2009

That moment now = 此時．那刻

Tin Yan, Celia KO

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AN EXHIBITION BY CELIA KO
In memory of my grandmother Chan Chung Pak

A remarkable woman of her time, without her selfless love, nourishment and education, none of these works would exist.

For my mother Ling Yuan Lin

An enthusiastic story-teller whose precious memories, love and knowledge of her family constantly capture my imagination, enrich my life, and anchor me to (or, hold me fast to) my Hong Kong-Cantonese roots.
Visual Studies at Lingnan University is an interdisciplinary programme designed to equip students with the historical and conceptual tools that will allow them to analyse, understand, and appreciate a wide range of visual phenomena. The Artist in Residence programme helps to sharpen students’ understanding of artistic practices and their results through studio courses and interaction with artists. The programme brings one local, one non-local, one established, and one emerging artist to the Lingnan campus every year. These artists are with the programme for a full semester, and during this time they are actively engaged in producing art in the Visual Studies studio.

“At Moment Now” showcases works produced by Celia Ko during her 2008 residency. With their emphasis on time, Celia’s paintings and “wearables” invite valuable forms of historical reflection. My colleagues and I are delighted to have been able to bring Celia to Lingnan.

Mette Hjort
Professor and Programme Director,
Visual Studies

In a new exhibition ‘At Moment Now’ on show at Lingnan University, Hong Kong artist Celia Ko presents three bodies of work that take as their subject the artist’s relationship to her maternal Chinese ancestry. In pursuing her subject Ko has created a trilogy of images through which the interior life of her family is approached from different vantage points. Using large-scale images and hand made garments and jewellery Ko explores the pervasive power of familial myths and narratives.

The first part of the exhibition are large-scale portraits of her mother’s parents: grandfather Ling Tak Hung and grandmother Chan Chung Pak. Ancestor portraits are nothing new in China, their history stretching back to at least the Ming Dynasty. Typically such images are venerated at the family alter. Seated in authoritarian majesty they hover over family life as symbols of continuity and longevity. Ko’s portraits however break with the schematic conventions of ancestor imagery. Far from the Confucian ideal these larger than life images are derived from black and white photographs that reveal a couple in the fullness of life. The expressions animating their faces seem eerily suggestive – grandfather relaxed and confident, his wife rather less so: postures that one imagines might ripple across generations.

The second body of works are again larger than life, in this case depictions of Chinese ceramics and lacquer ware. Painted black on black the images stand as metaphors of family story telling – the past dimly evoked, present yet somewhat undefined. In common with ancestor portraits, ceramics and lacquer ware are definitively Chinese productions. As heirlooms they are symbols of continuity and prosperity. But as these images reveal, inheritance encompasses not only goods and chattel but social and personal conventions as well. These containers appear as dark repositories, of secrets or pacts, both spoken and unspoken made in the confines of the family home.

In contrast the garments assembled by Ko speak of outward appearance and social standing. With their rich fabrics and ornamentation, they announce their wearer’s confident place in the world. Inspired by costumes worn during the late Ch’ing Dynasty the artist has embellished these pieces with talismans of contemporary life, and in doing so draws a line between past and present.

Discernibly, Ko’s work is concerned with both personal sentiment and broader social canvas. As statements of her Hong Kong heritage they stand in stark comparison with the island’s outwardly mercantile façade and in this they take their place with similar such artists who are likewise passionate about the cultural life of their island home.

Damian Smith
January 2009

Damian Smith is Gallery Curator of Maroondah Art Gallery and Vice-president of Public Galleries Association of Victoria, Australia
I associate lacquer objects with my grandmothers narrative world, of stories I know intimately that happened long time ago. The darkness of their surface (both the objects and my paintings) embodied my impression of the past that lives vividly in my mind.

We used to have lacquer objects at home for daily usage: boxes, bowls, vases, cups, pots, trays, large lacquer containers for storing winter clothes. They were in a warm, near-black dark umber, or sometimes in red, occasionally with decoration, designed in such simple forms that were both elegant and practical. Like my grandparents, they were from a time before me that was so different from mine. Yet I know them intimately because I grew up with them.
Narrative II

4ft (H) x 4.5ft (W)
Acrylic on paper

Narrative III

4ft (H) x 5ft (W)
Acrylic on paper
“Time is but a constant flow of moments of living. How that connect the past, present and future.” This is how I feel every time I look at my family photo albums. People I know as “old people” were also once youthful and vibrant, who in time, were absorbed into the backdrop of history. By cropping the images in a contemporary style, I try to “cast a modern gaze” on their formal photo-portrait to free them from their dated hairstyle and attire. I imagine how I can perhaps bring back to life a much younger couple, reconnecting myself to them in this moment long gone. Through the process of painting, I feel I have established a new relationship with my grandparents, old people who, at one time, were also young.

**About Grandma**

My “Po Po” (maternal grandmother) Chan Chung Pak was a most remarkable woman who lived an ordinary life in her times. A third-generation Hong Kong resident, she was born to a local grocery store owner in Hunghum, Kowloon, in 1907. She was the eldest sister to three younger brothers. All her brothers graduated from Hong Kong’s prestigious King’s College. But she remained illiterate with no schooling for being a girl. Her grandfather was a seaman in late nineteenth century and in Europe married a Dutch or English woman, who gave birth to Po Po’s mother. Po Po had fine curly hair, deep set eyes, long limbs, delicate fingers, and unusually tall and strong in those days for a Cantonese woman.

Po Po was generous, brave, hardworking, practical, and gifted. My older relatives still praise her from time to time for her legendary dishes, now some 20 years after her death. On special occasions, she would single-handedly prepare nine-course Cantonese banquets for her large extended family. From childhood, she worked for her parents’ store, making coal briquettes (then a common household fuel), chopping firewood, and brewing soy sauce and seasoning pastes. She was extremely good at performing arithmetic calculations in her head. It was in part for her courage and resourcefulness that she and my mother survived the Japanese invasion and occupation of Hong Kong while my grandfather was still abroad. I never saw her cry or indulge in self pity. She always seemed content and asked nothing for herself.

The Chinese often say that “an elder at home is a treasure at home.” My grandmother was a living proof of that saying. I still remember the special phrases and idioms she used that originated in historical sources. Her Cantonese turns of phrase alluded to sources from the ancient Book of Songs to the Neo-Confucian philosophers to Ming popular novels. My grandmother came from a time when Chinese culture still magnificently lived in common daily urban life. What I learned from her in my childhood has now become topics of cultural studies.

**About Grandpa**

My maternal grandfather Ling Tak Hung was a man who “had seen the world.” He died in his late fifties, 2 years before my mother was married. Nearly everything I know about him comes from what my mother and grandmother told me. But he was mentioned so often at home – and always with love, respect and much affection – that I feel as though I personally knew him.

I learnt he was intelligent, energetic, resourceful and hard-working. As a mechanic’s apprentice, he had only taken a few months of evening classes and taught himself English. He began his career as a seaman and worked his way up to become chief engineer on commercial vessels, a rare position for local Chinese in old colonial Hong Kong. The work took him to many faraway places. Even today my mother talks about the “exotic” gifts he sent her from his travels – fragrant Sri Lankan tea, exquisite Philippine mangoes, Dutch chocolates – a long list reflecting the prosperous trade of the early to mid-twentieth century colony.

The youngest of three brothers, Grandpa selflessly helped his relatives during the most difficult times of the Second World War. In his later years, he was known for offering opportunities to young people at work. He and Grandma were simple and optimistic people who worked hard and complained little. Both of an easy-going and generous nature, the couple, despite their arranged marriage — as was then typical — got on fairly well.

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Grandpa at That Moment, Now
7.5ft(W) x 6ft(H)
Acrylic on canvas

Grandma at That Moment, Now
7.5ft(W) x 6ft(H)
Acrylic on canvas
Background

I am a Hong Kong Chinese who was born and raised during the last 3 decades of the colonial period. Without the cultural disasters imposed by the Chinese Communists party, Hong Kong people have inherited traditional values of both morals and virtues rather intact. My early family education prepared me a foundation for my love of Chinese in different aspects. My maternal grandmother picked every important days following instructions of the Cantonese Almanac, the “Tung Shing” which was a treasure for grass root class, working as a guardian in real life as well as in avoiding disasters willed by destiny. I remember the way my grandmother described how life was when she was young in the 1920’s. She was one of the rare ones who were born in HK during the first decade of 20thC. Her family had been here for 3 generation already. Whenever I looked at photos of old Hong Kong, I imagined that was the world my grandmother had seen with her own eyes.

My perspective of being a Chinese is of great difference from the Mainlanders. My art pieces are representations of my pride and early imaginations of a “clean” urban life of the late Qing/early Chinese Republic days when traditional morals and virtues were still practice in all aspects of the society. The images I depicted in my pieces are often comments or atmosphere I was trying to re-create of an old world. Although a colony, and although a place where east and west met not in fair terms, Old Hong Kong had once preserved a highly cultivated way of living traditional Cantonese/Chinese. She has inherited Cantonese culture, a far older heritage of the contemporary Mandarin speaking culture, and merged into the modern world with great energy and courage for more than a hundred and fifty years now.

The Art Form

My Art Objects, or “wearable”, for me is a visual suggestion, a narrative expressing mood, emotions, humor, culture and point of views, and of course, telling stories. Since I was little whenever my mother took me window shopping at the local jewelry stores or whenever I look at different types of jewelry, I see possibilities, situations, color, atmosphere, drama projecting to my mind. I am not interested in create “pure” jewelry, i.e. jewelry only made of precious materials. I take the form of jewelry to recreate a time and space that roots from my very personal background, obviously reflecting my taste and interests, telling personal stories and sometimes ideals and believes. The pieces are meant to be a fusion of old and new, romantic and critical, Chinese and western. I create with fabric, ornaments, and re-create segments of clothes that are inspired by what people used to wear in my culture.

I have started making these as objects/wearables since 1991 when I was still living as an American.

Art Objects – Wearables By Celia Ko

Treasure

15cm(W) x 12cm(H)
CD Cases, acrylic on photocopied images
Blessed Moments is a loud and intense piece suggesting destiny and fate. The structure of the collar was inspired by a particular fashionable cut of late Qing period, "the Phoenix Fairy" named after a famous courtesan during the first decade of the 20th C. I was trying to be more textural and very flowery and dirty with the materials and fabric I chose: the fake fur, the beautiful but never subtle satin in intense pink decorated with small golden flowers. Being a Chinese, one simply can’t live without gold and red. I love the insanity, femininity and irrationality of such "loud" colors and images.

I am always being fascinated by sages and dangling ornaments women and men in old times hung from their waist. Conception was inspired such fascination. It supposed to move while the user walks around. I chose to use this traditional fabric which is made of raw silk, also used to be very popular among Southern Cantonese area for centuries, but instead of the usual common black tough shiny silk, this one appears to be darker, more ancient, golden and hence more solemn and nostalgic, carrying a sense of accumulation of dust in history. I am trying to suggest the atmosphere that I remember at the beginning of my existence.
The structure of “Traps of Life”, inspired by such high collars of the late Qing period, is a rather neutral and gothic design that can fit both women and men. The fabric I used reminded me of what my grandmother used to wear – that black shiny but tough silk. I love the darkness and the weight it suggests. It matches perfectly my imagined mood of my beloved old Hong Kong.

I Absolutely beware of what you say
II Don’t be amused by others’ disaster
III Hearing people from the east or Famous in the East
IV Teaching your son the classics
CELIA TINYAN KO

Education

BFA, DRAWING & PAINTING
California State University, Long Beach, USA

Solo Exhibitions

2/2009 “That Moment Now”, Lingnan University, Hong Kong
6/2001 “Lost in the Woods”, Red Mill Gallery, Vermont, USA
9/2000 “The Essence”, HK City Hall, HK
9/1997 “Detours to Paradise”, The Fringe Gallery, Hong Kong
3/1995 “Paradise”, Hong Kong Visual Art Centre, Hong Kong

Selected Exhibitions after 1995

4/2005 “San Guan – Observing the senses”, Courthian Gallery, Moreland City Council, Melbourne, Australia
7/2002 “Embark-Disembark”, Mass Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
2/2001 “Bundles of Paper”, John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong
4/2000 “Under the Bed”, Fringe Gallery, Hong Kong
11/1998 “Wall to Window” Group Exhibition, Para Site, Hong Kong
2/1999 “Works On Paper” Group Exhibition, John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong
7/1997 “Visions of Hong Kong” Group Exhibition, Taikoo Place, HK
6/1997 “Bad Art” Group Exhibition, Fringe Gallery, Hong Kong
4/1996 “Ink Momentum” Group Exhibition, HK City Hall, HK
3/1995 “HKG-SYD-HKG” Group Exhibition, Fringe Gallery, HK

Ko’s works are collected by Hong Kong Museum of Art and by private patrons. She received the Freeman Fellowship Award at Vermont Studio Center (2000-01), USA. Ko is an experienced teacher in art and design. Since Year 2000, she is a visiting lecturer at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKU-SPACE, Hong Kong Art School, and Hong Kong City University.

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Visual Studies Programme, Department of Philosophy, Lingnan University

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