

Born and raised in Tkaronto (Toronto), **Phuong Nguyen** is a Tkaronto-based visual artist working in representational oil painting and experimental weaving. Nguyen uses these mediums to explore themes of Ornamentalism and the relationship between exoticism and violence by referencing the aesthetics and the history of Chinoiserie and South East Asian/Vietnamese femininity. Nguyen holds a BFA from OCAD University (2014).



porcelain like flesh and skin,
flesh and skin like porcelain

Oxygen Art Centre is an artist-run centre located on the t̓mxʷúlaʔxʷ (land) of the Sín̓áy̓ckstx (Sinixt), Syilx and Ktunaxa Nations, colonially known as the West Kootenay, in the southeastern interior region of British Columbia, Canada.

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Phuong Nguyen

porcelain like flesh and skin, flesh and skin like porcelain is a solo exhibition by Tkaronto-based artist Phuong Nguyen. The exhibition features a series of oil paintings that explore Ornamentalist ideologies of femininity through representational still lifes, each framed with ornate wood-carved, ceramic, and woven adornments.

The exhibition title, *porcelain like flesh and skin, flesh and skin like porcelain*, is intentionally doubled. It refers to the “undead” or a living yet dead person alongside stereotypes associated with porcelain concerning East Asian identities and feminine beauty. The artist is interested in troubling these stereotypes through material juxtaposition and the use of traditional techniques and art historical references, specifically chinoiserie, the European interpretation and mimicry of East Asian art and culture, predominantly in the eighteenth century.

Curator Iris Moon describes chinoiserie as a second skin or “an ornamental skin that wraps itself around objects, that could be a protective device in a way” (2025).¹ From this feminist lens, chinoiserie represents doubled enfleshment of the racialized feminine body and how this ornate grammar reveals new narratives on colonialism, consumption, and desire.

Scholar Ann Anlin Cheng further develops Moon’s feminist interpretation, offering a critical analysis of the colonial aestheticization and exoticization of East Asian feminine bodies through ornamentation (2018). She writes,

By opening up a broader and historically deeper set of inquiries about how the aesthetic entails the political and how the political entails the aesthetic, the coercion and the enchantment or ornamentation allow the superfluous and the not-living that are integral parts of the human to come into view. It is precisely at the interface between ontology and objectness, animated by the ornament, that we are most compelled to confront the horizons and the limits of the politics of personhood (2018).²

Ornamentalism, for Cheng, is therefore more than a politically instigated objectification of humans, but a historiography of how bodies become raced and gendered through the aestheticization and commodification of domestic goods.

Nguyen’s practice suspends these intricate feminist interpretations of chinoiserie through artworks that seem to be dripping with ornamentation. Her lavish palette makes porcelain objects and flowers appear nestled among fleshy silk textile backdrops, all surrounded by adornments and embellishments skillfully carved in wood, shaped in clay, and woven with plastic string.

In this way, Nguyen’s ornamentation invites the viewer’s gaze to be caught and then entrapped—evoking a beautiful carnivorous plant clutching its prey. Through such luxurious details, the artist confronts our gaze within this entrapment, aiming to unravel systemic colonial violences embedded in everyday, feminized objects.

The exhibition, *porcelain like flesh and skin like porcelain*, by Phuong Nguyen, is on view at Oxygen Art Centre from January 14, 2026, to March 14, 2026.



¹ / Iris Moon, *Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie*, Exhibition, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 25 – August 17, 2025, Audio guide #512

² / Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman,” *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Spring 2018), The University of Chicago, p.446