labour involved in building international trade’s infrastructure and the continued Orientalizing representations of the drugs themselves. At the top left corner of the page with Douglass’ picture, the chapter heading ‘Baltimore’ appears, linking the show, incidentally, to Donald Trump’s recent racist diatribes against the city and its elected officials.



Lin draws attention to stages of labour in the production process, from the packaging of the herbs themselves – which indicate that each ‘strain’ includes the same mix of California Poppy, Damiana, Mullein, Sage and Wild Lettuce – to the construction of pipes and other paraphernalia, to a hotplate distillation ‘lab’ in the red-lit back gallery space and to aesthetic representations of intoxication. In *Staged Opium Den (After Georges Barbier 1921)* (2019), she reproduces a Barbier illustration in loose, distorted strokes of casein and oil paint. Which is to say, Lin’s work is interested as much in fictionalized accounts as it is in history: on the back of each of the packets, printed excerpts of a story about addiction narrate ‘from the point of view of the virus,’ according to the press release. One reads: ‘A boat inscribed with the name, SILENCE, came to the nearest port to collect the hardest of our kin.’ That ‘our’ seems at once to refer to intoxicants, shipmen, some community of viruses – reframed as the stolen and injured, rather than the threat – and the ‘secrets, in the form of fat women, fat like a pagoda carved out of butter’ with which the sentence continues. The story, with its stoner-friendly twists and science-fiction paranoia, implicates art audiences’ interest in drugs’ effects with the violent histories that their packaging has transformed into saleable herbs.

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