



Thinking through the body

Virginia Were talks to Liyen Chong about her investigations into the body and consciousness in recent works, which depart in exciting new directions.

Left: *Enter with Blue Circles*, 2010, acrylic, metallic paint, graphite and ink on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag archival print. Image courtesy of the artist and the McCahon House Trust. All artworks by Liyen Chong

In June this year young Auckland artist Liyen Chong showed new work, which was a radical departure from the exquisite, intimately scaled hair embroideries for which she has become well known. Taking part in a group show at Melanie Roger Gallery during the Auckland Festival of Photography, Chong installed a group of white ceramic bowls in a circle on the gallery floor, and at first glance it wasn't clear how these objects related to the tradition of photography and the photographs on the gallery walls by the other artists in the exhibition.

Crouching down to examine the gestural swirls and blobs of intense jewel-like colour in the bottom of each bowl, you gradually become aware of a human form coalescing beneath the swathes of colour. Then you begin the pleasurable experience of deciphering the black and white image of a woman curled foetus-like in the bottom of the bowl, her body echoing the curves of the vessel, her luxuriously long black hair swirling around her and enveloping her in a dark cloud. The figure – a photograph of the artist herself – is dynamic and filled with motion, suggesting energy, dance, change and transformation, yet it's impossible to make out much detail because the swirls of paint almost obliterate the image, frustrating our very human desire to recognise the figure's distinguishing features. Enjoyable about these works (which were first shown at Page Blackie Gallery in Wellington late last year) is the way image and form converse – the way the woman's curled body echoes the concave surface of the bowl. Interesting too are the implied associations with the visual language of advertising, in which women's hair is often used to evoke desire and sexuality, and also the long history of ceramics with China and the East. Although it seems Chong is inviting familiarity and intimacy by imaging her own body, she is simultaneously denying that relationship with the viewer, and these multiple layers and tensions are also at play in a series of photographic works on paper, which she will exhibit in her August show at the Gus Fisher Gallery in Auckland.

Chong took these latter photographs of her body, setting up a camera on a tripod in the studio and moving in front of it, before she cut her hair off last year.

Like the ceramic works, the works on paper are rich hybrids, combining physical performance, photography and gestural painting in a way that makes the marriage of conceptual ideas and materiality seem just right. In them she skips happily, joyously between different media, but returns always to her ongoing interest in exploring understandings and ideas about consciousness and the self, and how that self is mediated by the body – her own Asian female body in particular.



Top: *Disappearance scheduled for Friday night*, 2010, LED lightbox. Image courtesy of the artist and Page Blackie Gallery

Below: *Untitled*, 2010, mixed media on glazed ceramic bowl fired with laser printed ceramic decal. Image courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery

The fact she is a young Chinese woman who was born and grew up in Malaysia, lived in Shanghai for a year and immigrated to Christchurch in 1995 (where she completed a BFA and MFA at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts), means she's no stranger to cultural dislocation – a fact that complicates and enriches her investigations in productive and fascinating ways.



Test piece, 2010, acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag archival print. Image courtesy of the artist



Liyen Chong. Photo: Ted Baker

In these A2 and A3 sized works on paper she appears caught in the midst of mesmerising movement, her body and face veiled by swathes of fabric, a fluffy white sheepskin or a metallic gold blouse. Circles and other simple geometric shapes are painted over these images in gold and silver leaf, bright red, blue or yellow, emphasising the surface and reminding us that the photographic image partly concealed beneath the paint is in fact an illusion, and by extension prompting the realisation that the body is merely an exterior 'marker' of the self.

There are echoes of American photographer Cindy Sherman, who photographed herself enacting a multitude of different personae to suggest the slippery, constructed nature of feminine identity – adamantly focusing our attention on surface appearances. Like Sherman, Chong is interested in exploring identity and gender and the way selfhood is always mediated through the body – her own. Like Sherman, she wrenches our attention back to the surface.

Chong revels in being a conceptual and media magpie. After leaving art school, where she studied graphic design and painting, she made a number of text-based works, including the wonderful installation, *A Humid Day*, which was exhibited at the Gus Fisher Gallery in 2007. In this meditation on the elusive, tricky nature of translation, a task in which all humans are daily engaged, she re-appropriated the packaging of consumer products on which she then cheekily printed her own subjective, witty and subversive texts. Thus a bar of hygienic soap was rebranded as "Neurotic", and a Penguin Books cover became "Parrot Books" with the penguin logo replaced with a parrot.

In the catalogue for this exhibition, Kate Brett Kelly-Chalmers writes: "In some instances, it appears as though Chong's packaging has become a canvas for Surrealist word games and, in others, a means to make shrewd cultural critiques and theoretical observations. We might conclude that the stuff of our recycling bins has been tipped down

the rabbit hole when a bottle of vodka obliges its drinker to 'Learn how to speak incoherently' and the label of a packet of hardware nuts reads 'The in-between space of feeling unlike yourself'. Perhaps it is also the experience of the immigrant that is being played out in these papery vessels, the thought patterns of someone who exists between here and there."

In her recent works on paper Chong has returned to her love of painting. "What led me to painting was my practice of Chinese calligraphy which I learned at a very young age. So I had that facility of being able to do calligraphy, and painting became a logical move for me to make."

"At university we were given an exercise where we had to emulate 1950s modernist painters, but we were told to cut out all the cultural and political associations. Being a docile Asian student I played along with this exercise, and I was surprised to find that in a strange way I really enjoyed it! I found it like the practice of calligraphy where your body and mind are one, and you are just making a painting."

Talking to Chong in her small Auckland apartment, which she also uses as a studio, I detect her enjoyment of making these new works in contrast to the intense discipline and concentration needed for the hair embroideries, which required her to sit very still and focused while she worked on a single piece for several months at a time. After five years of making these extremely fine and detailed works, using her own and other people's hair, to reflect on the nature of being and consciousness, she was physically unable to continue.

"I worked too hard on them and got to the point where my body didn't want to do any more; I had to listen to my body and it was a very profound lesson to learn."

Though she had been wanting to move on from the hair embroideries for some time, it was the physical hardship of making them and the luxury of working in a large space, during her two-month McCahon House Residency in Titirangi earlier this year, that propelled her practice in an exciting new direction.



Above: 1. *Hero* (detail) 2008. White, black, brown, blonde and red hair embroidered onto cotton, black lacquered MDF board. Image courtesy of the artist

Below: Fig. 14.3 *Antibacterial Soap Packaging*, 2007, electronic file with multiple applications (www.ahumidday.info). Image courtesy of the artist

“As a foreign-born New Zealander it was interesting for me to see if I could connect with the period of time in New Zealand art when McCahon was working, and the kinds of obstacles he faced as a human being,” says Chong. “I read one of the little texts beside the kitchen sink in his cottage – something about how he felt less like a foreigner in Titirangi than he did in the city. It really hit home, because like McCahon I moved from Christchurch to Auckland as a young artist.”

Chong is hesitant to describe her practice as an investigation into her identity as a Chinese woman living with the awareness and understanding of two very different and often conflicting cultures, yet her interest in the different – and often conflicting – understandings of self, and how individuals relate to society as a whole in eastern and western cultures, lies at the heart of her practice.

She sees her work as a constant negotiation – both between ideas and their material manifestation and between two different cultural systems.

“Because I’ve grown up in a different cultural context, I tend to consider things from very different perspectives,” she says. “I have an obsession with making my work in such a way that it’s somehow accessible to both cultures – western and eastern. I’m trying to honour the experiences I grew up with and also this culture I’m now in.”

“Right now I feel there isn’t very much conversation about the idea of the self in New Zealand, which is understandable because in the late 1990s there was this fiery interest in identity, which resulted in some great works, and also I think some dubious ones; but it got too heavy – for instance it seemed that only ethnic minorities were allowed to talk about identity. I was interested in very similar themes, but when I moved to Auckland it was almost as if no one wanted to deal with these issues. I think the conversation had to go underground for some time. In the late 1990s people like Yuk King Tan, Shigeyuki Kihara and a few other artists of

Asian descent were not afraid of approaching these issues, but when these artists left Auckland everything fell silent.”

Certainly, with Chong’s incisive and refreshingly different approach to engaging with these complex and often contentious issues, by invoking her own body as a means to explore these ideas, the silence has well and truly been broken.

Liyaen Chong’s new work will be exhibited at Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington, 16 August to 10 September 2011; Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland, 26 August to 29 October 2011.

