

*Jasmine Tea* by Christina Chau

Artist: Ellen Norrish

Artwork details: The Tin Heads – Jasmine Tea. Oil on ply.

Bio note: Christina Chau is a Lecturer in Media, Culture, Art and Social Inquiry. She is a regular arts writer in Perth and has also focused her research on kinetic sculpture, interactive art, time-based art, robots, and media art history.

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There is a neglected tin of Sunflower Jasmine Tea in my mother's kitchen that has been sitting next to the kettle for decades. My mother drinks up to 9 cups of English Breakfast tea a day, but rarely breaks out the jasmine unless prompted by someone else. I haven't thought about the tin, until coming to *The Alternative Archive* exhibition and seeing one painted in Ellen Norrish's *Tin Heads*. I realise now, that it's likely that we've kept this tin for so long because it must have some significance in our family. The few objects that my mum has kept in the house post empty nester and pre-downsizing includes a pepper mill that she stole from a restaurant in her twenties as a nursing student; a cabinet that my brother made in year 11 woodworking class; a rocking chair that she nursed her children in, and also this tin of jasmine tea. Surely it must be one of the few markers of my Dad's presence in our past.

I can't believe that I don't know how it came into our home. Even though it's one of the most common brands of Chinese tea, I've assumed all this time that it was bought and kept by my dad on our only family trip to Hong Kong when I was 2 – a sentimental connection to home while tucked away in Albany thousands and thousands of kilometres away. I assume, also

too, this is perhaps why we've painfully kept the tin and rarely drunk the tea. The tin is a reminder to keep in touch with friends and family in Hong Kong even though he died over a decade ago, and he rarely connected with them anyway. A marker of a broken lineage, and reminder that any connection is now up to us to make.

Not long ago I used to fly to Hong Kong twice a semester and teach media studies. This commute was also an opportunity to meet my extended family and get a crash course on our painful family history. Scanning over a map of Hong Kong and the archipelago that surrounds it I couldn't help but notice that my name "Chau" was written in English and used for "island" on the map. My students politely explained "No Miss, it looks that way because of the translation, but "Chau" does not mean 'island' in any way. It's more like Smith – it's so common".

Today that tin of Jasmine tea still sits next to the kettle, two thirds full. I told my mum that I was writing about a painting of a tin that looks exactly like ours and asked "what's the story behind that tea, is it from Hong Kong? Did you buy it on a family holiday with dad?". My mum replied, "There isn't any story. I just bought it once when we were in Perth and we've kept it but we don't drink the tea".