

The work of Liyen Chong: finding the right words to speak with.



Untitled
2010 (installation shot)
Photographic ceramic decals fired onto found
and glazed ceramic bowls.
Dimensions variable

Rasheed Araeen's seminal article *A New Beginning: beyond postcolonial theory and cultural politics* published in 2000 suggests an interesting proposition. He proposes understanding the production of work made from those occupying a 'third' space. Being part of this 'third' space or hybridity has also been referred to as 'third culture', a state of being occupying a position as neither within the cultural centre or the periphery but within the space between it. It is within this hybrid space in which I'd like to consider the practice of Liyen Chong.

These significant shifts in understanding culture are important because they embody our contemporary moment of movement, displacement and the process of choosing a language in which to speak with. In terms of creative practice, this means choosing the means of production in which to create. Whose language are we using to create with and whose politics does using this language involve? Stuart Hall advocates the idea that you have to identify with language and its signifier to be able to say anything at all (1996).

Araeen specifically argues that the hybrid is an exclusive state of being "for those artists from other cultures who must carry identity cards showing their cultural origins and must locate themselves within a specific space — an in-between space — in order to enter or encounter the dominant culture" (2000: 9). Thus, it is this space for negotiation that artists like Chong are tied to.

Within her work we see old conclusions about displacement and distance being replaced for a more complex meditation on negotiating differing cultural languages. Perhaps the stylistic movements in Chong's work can be read as an accompaniment to these changes.

To an extent, Chong's work rests easily within a neat reading of addressing identity politics. Her hair embroideries are a comfortable investigation of identity through their material makeup, literally the DNA patterns that manifest themselves physically. These intricate, detailed controlled pieces comment on salvaging identity through their connotations with iconic imagery. She has produced a New Zealand \$5 bill, images of dragons and more recently intimations on mortality through her own examination of the skull and bones that make our body through depicting them in a literal manner.

There is a somewhat somber tone to her piece *I am here and there* with a black box made with composite dimensions of her own physicality. On creating these works she interestingly suggests that "it's like I'm embodying a craftsperson" through her faithfulness to the medium, and adopting the tradition of embroidery. On these works there is a similarity here to Berlin based Iranian Armenian artist Nairy Baghramian where she is interested in "the identity shaping role of one's occupation..." (2010: 107).

However, there is also a deeper reading here beyond the surface of identity issues. These earlier works prelude greater issues of being and becoming that Chong is now addressing using identifying as a process for creative production.

Her text based design works from *A Humid Day* are another extension of this, examining the detritus of everyday life and the language which predetermines our thoughts and how we navigate our day. There is another element here which sees her in control of the medium, revising objects we are familiar with and rewriting their content and significance in terms of our relationship to the words that surround and shape us. A passport as part of *A Humid Day* instructs us not to forget who we are.

Her most recent hair pieces shown at Anna Bibby Gallery (2010) show a digression away from the literalness of the earlier hair works and the concreteness of her text based work. We see the skulls replaced by a similar spherical bowl shape but in a more abstract ambiguous form. There is an interesting noteworthy transition here from the skulls to the bowls of her latest pieces seen at Page Blackie (2010).



Moon Bowl III
2010 (detail)
black and white hair embroidered onto acrylic backed cotton encased
in 530 x 630 x 20 mm painted MDF board

These new pieces shift away from the control and restraint of her previous work, instead focusing on a medium more abstract and arbitrary in process which is outside of the artist's control. This consists of found ceramic bowls glazed with images of the artist herself in various positions and poses. In some of the work her dark hair and silhouette look like gestural paint marks with her body barely recognisable in the abstractions. These works seem to be more introspective, looking inwardly onto themselves and to the greater issues of being and experiencing, moving away from the external material stuff towards something more internal and abstract. Because of the physical form of the bowls and the image that sits inside of them, I can't help but think of Alice's journey down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, an ambiguous and strange place with different rules of logic. If the process of creating hair works was through embodiment, here we see the very nature of embodiment itself up for examination.

The idea of embodiment is inevitably tied in with the nature of the self and whether or not there is a 'true' self amongst the mediated way we salvage an understanding to the way we make meaning and identity. Like Alice, Chong is constantly questioning who she is and her positioning, at one point in the story Alice forgets who she is entirely, her journey into

Wonderland is a constant battle between identifying and the role that language plays within this.



Untitled Bowl
2010
Photographic ceramic decals fired onto found and glazed ceramic bowls.
330mm diameter, 100mm height

Within her images on the bowls we see Chong channel a performative self, treating her body as a tool and object for which the self is personified and as an external reality rather than something that is connected through the mind, culture and practice.

Araeen talks about the third space in terms of cultural hybridity. Equally relevant is Kate Love who articulates a third space as that moment that emerges in the gallery between the artwork and the viewer “when you are mixed up, in real time, in the business of making sense of the world as it tries and makes sense of you” (2006: 171). It seems that in her process of production, Chong is summoning that moment too.

Her images have shifted from making sense of place and surroundings to an abstracted language based on herself and her body through these images we see inscribed onto the bowls. Despite the varying specific subject matter and her changing medium, it all in a round about way leads back to the same central question of how we communicate our own representation when we don't have the cultural language to accommodate our experience of it.

If so much of our perception and reception is pre-determined like our culture, then I wonder if an individually determining “self” exists at all. Is the concept of the self different between different cultures? Perhaps this will forever be incommunicable within our very basic understanding of how the self is articulated. Buddhism deals with the self as a non-existent singular entity, claiming that there is no real self at all.

Although these works are the most directly self-referential due to the images of herself projected onto these found bowl objects (which as found objects have a history prior to becoming part of her artwork), these bowls are perhaps the least personal of her works so far, in so far that they treat herself not as a person but rather as an objective entity, a vessel for the tidings and shapings of our surroundings. It is almost like she is denying the loaded nature of representation by presenting a sign with an empty referent.

In terms of her process for creating these works, and their visible digression away from her previous aesthetic she says that she worked “intuitively” and that it felt like a natural next step.

Despite my reading of these bowl works as abstract, this is clearly showing my own position and search for an authentic self unmediated by these subjective and influenced experiences. That is not to say that these works could easily be understood as symbiotic of the Chinese penchant for circular forms or references to the Buddhist mandala. Her work could be read in these terms too, but I feel a more productive stance in understanding her work is Eichler's notion of post-identity with characteristics he refers to as “it often takes on board aspects of the politics of identity (race, class and sexuality), while attempting to problematize the traps of illustration, pigeon-holing and ghetto-ization.”

Chong says “by changing medium I'm looking for the right aesthetic language to communicate this experience of being in between it all, of mediating what I've seen by what others see and by my own comprehension of how creative production and identification

as a process are undeniably intertwined. I can't help but cite these issues of occupying this ambiguous cultural space and having it tie into my practice."

Despite the freedom of the "hybrids", part of the difficulty with producing work in an in-between cultural space is looking for a genuine connection and cultural language within which these ideas can manifest. Part of this creating this language involves finding something that is separated from the codified monoculturalisms of everyday signs and something that doesn't just subscribe to ethnic essentialism or specificity.

Her work reminds me an interesting proposition Korean artists Kim Beom suggests through his comment on education: "The changes which Asians have experienced during the past hundred years can be compared to the transformation of a human being into a tree. Our ways of living and conditions of living have been assimilated into those of industrialized Westerners whether voluntarily or not" (Beom in Chong, 2010: 65).

It is important to address these ideas in which her work can be read within and how this cultural position should not be disregarded or overlooked when attempting to understand her practice. Is it possible to read Chong's work without implicating it into the now deeply untrendy identity politics? Perhaps so, but I believe her work to be a case of how it is more interesting and productive to read it in this way because it says so much more about where these arguments are shifting and how it is no longer a simple case of being pulled by different locations and having conflicting cultural influences.

Her natural digression away from the illustrative to the abstract seems to show this. However, can creative production ever move away from the trappings of cultural context and thus identity? Her work is not driven solely by identity, but by identifying and the search for the self beyond surface identity issues. I feel she is on the cusp of developing a new language and it couldn't be more timely.

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