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The trials of Wong Foon Sing

In 1924 Scottish nursemaid Janet Smith is killed in the basement of Hycroft House, the Shaughnessy Heights' home of prominent and privileged pharmaceutical exporter, F.L. Baker. Chinese houseboy, Wong Foon Sing, discovers the body and reports it to police. Soon after, he is forcibly taken to the Canadian Detective Agency in the Empire Building on Hastings Street where he is beaten and interrogated. He is let go the next day. Months later he is abducted by Klan-hooded men and shackled to the floor of an attic

in Point Grey. He is beaten, threatened with death, and interrogated for six weeks. Again he is let go. That same night he is taken into police custody and this time charged with murder. Brought to inquest, he is finally released for lack of evidence. The investigations and exposés conducted at the time led down murky alleyways of police interference, bribery, drug smuggling, and corruption in the political and social fabric of the city. The murder of Janet Smith has never been solved.



We walk into Keith Langergraber's sculptural installation as if onto a film set. Pages of dialogue, storyboard, spliced film, the walls of the set, the various tools and remnants of the film trade all make this clear. The stage set consists of a detective's office. The desk is strewn with the gathered evidence in the murder case — photographs, case files — a typewriter, and a phone. In front of the desk sits a chair draped with rope. The focus of the camera, and hence of our attention, is not on the murder, but on the events arising from it —

The Trials of Wong Foon Sing.

Langergraber has adopted elements of film noir as the style with which to express the dark and nebulous aspects of the story. The themes and style of film noir are defined by a sinister melancholy permeating the plot and despair or menace emanating from the characters. The evocative quality of darkness — the way in which not light but its absence is used — defines the mood and develops the bleak narrative. Brief recognitions loom into the muted light, shrink back again into the dark recesses, soon to be replaced by yet another corrupt intrigue, or by sorrow. There are no heroes on which to pin our hopes for solution or innocence; there are only villains or victims or anti-heroes enveloped in their own intrigues; and we, who watch.

We are called as witnesses to a plot and characters held captive by the props of the stage set — the case files, the detective's desk, the eloquent empty chair. Those props, even in their resolute muteness, relay the story, but the chair, the lighting, the fragments of clues do not, in the end, solve the mystery. They only serve to deepen it.

The filmmakers' equipment — the cameras, the notes, the empty coffee cups — combined with the sculptural quality of the set make it clear that this is not a simple reconstruction, but an installation of an imagined documentation of events arising from an historical mystery. The removals from the core are dizzying. The vortex of meaning, implication, and allusion has no bottom, no resting place, in which there is resolution or victory.

Overlapping narratives are whispered from the shadows of this history — the forensics and the forgetting and the intent that shape its interpretation. Whatever ominous fragment is clear in one moment is, in the next, obscured by the image of what has come before, or given an entirely new meaning by what comes after. Time becomes circular; consequences rippling out from events like the waves from a pebble thrown in the water. Each event — the murder, the torturous interrogations, the scandal, and the installation itself — refers to the other and is changed by it. We step back and the film set once again highlights the artifice, the facade. This is not real, nor is it pure fiction. The story seems to have no beginning or end, and yet is able to contain shifting layers of symbol, meaning, and implication without becoming lost in its own complexities. Langergraber lets the plot, the understanding, unfold in us.

We grasp the multi-layered narrative and its implications more by intuitive leap than by any linear construction, or transparent solution, contained within the elements of the installation. There is no single answer in the turgid explanations and evasions of history, or the unavoidable exclusions of documentation, or the fragmented exposures of event and character. There are only suggestive hints of retelling — the footprint of a truth not yet in sight, and perhaps nonexistent.

Langergraber is unafraid to push aside the cobwebs of a hidden history, or the fretful memory of betrayal. His fascination with abandoned places and histories carries his work forward from one project to the next. He follows the clues of his environment like footprints in a landscape of visual metaphor. He is somehow able to recognize the ghosts that reside in objects, places, or events, and he brings them to us by an art devoted to the evocation of things past, or passed by.

In this retelling, Janet Smith never really emerges from the shadows. Although she is at the heart of the mystery, at its beginning, her murder becomes obscured by the darkness of crimes which go far beyond the individual: racism; corruption of those in power; deceit and betrayal; disillusionment and hopeless alienation; hatreds and injustices, and our distance in the recording of them; our colonization of site and story; the lurching shadows of human nature.

Keith tells this story: After the conception and planning of *The Trials of Wong Foon Sing*, he came in his explorations upon an abandoned building, and discovered a way in. Along a darkened hall he came upon a room, its windows boarded up, lightless but for the wan shafts that struggled through the cracks between the boards. Pushing the door wider he saw that on one side of the room was a table with a section of garden hose lying on it. In the middle of the room sat a chair, draped with rope.