

Celebrating blue-collar history

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There aren't many places in the world, let alone in Canada, where you can learn the real history of our times. The kind of history written at ground level by everyday working people. For instance, who knows that it was labour activism that gave us one of our greatest modern inventions -- the weekend?

There aren't many places where you can see and feel that history expressed in art and culture that reflects and validates the experiences not of the rich and powerful, but of workers and their communities.

The Workers Arts and Heritage Centre is just such a place, a true rarity and, as such, a Hamilton treasure. It celebrates work and the contributions of workers, even as a cynical "downdturned" global economy holds labour cheap and would have us believe unions are no longer relevant when, in truth, they have never been more necessary.

If WAHC is always celebrating the usually uncelebrated, singing the unsung, then, in that very spirit, it has occasion this year to celebrate its own fine and oft-unsung self, by observing two anniversaries, three really.

This is the centre's 15th birthday. It began in 1995. And it is also the 150th birthday of the amazing heritage building in which it lives -- the old Hamilton Customs House.

And, in September, it will have been one year since Elizabeth McLuhan took over as executive director of WAHC. One of the big pushes for WAHC under her leadership this year is the setting up of a \$1.5-million endowment fund.

"It will be a three-year campaign for the fund, which will provide money to cover basic operating costs. It's an expensive building to sustain," says McLuhan, who comes from Winnipeg's Dunlop Art Gallery, with a deep background in history, academia and art.

The endowment fund is but one of several new initiatives at the centre to mark these anniversaries. Others include the Labour Lounge; the Labour History Team, which will collect stories, memorabilia, files, records and other materials from union locals; and more regular and in-depth tours of the building, which was built in 1860 as a customs house but has been used at various times in its history as a macaroni factory and a martial arts studio. It is reputed to be haunted.

"We don't deny the otherworldly," says McLuhan, gamely. "It's very much part of our charm. But we want more people to come through on other than Haunted Hamilton tours."

The Labour Lounge is designed to bring in new audiences, especially young people and creative classes, as well as the marginalized, for discussions, workshops, screenings, music and entertainment.

For Valentine's Day, there will be a Labour Lounge devoted to sex trade work.

McLuhan says she is enjoying "the luxury of working in what I love. This building for me pulls together everything I have done. It is at once a museum, an art gallery, and a nationally important heritage building."

Currently at WAHC, the main gallery is featuring Chinese Fever: Liki Liki, a show of the fascinating and exquisitely beautiful paper and vinyl cut-outs of Karen Tam.

Tam's art is steeped in a thousands-year-old Chinese tradition of paper-cut constructions. But her very choice of medium is an ironic tilt at the "Chinese-esque" (also called "chinoiserie") as a western construct, which tends to reduce everything Chinese to "thousands-year-old" and hyperbolically exotic.

It is a way of one culture managing the identity of another, arguably amusing at one level, menacing at another.

Tam's pieces in the exhibit look at first blush to be elegant, technically exact, even demure in a sinuous way. And they are strikingly presented - gold against teal walls. But a closer look reveals deeper purposes, often playful, sometimes disturbing.

The show uproots many clichés about the Chinese - myths about cheap labour, loss of face, sexual esoterica, and their status as outsider, often the objects of benign, kitschy sentimentality (as in early 20th century sheet music illustration) but ultimately inscrutable and not to be trusted.

Tam's critique of this reductive view of the "other" is not the least heavy-handed. Some of her references are oblique, some downright obscure (the more powerful for being so), as in the case of the Belgian TV show Lucky Luke, which uses stock Chinese characters. (The Liki Liki portion of the show's title refers to how one of the Chinese characters pronounces Lucky Luke's name.)

Tam also subtly alludes in her work to issues like the conflict between Tibet and China and fears about the safety of Chinese-made products, such as toys.

One piece shows a man hanging from a tree and it refers to the story of a Chinese factory owner linked to unsafe toys and his subsequent suicide, such was his disgrace.

Tam is uniquely qualified to make her critique. Her parents owned a Chinese restaurant in east Montreal. In fact, Tam has, in other exhibits, recreated a Chinese restaurant milieu within an art gallery space.

The show, which opened Jan. 8, runs to May 1. WAHC is at 51 Stuart St. W., 905-522-3003.

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