

Stephanie H. Shih: Open Sundays

30 Orchard St, Gallery 2 ▪ June 29 - Aug 6, 2022



I read a story about a woman who worked in a convenience store. She ate only food from the convenience store. The water she drank was chilled in plastic bottles from the refrigerators that hummed fluorescent light from the back of the store. She imagined the light interacting with her skin like the sun might. It would change its tone the way the sun does. She arrived at work before sunrise and left the store long after dark. A humming fridge sounds like a cicada.

This was not a chain convenience store, it was family owned. They were open every day, including Sunday. The owners of the store were not Christian. The clientele varied with each day. On Sundays, employees of nearby restaurants would come in to purchase last minute items for service, as their deliveries would not come until Monday. Sometimes the Church van drivers would stop in for coffee before starting their pick-ups. Others not observing the Sabbath came in for prepared foods.

The prepared food menu also varied by day, though most days steamed meat and vegetable dumplings were on offer. On Sundays, they offered a special of sliced roasted pork on garlic bread. This item was very popular. People like an open faced sandwich.

The convenience store worked with a nearby Jewish bakery that kept the same hours as the convenience store. The garlic bread was made Italian style on Sunday mornings. The woman liked to go to the bakery to pick it up before sunrise. The smell of garlic and butter perfumed the whole block.

On Christmas, the convenience store offered special takeout packages of roasted meats, fried rice, spring rolls, and a bottle of Manischewitz.

The bakery and the convenience store kept a copy of each other's keys in the register, which had come in handy one time for each business in the woman's seven years working at the convenience store. The store offered a discount to the bakery, and the bakery often included slices of chocolate marbled bread and apple cake with the Sunday garlic bread delivery. Once, the bakery bought a new printer for their office, and gifted their old printer to the convenience store. The cord dragged on the sidewalk as the woman carried it to the store in both arms with greasy brown bags of garlic bread balanced on top. She used the printer to make a sign advertising the store's Sunday menu for their window. The first copy of the sign printed over a copy of the bakery's menu that had been left in the printer.

Once the items from outside the convenience store entered the convenience store, they became authentic convenience store items. The woman ate and drank only convenience store items. When she started working at the convenience store her hair had been just above shoulder length, but by now it was reaching her waist.

—Toniann Fernandez

Stephanie H. Shih

Stephanie H. Shih addresses the diasporic nostalgia and material lineages of migration and colonization through the lens of the Asian American kitchen. Her painted ceramic sculptures examine the relationship between consumerism, cultural interchange, and identity in immigrant communities.

Open Sundays explores the culture that grew in the overlap of the Chinese and Jewish communities of the Lower East Side. These two groups were the largest non-Christian immigrant communities, and their businesses often remained open on Sundays while others closed in observance of the sabbath.

Cultural traditions are at times only considered 'authentic' when done in the way customary to their place of origin. For Shih, though, relics of cultural overlap are just as authentic, and provide evidence for a more accurate account of our lived experience. The artist presents ceramic sculptures of a sliced pork on garlic bread sandwich invented in the Jewish "Borscht Belt" of the Catskills and pork dumplings deemed "safe trait" by some who otherwise kept Kosher. A bottle of Soy Vay Veri Veri Teriyaki Kosher marinade and MahJong are enjoyed by both cultures. Bilingual signs inviting those without commitments on Sunday to patronize their business show evidence of a history shared by

neighborhood and class.

Shih has had solo exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Portland, OR, and her first institutional solo presentation will open at the Syracuse University Art Museum in 2022. Her exhibitions have been reviewed by the LA Times, Hyperallergic, and W Magazine. Activism is also central to Shih's practice, and since 2017 she's raised over \$100,000 for marginalized communities experiencing instability related to home through her art and platform.