

Exhibition Review: “Sami Tsang: Our Family Portrait” at Claire Oliver Gallery, Harlem (on view through July 26, 2025)



Installation view of Sami Tsang: Our Family Portrait at Claire Oliver Gallery, Harlem (on view through July 26, 2025)

By **LIAM OTERO** July 22, 2025

[Exhibition Link](#)

[Sami Tsang's Website](#)

Summer in New York has just gotten evermore enchanting as there is currently a spectacular exhibition at Claire Oliver Gallery in Harlem - the first-ever US solo show of Sami Tsang! Sami Tsang (Chinese-Canadian, b. 1997) is a rising figure in the Contemporary art scene, to which this exhibition serves as a marvelous introduction to the artist's multidisciplinary practice in painting, site-specific installation, and ceramic sculpture. Having previously exhibited with Claire Oliver at EXPO Chicago, *Our Family Portrait* makes for an opportune moment to showcase the full breadth of Tsang's fantastically whimsical and minutely detailed works in their full glory.



Sami Tsang (Chinese-Canadian, b. 1997), *I'm the Reflection of You*, 2025, stoneware, glaze, glass, acrylic, resin faux fur, nylon cord, chain, jade, micro-beads embellishment.

Stepping into Claire Oliver Gallery feels wondrously different from that of the standard art gallery, for there is an overwhelming sensation that you have just entered a magical world sprung from a richly illustrated storybook that can be appreciated by youth and adults alike. Freestanding ceramics of magical creatures are interspersed throughout the space ranging from small to large scale. Furthermore, a series of gigantic, roughly 12-foot high ink on MDF board paintings feature a similarly chimerical cast of anthropomorphic beings. Tsang unites the visual attributes of traditional Chinese art with a contemporary expressionism, be it the wispily

calligraphic anatomy of her ink subjects or the inherent animism of her colorfully lifelike sculptures (these are quite reminiscent of mystical Bronze Age Chinese ceramics and earthenware).



Sami Tsang (Chinese-Canadian, b. 1997), *When Heroes Were Real* (detail), 2025, stoneware, glass, acrylic, resin, micro-beads embellishment, wire.

As the exhibition's title suggests, *Our Family Portrait* is a predominantly autobiographical narrative reflective of the artist's upbringing and personal identity. Around the time I saw this exhibition, I encountered the famous Edward Hopper quote: "If I could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint." The idea here that visual art can express deep truths in ways that are inconceivable through written expression is an apt characterization of Tsang's art. She was born into a traditional Chinese household and was raised in both Canada and China. Traditional Chinese family life is defined by a long-held, generational system of social hierarchy, gender &

class expectations, and respect for elders. Tsang's works capture the struggles of being the youngest child within this conservative environment as there is a recurring display of covered mouths to denote the repression of independent desires on the basis of age and gender. At the same time, there are plenty of figures with their mouths open in raucously exuberant manners suggestive of a rebelliousness - a desire to shout or to blow raspberries as a way to combat the forced silence of Tsang's youth.



Sami Tsang (Chinese-Canadian, b. 1997), Chicken and Duck Talk, 2022, white stoneware, glaze, engobe, glass, fabric, tape, paper, resin, nail art.

While Tsang's upbringing had its challenges, she clearly overcame those endeavors like a triumphant phoenix as one can sense Tsang was a precocious child whose mind was perpetually stirring with an imaginative vision. Yes, there is the literal big picture of her works which all exude a commanding presence in the space, but there is also a further nuancing that can only be appreciated upon a much closer looking. If you only take a casual, passing glance at each piece, you are definitely going to miss out on the fine details that inundate Tsang's work. You will discover creatures within creatures, minuscule natural elements inspired by Chinese literati landscapes, painted floral motifs, and much more. Every piece in this show could function as a world in itself, which just goes to show how rich Tsang's works are in their appearances and thematic associations.

Nothing is purely coincidence for all of these small and large attributes are deftly woven together to tell the story of Tsang's life while simultaneously expressing truths on family, selfhood, and creativity that can be appreciated on a universal level. Tsang's early life was one of forced silence and pressured lifestyle expectations, but instead of articulating her creativity in the form of words she goes even further by letting pictorialism tell her story - her dreams, frustrations, joys, and so much else - which is totally in accord with the aforementioned Hopper quote. With most of the pieces in this exhibition dating from this year, it is extremely evident that Tsang has an incredibly bright artistic future ahead of her.

Note: Claire Oliver Gallery follows the standard Tuesday to Saturday gallery hours during the Summer.



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