

A Voyage through Lin Wang's *True Romance*

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True Romance is a siren song luring us deep into Lin Wang's complex porcelain storytelling of what she calls "exotic dreams and poetic misunderstandings." For her first solo exhibition at HB381 in New York, Wang created three installations that embody the shifting perspectives of romanticized otherness within the Eastern-Western dichotomy, as an artist adrift, living and working between Jingdezhen, China, and Oslo, Norway. In a confluence of fantasy and history, Wang's practice is a layered poetic rumination on culture, identity, and belonging. Shaped by the Western bedtime fairy tales her grandfather would read to her as a child, her understanding of this exotic, faraway land was one of enchantment and wonder. Years later, a romantic pursuit led her to Norway, where she got her master's in fine arts. Although the love faded, she remained. There, Wang discovered "true romance" as her illusion of the West fell away, revealing the realities of life as an immigrant and the challenges of navigating cultural contrast. Through a double-sided outlook of both East and West, Wang is in a unique position to decipher misconceptions and write out her own romantic interpretations of truths.

The trade of porcelain from the East to the West, spanning from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, spurred the global production of blue and white ceramics across Europe, including English transferware and Dutch Delftware, and all the way to Mexico's Talavera. The mystifying commodity enraptured nations, and the allure of cobalt glaze is enduring. The early patterns and designs of authentic Asian porcelain wares brought to Europe provided the West with a glimpse into the mysterious East. Yet, like a game of telephone, the imagery became distorted and lost in translation, resulting in a romanticized aesthetic for the European market known as chinoiserie. As Wang puts it, "The imagination and misunderstanding of the 'other' permeates both past and present." It is no surprise that, given the intricate matrix of global histories, ocean-deep lore, and elaborate metaphors associated with porcelain, it has proven a generative medium for contemporary artistic intervention. Wang is in good company with artists such as Ai Weiwei, Roberto Lugo, Jennifer Ling Datchuk, Ann Agee, Eduardo Sarabia, and Steven Young Lee, who engage the history and materiality of blue and white ceramics to address issues of identity, race, gender, and other sociopolitical concerns.

The exhibition opens with *On the Other Side of the World*, a two-part, double-sided mirrored stainless steel screen featuring almost 7,000 cobalt-blue, hand-painted porcelain discs adhered to its surface, resembling at once the sparkling scales of a sea creature and the silhouettes of rolling hills. This installation builds upon Wang's previous work from 2019, *Rhapsody* (a nod to George Gershwin's 1924 musical composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*), which consisted of 20,000 circular tiles arranged as if a stream were spilling out of a window. Wang's sapphire tiles, created using a range of cobalt pigments from traditional porcelain-making regions around the world, including Danish cobalt, Jingdezhen blue, Porsgrunn blue, German blue, and Danish blue, glitter like the ocean reflecting the sunshine. The subtle differences between the tiles metaphorically represent cultural differences despite having a common denominator.

In China, screens are traditionally utilized to distinguish a separation between spaces used for different purposes. Wang's screens conceal what lies ahead, while making a passageway reminiscent of the mountainous landscape of Jingdezhen to guide people further into the exhibition. At their front, they present an innocuous welcome for the more intimate revelations

behind. *On the Other Side of the World* creates a hybrid coastline of mountains and seas that transports visitors into an imaginative space, where Wang examines her relationship between East and West. The funhouse-like mirrored surfaces reflect the distortion of perspective depending on where one stands, both literally and figuratively. The cobalt waves suggest the movement of people, porcelain, and other goods in ships of the past and her current journey back and forth between two homes, while urging the visitors to the gallery forward.

The exhibition flows onto a central installation composed of 72 porcelain bricks on a stainless steel table. The *Porcelain Flesh Table* presents a map of a land where Western and Eastern icons and creatures coexist—Buddha, Christ, Guanyin, the Madonna, warriors, saints, and dragons—in churning cobalt seas that crash against islands of tattooed skin. A dynamic meeting place where it is unclear if water floods or skin grows over, where visitors gather around to dialogue or get lost in the imagery, and the setting for one of the artist's food-based performances. It is as awe-inspiring as it is monstrous, juxtaposing the traditional crystalline surface of porcelain decorated in the style of export wares with one that is eerily wrinkled and creased like human skin. Wang decorates the porcelain skin with sailor tattoos of pin-up girls, ships, sea monsters, and mermaids, as well as symbols of conquest, exploration, Christianity, strength, love, courage, death, and the Bacchanalian spirit. Wang, who is fascinated with “bad tattoos,” imagines these symbols as archives of exotic adventures and fleeting encounters with lovers abroad that fade over time, becoming fragmented histories. Together, the blue ink on the weathered skin and the pools of waves are “an epic poem of wanderlust and homesickness,” says Wang.

The exhibition concludes with an installation titled *I Never Saw the East Coast until I Moved to the West*, featuring a four-panel wooden, semi-transparent silk screen divider with a garment draped over it—a nod to Wang's time apprenticing at a tattoo studio. This second screen demarcates an even more vulnerable space within the exhibition. The collection of objects that follows recalls the bricks from the previous section, combining traditional porcelain with Wang's skin-surfacing technique. Wang's embrace of new cultural norms has required the shedding of parts of herself, including habits and perspectives. She personifies this process through these pieces with violent dispositions—some appearing to rip from the inside out—demonstrating the raw and brutal cycle of destruction and rebirth that feeds the artist's identity and her whirlpool of cultural understanding.

Without the internet or newspapers, sailors and merchants were the primary network of communication between continents. Wang likens her role as an artist to that of adventurers of the Age of Exploration as she navigates contemporary sociopolitical landscapes through visceral engagement. Her sense of belonging is an ebb and flow of the beautiful and the grotesque, dreams and nightmares. *True Romance* is a journey through the fluidity of perspective as shaped by geographical distance, life experience, and cultural differences. Through a distillation from fantasies and truths, Wang has crafted her own romanticized reality.