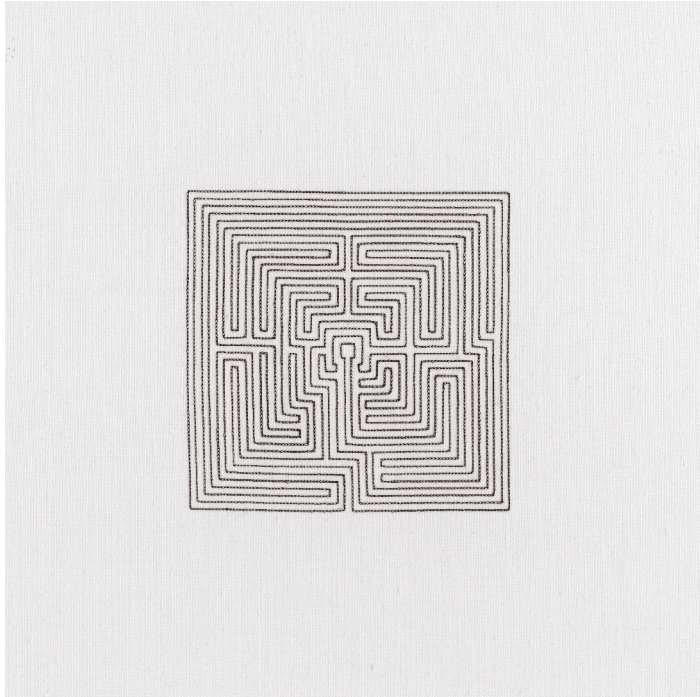


9

works by Liyen Chong

The Enchantment of Irony

essay by Kriselle Baker



list of works

New Zealand History 1. Hero

Applied and Decorative Arts 2. A Bowl to Catch the Sun

Ethnology 3. Empire

Pictorial Collections 4. Magritte's Hat

Marine 5. Sky chart: 1730hrs, 1 July 2008,
42°31'59" S, 172°37'58" E

Botany 6. Hedge Maze

Entomology 7. The Cockroach

Land Vertebrates 8. Ouroboros

Archaeology 9. 1:1 scale of the 'pyramid' on
the reverse of the United States
one-dollar bill



HUMAN HISTORY :

New Zealand History

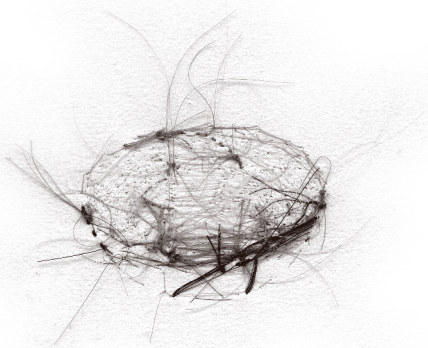
I. Hero

Portrait of Sir Edmund Hillary on a NZ 5 Dollar Note

In the early morning of Sir Ed's funeral, 22 January 2008, I dreamt I was in a 'chapel' just before the service was about to start. My dog Babushka was there with me though after a while, she disappeared. There was a huge blue swimming pool in the centre of the 'chapel'. For some reason I was left alone with the casket and then suddenly there was a lot of running around. Other people whom I did not know randomly appeared in my dream consciousness. While in my dream, I realised the service was about to take place *somewhere else* and I had to carry the casket. I can't remember much else after that.

I think it is strange that although I am not acquainted with the Holy Trinity Cathedral and its surrounds, I dreamt of the existence of a 'chapel' next to it. I later learnt of St Mary's Church, which is very near the Holy Trinity Cathedral.

Notes: Collective Consciousness. TRAVELLING like a dream through history.



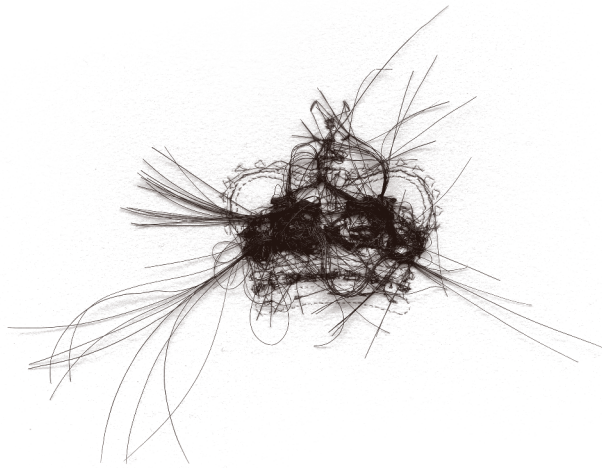
HUMAN HISTORY : **Applied and Decorative Arts**

2. A Bowl to Catch the Sun

hair from a stranger

whose
hairs
stood
on
end.

Notes: Candy Text. My hairline cracks at the site of you. PRIVATE LAUGH*ings*



HUMAN HISTORY :

Ethnology

3. Empire

from the New Zealand Coat of Arms

Chart the courses of empires that last a thousand years.

Notes: Castration. Conspiracy. The diasporic vagrant child speaks.



PICTORIAL COLLECTIONS :

4. Memory of Hat

a.k.a. Magritte's Hat

He sat up last night in a fright. He thought he was about to die, but strangely enough, if he was actually dreaming he was already dead and in heaven, it wouldn't have stressed him out that much.

Notes: Conceptual versus Continual Deaths.



NATURAL HISTORY :

New Zealand History

5. Sky Chart

5.30pm, 1 July 2008, 42°31'59" S, 172°37'58" E

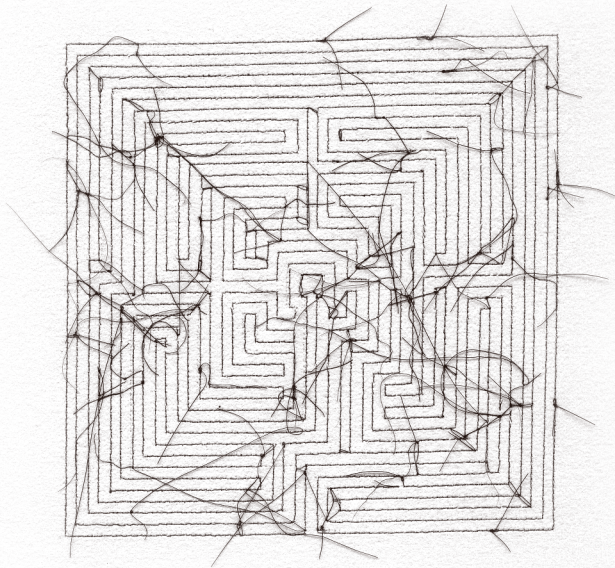
AEDH WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B.YEATS (1899)

Notes: Christchurch. Now Time Past. What you are seeing in the sky now already happened thousands of years ago as the lights from those stars now reach us. Imagined Space ~

locate your ache.



NATURAL HISTORY :

Botany

6. Hedge Maze

Landscape Architecture

This work is based on the maze at Chevening House, England, which was the first maze to have been designed using mathematical principles and is a 'multiple connected maze' which means that it has infinite loops and many dead ends. It cannot be solved by the 'left hand rule', i.e. running your left hand along the hedge until you find your goal.

1

The world, somebody wrote, is the place we prove real by dying in it.
Edward Bond, as quoted by Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*.

Notes: Desire. Control. She runs alone in a maze. (Scene from Orlando by Sally Potter)



NATURAL HISTORY :

Entomology

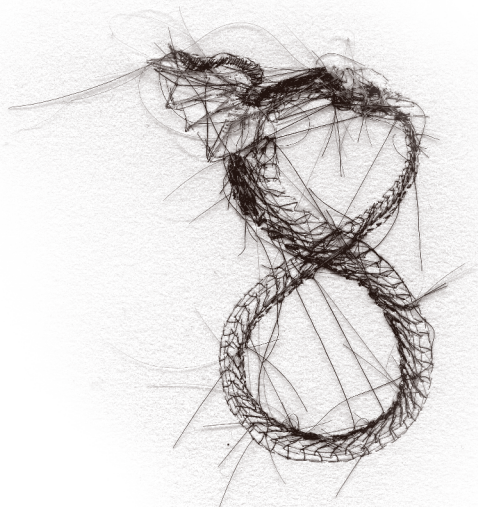
7. The Cockroach

Order Blattaria

Cockroaches are known to be able to withstand radiation from nuclear explosions. As a species, humans will probably die out before cockroaches do. The luck of evolution is on their side, not ours.

It is interesting to think that time won't end when all human consciousness finally ends.

Notes: None.



NATURAL HISTORY :

Land Vertebrates

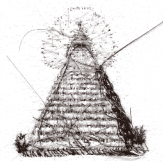
8. Ouroboros

Ouroboros, Oroborus, Uroboros or Uroborus

“...it is said of the ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilises himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolises the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites.”

Carl Jung

Notes: Consumption. The Taxonomy of Love and Illusion.



9. 1:1 scale of the 'pyramid' on the reverse of the United States one-dollar bill

Irony is dead! Long live irony!

David Beers, September 25, 2001

1

Google Ad found when a search for 'state of the US Dollar' was performed (14th June 2008):

[United States Dollar](#)

Hear What Our Experts Say About
The Dollar's Decline - FREE Report.
www.WorldCurrencyWatch.com

Notes: Contradiction embracing irony.





*"What kind of an idea are you?" the Jewel Bedecked
Dragon asked? 2006, artist's hair embroidered on
cotton, 34 x 82mm, private collection.*



The Enchantment of Irony

It is in the world of dreams that irony's unhappy love finds its object.

Søren Kierkegaard

There is an underlying instability inherent in the notion of irony. It is a device of language that acknowledges the gap between what is expected and what is seen and between the world of dreams and the world of reality. The dislocation of irony interwoven with the concept of attachment forms the theme of Liyen Chong's current work. These are images that make apparent a desire to engage with the complexity of language as much as with the art object.

There are in essence two sorts of irony: a modern satirical irony that attacks the conventions of a context (by saying the opposite of what is meant in order to expose an underlying truth), and a Romantic irony that aims to shift the reader's awareness beyond a given context. Romantic irony is often the more evocative of the two – it is the irony of the great Romantic poets such as William Blake and Samuel Coleridge – and is closely associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel. Schlegel wrote of divided perspectives in which the author simultaneously occupies a dual position within and parallel to the narrative. Both these types of irony filter through Chong's imagery creating uncertainty and disequilibrium in works that prick at our consciousness, interrogating our perception of the world and of others.

In Cai Xueqin's eighteenth-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hung Lou Meng* – a euphemism for the secluded mansions that once housed the daughters of China's aristocracy) the love story that winds through this long episodic tale begins in a supernatural realm and then progresses seamlessly through to a real world of closely observed detail and emotional nuance. As the narrative and the characters move between these two worlds it is this duality of being 'both within and without the illusion' that signals the beginning of irony.¹

In Chong's earlier work, the installation and online project *A Humid Day* (2007), the Romantic irony that underscores the narrative structure of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is translated into material form as the text on the packaging of commodities used in the course of an ordinary day. This is altered to reveal the schizophrenic reality of the protagonist: a character of uncertain origin who 'lives by herself among strangers in a land where she was not born...She is sometimes not sure which world, or set of laws she is living by.'² As she negotiates her way through an unfamiliar culture, the fragmented reality of the character is ordered into layers of meaning based on the increasing levels of abstraction in Roget's Thesaurus, and her state of mind charted according to the multiple stages of psychological development so that the altered syntax of a gift voucher reads: 'To the value of uncertainty...because we know how certainty crumbles in your hand.'

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.139.

2. <http://www.ahumidday.info>

‘Under the aegis of Romanticism faith in the capacity of the mind to create other worlds is said to be matched by fear of delusion’.³ That fear or incomprehension permeates the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi’s recounting of a dream in which he imagines he is a butterfly. When awoken he finds himself a person again but he now does not know if he is a man who dreamt of being a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams of being a man. This story is retold in two elaborate and fragile images of a butterfly that Chong has embroidered in delicate, tendrils and arabesques of line. The titles of the work pose the questions: *Am I a woman who dreamt I was a butterfly?* or *Am I a butterfly who dreams I am a woman?* Which of these worlds is our reality, they ask, and which the illusion?

Many of Chong’s images, like the butterflies, are finely embroidered works of hair on cotton exquisitely rendered in painstaking detail. The process for the artist is meditative and exacting, with the individual works requiring more than 30 hours of close concentration with some extending to over 100 hours. These images seem more like elegant line-drawings or intaglio prints than embroidery, with their smooth, velvety blacks like that of drypoint and the crisp linear details like the precise lines of etching. They are works of such highly refined artifice and complexity that as a viewer one feels compelled to look at the back in order to take in the extraordinary skill of the artist. That level of skill and the attention lavished on the work creates a strong sense of attachment or enchantment with the work as a coveted, irreproducible object of rare beauty.

3. Wai-ye Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p.259.

The technique of embroidery creates its own form of associations and attachment for Chong. It was a skill learned within the family. Taught by a mother and paternal grandmother, it carries the memory of a Malaysian childhood and a nostalgia for the familiar symbols of culture – the traditional Chinese emblems of lions and dragons that in earlier work are assigned lyric titles questioning the singular understanding of cultural context: “*What kind of an idea are you?*” *the Jewel Bedecked Dragon asked* (2006).

Whereas once the artist used her own hair, more recently it is the hair of friends and acquaintances, and in one case, a stranger. Using a person’s hair to create an artwork elicits an extraordinary sense of intimacy. Hair that is silken and fine can be lovely but hair is also associated with darker meanings. There are the rooms full of hair that are poignant and distressing reminders of the Holocaust. In Chinese literature, the long unkempt hair of women is often associated with madness, the otherworldliness of ghost stories, and young women committing suicide in moments of inconsolable grief. The embroidered images are weighted with this accumulation of meaning.

In this current exhibition, Chong has used the taxonomy of the museum to structure and clarify, and to create a sense of order. Each image is positioned within a different classification system (History, Applied and Decorative Arts, Ethnology, Pictorial Collections, Marine, Botany, Entomology, Land Vertebrates and Archaeology). These systems encompass a specific context or way of looking at the world of categorising, naming, and assigning significance.

How we might understand the images within the codes of that classification, and our attachment to them within the function of the museum, is undermined by a competing reality. The irony of that reality reorients our understanding of the image so that a St Edward's Crown located within the discipline of Ethnology and embroidered with the hair of Asian and Polynesian friends takes on a new layer of meaning. The material reality of the work shifts our perceptions away from an entrenched cultural geography that in a colonial context positioned Britain at the centre, marginalizing other cultures. Our understanding of this most Euro-centric of symbols is now infused with a competing reality.

These works are also, in their individual way, a small memorial to the idea of death. They mark not only the physical death of the body but the mortality of ideas. Take, for example, Sir Edmund Hillary immortalised on a New Zealand five dollar note – a hero that following his death and within the context of the museum might be assigned to the category of History and yet he remains part of the currency of our everyday lives. This work is also tinged with a humorous, satirical irony in what in one sense might be considered the absurdity of ascribing an insignificant value to our most revered public figure.

Then there is the uncertain 'death of irony' following the events of September 11th. The division of the world into good and evil, which would make redundant the need to seek truth through irony, was soon shown to be a fallacy. The Eye of Providence depicted here, and that is included in the Great Seal of the United States and the dollar bill, cannot

then in absolute certainty be used, as intended, as a seal of authenticity and truth in a world in which those concepts remain unclear.

These works are exquisite objects – the embroidery is as captivating and ingenious as the perfectly re-visualised packaging of *A Humid Day*. They are though deceptively refined and ordered images they do not hold to a single truth or idea. Our enchantment and understanding of the image is constantly displaced by the layers of meaning revealed through the unfolding nuances of irony. The moment when we perceive the irony within the object – when our understanding of the significance of the object is altered – that is the moment of disenchantment. As each successive layer of meaning forms within our consciousness it expresses something different about the nature of our attachment to the material world.

Kriselle Baker



Am I a woman who dreamt I was a butterfly
2007, artist's hair embroidered on cotton,
55 x 37 mm, private collection.



Am I a butterfly who dreams I am a woman?
2007, artist's hair embroidered on cotton,
55 x 37 mm, private collection.

9 is the highest single digit number in a world that has accepted the base ten numeral system.

9 being equal to 3^{2^1} , is an exponential factorial.

The number 9 is considered a lucky number in Chinese culture because it sounds exactly the same as the word “longlasting” in Chinese.

9 is strongly associated with the Chinese dragon, a symbol of power in the Chinese culture. The dragon has nine attributes and nine forms, and the number of its scales has a factor of 9.

I

Liyen Chong graduated with a BFA in Painting (2001) and a MFA in Design (2003) from the University of Canterbury. She is currently based in Auckland.

Liyen Chong was born in Malaysia on the 9th of May, 1979.

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