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The Reflective, Playful Art Of Stephanie H Shih

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Stephanie H Shih credits the blossoming of her artistic career to a handful of dumplings and a bottle of Chinkiang vinegar. In 2018, it was those two Asian food staples that the Taiwanese-American ceramist decided to recreate using clay. She was drawn both by the objects' mundanity and their ubiquity within Asian-American households, hers included. The final pieces showed such painstaking detail they could almost pass for the real thing. When Shih posted them on Instagram – starting with the rice-based black bottle – the response was so overwhelmingly positive she realized she was on to something big.

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Stephanie H Shih © James T. Bee

“A lot of viewers in the Chinese-American community began sharing stories related to those foods and their childhoods with me,” Shih says from her Brooklyn studio. “It was clear those items weren’t just part of my personal memories but of a mutual experience. That got me thinking about exploring what other kitchen staples people were nostalgic for from within the diaspora.”



Same Same, Stephanie H Shih (2020) © Robert Bredvad

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The series that followed, *Oriental Grocery*, set out to do just that – and turned Shih’s ceramic practice into a full-time venture. For it, Shih polled more than 20,000 of her Asian-American followers on social media to gather a culturally and ethnically diverse list of foodstuffs that would feel representative of their backgrounds. The pieces she crafted as a result spanned life-sized versions of rice bags, seasonings and different soy sauces, aimed at showcasing the breadth of the Asian-American diaspora and challenging the idea of a monolithic Asian cuisine.



Spam, Stephanie H Shih (2021) © Robert Bredvad

In more recent works, she has expanded the narrative further – always by seeking a dialogue with her audience – looking at the Western groceries that have a special place in Asian culture. From Spam and Kit-Kats to Danish Butter Cookies and Ovaltine, they are all products introduced to Asian diasporic communities via colonial exploitation, assimilation and military presence (as in the case of Spam, an American import to Asia), but went on to find huge popularity among local communities.

“Food plays such a big role in the way individuals, particularly immigrants and children of immigrants, can connect with their cultures,” Shih explains. “To me, it feels like the natural vehicle to understand how we shape our sense of self.”

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Streit's Passover Matzos, Stephanie H Shih (2022) © Robert Bredvad

But the artist has also used food to reach beyond the personal. In her show *Open Sundays*, held last year in New York's Lower East Side, she examined the 100-year-long overlap of Chinese and Jewish communities in the neighbourhood through classic pantry items from both cultures, such as White Rabbit Creamy Candy, Dr Brown's Cel-Ray Soda, Yang Jiang Preserved Beans and Streit's Passover Matzos.

For her last solo exhibition at [Berggruen Gallery](#) in San Francisco, she paid homage to the cultural history of the city's Chinatown – not just through food but the books, films (by way of stunningly rendered ceramic videotapes) and pop-culture objects that have defined it, including perfect replicas of Nike Air Jordans and a 'Linsanity' basketball cap (after the Taiwanese-American player Jeremy Lin, who rose to sudden fame in 2012), because “there's something very Asian-American about watching the NBA,” Shih says.

“What I am interested in is challenging the idea of ‘authenticity’, to focus on cultural interchange instead,” Shih adds. “A culture is never untouched by other cultures, yet often people try to freeze it as a way of protecting it. But that is unhistorical and unhelpful, as reality is much more nuanced. With the pieces I make, I want to approach the way we think about our identities in a more expansive way.”

Jasmine Rice (2022), Air Jordan (2022), Berggruen Gallery; Dr Brown's Cel Ray Soda (2022); Yang Jiang Preserved Beans (2022); Five Books (2022), Berggruen Gallery; White Rabbit Candy (2022); Four VHS Tapes (2022), Berggruen Gallery; Ovaltine (2021); Danish Butter Cookies (2021), all Stephanie H Shih © Robert Bredvad