

# Things of Desire

Canada's Alternative Art Weekly

## Empty Orchestra October 16, 2008

By Mike Landry



<https://thingsofdesire.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/tam.jpg>

A photo from inside Karen Tam's "Tchang Tchou Karaoke Lounge."

Maiko Tanaka's earliest memories of karaoke involve late nights, laughter and adults acting shockingly un-adult-like. Tanaka and her brother, unable to sleep from the noise, would sneak to the stairs and watch the scene below through the banisters wondering what was going on.

Her parents had immigrated to Canada from Japan, and had brought their love of karaoke along with them. Young Tanaka was introduced to the strange Japanese country-sounding songs by other Japanese immigrants crooning in her living room. Her new exhibition *Empty Orchestra*, which she co-curated with [Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival](http://www.reelasian.com/) (<http://www.reelasian.com/>) art director Heather Keung, examines the impact of karaoke from her home to her neighbourhood, across generations and borders.

"I've been doing [karaoke] since high school—probably 300 times. I can't get enough of it. It's really the most fun communal activity you can do with your friends," says Tanaka. "I also love shameful pop music."

## Empty Orchestra October 16, 2008

---

The exhibition grew out of her experience at Toronto's **Gendai Gallery**, where she was introduced to the **Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre's** karaoke club. The group of seniors has been around for decades meeting up every Saturday for karaoke. She thought it would be neat to collaborate with them.

She hooked up with Reel Asian Film Festival to get videos made of the singers. The end result was a number of pairings, including the president of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre karaoke club is singing is to one of **Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay** videos.

During the research for the mini-video project Tanaka was intrigued by the amount of art dealing with karaoke as its subject. She settled on a handful of artist from around the globe for *Empty Orchestra*, including Montreal artist Karen Tam and her *Tchang Tchou Karaoke Lounge*. The piece features a karaoke booth for visitors to listen to a selection of golden oldies in Chinese.

Not only does the final grouping of international artists show how karaoke moved across the globe as a cultural commodity, it also looks at the political aspects of the medium.

Inspired by the critique from Beijing-based artist Wong Gongxin, who's work is in *Empty Orchestra*, Tanaka started to re-examine her own relationship with karaoke. Gongxin notes how karaoke, as a leisure activity, has been transformed into a liberating western practice. However he draws exception to this idea since karaoke is structured around following and mimicking.

Tanaka finds the sinister aspect of karaoke intriguing, but she's not sure whether she buys it completely. While not being totally about partying, *Empty Orchestra* ends up reflecting Tanaka's ambiguity.

"From a social science perspective, it says a lot more than just about what people like to do for fun. But that's not the spirit to what it does to you when you're in the actual social moment of it... I still feel it could be a kind of subversive activity, because you're making it own—you're bringing your own voice and personal stories to each song."

And for Tanaka, her favourite tune to make her own is the Smashing Pumpkins' "1979." But don't be surprised to catch her belting out "Superstar" by The Carpenters.

*Empty Orchestra will be on display from Thu October 16 - Thu November 16 at Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. Click on the gallery link for a complete schedule of events.*