

View of “Permaculture,” 2021, at Downs & Ross. *Courtesy Downs & Ross*

The sights and sounds of consumption wafted through [Kim Farkas](#)’s recent exhibition “Permaculture” at [Downs & Ross](#) gallery in New York—although not from the streets below. A large projection in the first room showed footage of thick, translucent noodles saturated with dark sauce, blended with images of storefronts piled with bright-hued goods. The compilation of found videos toured a range of cuisines: The noodles in the foreground switched from round to flat, kinky to straight; the bowls became plates and then trays. A nest of ramen appeared, topped with four fried eggs. In the background, two women danced across a stage advertising Mamee, a Malaysian dry-noodle brand popular worldwide. A pair of chopsticks jabbed across the frame, maneuvering noodles mouthward, and the gentle ambiance of Peranakan Malay and accented English, songs and conversation, was broken by amplified squishes and slurps.

Related Articles

Ingestion was a theme throughout. The bulk of the show consisted of more than a dozen long organ- or jelly-like resin sculptures, seemingly folded and scalloped. Embedded in the resin were goods of the sort available in the gallery’s neighborhood, and probably in any given Chinatown: dice, mahjong tiles, reiki stones, melamine bowls, and joss papers depicting watches, electronics, and banknotes made to be burned as offerings for ancestors. As the anonymous eaters in the video grazed on Asian foods, these sculptures seemed to ingest, without analysis, the broadest signifiers of Chinese culture. Although the show points to New York’s Chinatown by physical association, and while the video depicts other specific (yet unidentified) locales, its focus on mass-produced goods seemed to elide the regional and transcultural customs that distinguish one place from another. Farkas’s sculptures gesture toward a composite Chinatown—not unlike the way Cady Noland’s bullets and Budweiser cans “represent” the United States.

View of “Permaculture,” 2021, at Downs & Ross. *Courtesy Downs & Ross*

This generic form of cultural reference, the vague way the paraphernalia of gambling and superstition “flavor” the sculpture, suggests the sin of cultural appropriation, which leads to questions about the artist’s identity. In this case, the press release—a letter to the artist from Los Angeles–based curator and writer Ana Iwataki—opens up the possibility of reading the work as an illuminated sign of diasporic life: Farkas has a Peranakan (people of Chinese descent born in the Indonesian archipelago) and Jewish background (the word “diaspora” originally pertained to dispersed Jews), suggesting that he holds a genuine relationship to the ingredients on view. “Permaculture” might infuse the everywhere replicable space of the white cube with touchstones of Asian culture. With the

sculptures' soft shapes and the video's comforting bustle, Farkas's show suggests the open, accessible sculptures and performances of [relational aesthetics](#), known for convivial situations (dinner parties, arrangements of living room furniture) framed as art that, while attentive to how different people shape the experience, seem reproducible almost anywhere.

"Permaculture" captured some of the synesthetic pleasure of wandering through the Bowery and Chinatown, the lamp shops and kitchen suppliers, the languages and intonations on the crowded sidewalks. It also tokenized this atmosphere into a further set of commodities. As in a line of high-end home decor, Farkas modified the same forms into objects with different functions: the tubular resin pieces became wall-mounted sconces, freestanding sculptures, or illuminated mobiles suspended from bare copper wire. These can be fitted with LEDs, tinted burnt orange and purple by the gradient airbrushed on the objects' surfaces, or with speakers, as in the twin sculptures flanking the video. Farkas's sculptures exist in limbo: grounded yet dislocated, not lamps but not *not* lamps, sensitive to and sited in Chinatown ambiance but *above* it, too.

In mainland China, Xi Jinping has moved to ban the burning of joss paper goods, ostensibly to cut pollution but also to stifle a superstitious practice, just as he has restricted art and film. Meanwhile, Farkas's show treats the material culture of the diaspora itself as a magical bridge across huge distances, not just between people or cultures, but also between spiritual and mortal planes, or from art to not-art—in the hope that the good of one place might enter the other, and that the artist won't have to choose.

Source: [Swallowed Symbols: Kim Farkas at Downs & Ross](#)