

Dreams
Circles
Moons
Fictions

*(and fragments found on the forest
floor of disquietude)*

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Contemplating difference
2012
Mixed media on archival inkjet print
450 × 315mm
Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery

Introduction

Alchemy. An alchemist.

These are the words that come to my mind when thinking about the practice and person of Liyen Chong.

I came to know both through the privilege of being offered a glimpse into the home and heart of Chong as we, together, developed her survey exhibition *Dreams Circles Moons Fictions (and fragments found on the forest floor of disquietude)* for Papakura Art Gallery.

Chong's survey show, her first, featured works of diverse forms and mediums. The starting point was a cloth-bound book of concrete poems she submitted for her graduation exhibition at The University of Canterbury in 2001. It then picked up on and included selected works from every body of work generated since that point: The *A Humid Day* series she produced for her Master of Fine Arts submission 2003 (and later reshowed at the Gus Fisher Gallery); meticulous embroideries made from human hair; ceramic bowls with photographic transfers and hand painting (called *Exportware*); self portraits presented as hand painting on photographic prints and lightboxes; acrylic and gold leaf drawings of 'magical ordinary objects' on paper; and mixed media on found images sourced from old encyclopaedias.

To an outsider, at first encounter, these forms might seem disparate, but having worked with Chong, from the inside out, I understand the differences as visible moments in a practice that has persistently and consistently dealt with a singular enquiry; an enquiry that begins from an exploration of the structures of consciousness as experienced from a discrete viewpoint.

Chong's earlier work had its genesis in an inspection of the self as a displaced entity. At least that was how I understood it to that point. Until then I apprehended this notion in a narrow, negative, post-colonial sense. The dictionary form of the word 'displacement' stops at that same place: "to force something or someone out of its usual or original position".¹ But it's at exactly that place Chong's magic begins. She has persisted with a transformation of that state into something wonderfully other-worldly. There was an instant, following one of the days I spent with the artist at her studio in Flat Bush, that I grasped this, stepping through a portal offered by her practice into a place that theoretical language cannot capture and that I (and you) can only know through experience of her work.

In 2011, in a substantive essay for Art News, Virginia Were wrote about Chong: "she skips happily, joyously between different media."² The evocation this sentence initially brought to my mind was quite literal—someone skipping like a child might, carefree. Having spent so much time in Chong's company I have rethought this. She does *appear to skip* in that her work spans different forms. But I now interpret Chong's practice as highly considered, each step measured against the last and each aesthetic transformation embedded in a series of personal, philosophical and conceptual deliberations. Moreover, regarding



1 Cambridge British English Dictionary Online. Cambridge University Press, 2014. Web. Accessed 24 Feb. 2014.

2 Virginia Were: *Thinking through the Body*; Art News New Zealand, Vol. 31 No. 3. Spring, 2011. (pp 115)

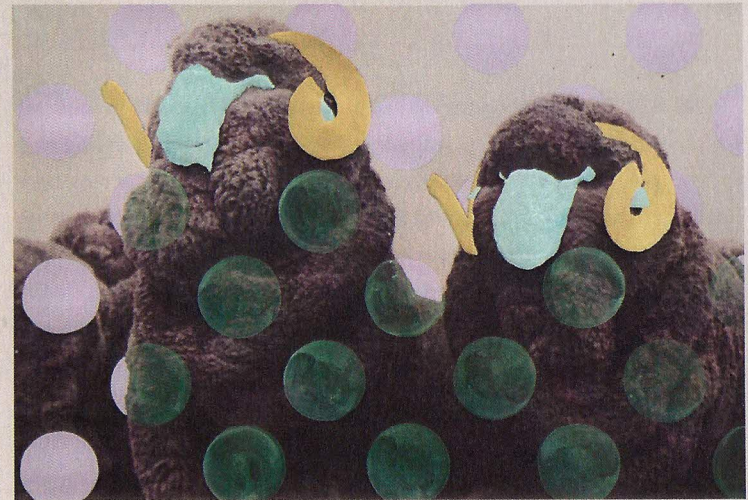
the materiality of the works, while they might appear to have been produced *happily and joyously*, they are effectively paradoxes. Each has passed through the artist's profound introspection. Each is highly laboured. The hair embroideries literally crippled her. This is not to undermine Were's delightful observation, rather to underscore the enigma of Chong's practice.

Chong has variously transformed the state of *being* human; she has liquidised it, passed it through her self, the alchemist, into a thing of pristine intelligent beauty—turning ordinary objects to gold, human hair into intricate illustrations (skeletons, mazes, iridescent bowls and star charts), words into pictures, pictures into words, black and white portraits into electrified objects with colour and lustrous effect, mass-produced ceramic bowls (each individually customised with photographic transfers over-painted with interference colours) into artefacts that shift and pulse where the light hits. Through her practice Chong offers us the gift of a striking fluid mutability.

Tracey Williams



She thought she was in a play when the whole scene had to be repeated again
2011
Duratran on LED Lightbox
560 x 420 x 80mm
Courtesy of the artist



Impossible to depict an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere
2013
Mixed media on archival inkjet print
296 x 437mm
Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery

In the company of the moon

A forest is a long way from a studio, an urban or suburban dwelling, or a gallery. Immediately and evocatively, 'forest' switches from word to sense, maybe causing you to breathe more deeply, maybe encouraging you to close your eyes. To each of us, 'forest' is a known and an unknown. In titling this exhibition, Liyen Chong asks us to enter the forest and, shouldered by trees, to look at the floor. We become Gretel, searching for crumbs. Chong's forest of disquietude is not the forest of my childhood (which is more truthfully bush, lush and infinitely green, and in which I am at home, never alone, being here and there accompanied by inquisitive fantails). In the disquiet forest you are a stranger, possibly observed as you keep your gaze trained near to your own feet. The air is unscented, the sounds not quite familiar. The edges are unlikely to be defined. Nevertheless, in this state of unease, there is a promise of fragments; the temptation of a puzzle.

*The Book of Disquiet*¹ by Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) is fragmentary in nature and is described by its author as a "factless autobiography."² The book is without narrative. It was assembled posthumously from a collection of texts found in an envelope—the slips of poetry, ruminations and observations had been written over decades, in numerous literary voices. The reference to Pessoa's book title in the title of Chong's survey exhibition is a dropped hint. What noise will a hint make upon impact, one wonders? Pessoa was born in Portugal but spent his formative years in South Africa before returning alone to Portugal in his late teens. At the crux of child-becoming-adult, he had to make himself anew. Pessoa's manifold voices resonate with Chong.

Pessoa's writings in *The Book of Disquiet* display an intense introspection, in which he repeatedly questions the nature of being. The crossover periods between sleep and waking, dreaming and being frequently occupy him. "I'd woken up early and I took a long time getting ready to exist."³ These anxieties of who to be, and how to be, are equally undertones in the many and varied works in Chong's survey exhibition, and across the larger practice from which these representative images and objects have been selected.



1 While in most translations from the Portuguese *Livro do Desassossego* is known as *The Book of Disquiet*, it is also known as *The Book of Disquietude* as seen in Richard Zenith's translation, Carcanet Press, 1991. (pp 323) ISBN 0-14-118304-7

2 Fernando Pessoa: *The Book of Disquiet*; (trans. Richard Zenith) Penguin, 2002. Text 12 (page unnumbered)

3 Fernando Pessoa: 2002. (pp 29)

Dreams

What dreams will you sell us today?
The old lady said that she was selling dreams, yes the girl said
and she bought a dream, she did,
She dreamt of being in a strange place,
— And of seeing marvellous and amazing things and then
woke up.⁴

The girl and the old lady conduct the exchange of dreams for an unknown payment in headlines on the cover of a fictional magazine, *Artist's Vision*. This magazine can only be found in *A Humid Day*—the artist's project that takes different physical and virtual forms. And then it is only a cover, an empty package, an unfulfilled promise of sorts. The *A Humid Day* project is full of such instances of temptation, tease and denial: a story that you may never read because it is only a title or a headline, a product you can never test, a ticket that will take you nowhere. Added to that, texts are written in a voice the artist does not claim as her own, gathered around the premise of imaginary encounters in an imaginary day in the life of an imaginary girl. While the project is comprised of an overwhelming number of fragments, collectively they are impossible to interrogate.

Nevertheless, I am taken by this exchange between youth and old age. And I wonder about the title of the publication, *Artist's Vision*. The artist is still a romanticised character in contemporary culture. Identifying oneself as an artist may mean intentionally (or unintentionally) adopting a persona, agreeing to play a role. An artist, especially a young artist, may feel an expectation to become more than themselves. Does anyone at all think that artists sell dreams? Or do artists buy dreams then eventually wake up?

4 Liyen Chong; *Fig. 1.4 Magazine Cover*. 2007. Liyen Chong, New Zealand. *A Humid Day*. Web. Accessed 2 May 2014.

As a reviewer of *The Book of Disquiet* noted, the full edition comes in over 500 pages, and is suited to insomniacs.⁵ Otherwise, a pocket edition is recommended for a dipping in and out, fragmentary, reading style. Likewise with *A Humid Day*; it best suits random sampling. The satisfaction of spending time with this work is that it so actively promotes letting your mind wander. By largely refusing to answer questions, and determinedly and repeatedly asking more questions than any reader/viewer would be prepared to answer, the reader/viewer ends up accepting what they do not know and becomes open to being sold a dream.

Moons

The moon is a changing constant. Marking time, pulling tides. The sleepless, the night-gazers (and day-dreamers) are those on most familiar terms with the moon. To our post-moon-landing generation, the moon is no longer a mystery or a frontier, yet it retains its poetry.

Moon Bowl II (2010), is a miniature embroidery of glossy black and white hair on fine cotton. As with all Chong's hair embroidery works, it is transfixing—the initial engagement involving simply contemplating the materials and the process, before any consideration of the subject of the object can begin. In comparison to the more physically complex embroideries depicting skulls, skeletons, a bank note and mythical creatures, *Moon Bowl II* appears understated. But its simplicity results in a far more satisfying openness. Each time I come back to this small work, I find a new way of understanding it. Sometimes, the intentionally naïve perspective renders the bowl little depth, allowing the incomplete circle to be able to be read as a three quarter moon. At other times, if the bowl is perceived as a vessel, it is then an inversion of a moon; the moon as

5 Nicholas Lezard; *The Book of Disquiet by Fernando Pessoa*; *The Guardian*, 22 May 2010. Web. Accessed 1 May 2014.

a void. The whorl of stitched white hair plays its own game of inversion, as youth and age become reversed and entwined. Centrally, but subtly, the hair turns on itself to mimic the yin yang symbol.

In *Disappearance Scheduled for Friday Night* (2011), the figure of the artist attracts (or is attracted to) a personal moon. The lunar presence in this and related works is otherworldly, adding a ritualistic element to the artist's performances for the camera in the studio 'night'. The possibilities for being, and trying on other ways of being, seem permissible in the company of the continuously reincarnating moon.

Circles

Circles, disks, rings, spots and dots appear to be highly contagious. As in Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*,⁶ one mark moves, magnifies and multiplies. Perhaps innocently invited into Chong's practice, initially just a select few at a time, they have made themselves at home—highlighting and obscuring, in ordered polka-dotted patterns, as positive or negative shapes (like sold stickers or gunshot holes), masquerading as sunbursts, infographic bubbles or haloes.

While circles are delightfully and unavoidably overwhelming in Chong's most recent works, such as *Following fumbling falling finding fantasticities* (2013) and *The economic history of interpretation is for the birds* (2013), truthfully, they snuck in much earlier. The game of picking up fragments can be amended to spotting the circles. Skimming the list of works for the survey exhibition (not interrogating the artist's entire oeuvre which, though she is young, is truly extensive) also reveals repeat roundnesses—the eclipse, point, hole, supernova, spotty, sphere, circumference, moon. Mythical, mystical and sometimes fashionable or fun: they're pervasive.

• • • • •
6 Dr. Seuss: *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*; Random House, 1958.

Circles belong to no one. However, it seems most likely that Chong is giving a nod to LA conceptual artist John Baldessari (whose strategies she appears to have learnt from) and and Japanese pop conceptual artist Yayoi Kusama (princess of polka dots). The history of commercial printing, with the half-tone screens used in newspapers, books and magazines, is also both reference and a rich source of material.

Fictions

Signposts of Cogniscience (2012)—elsewhere titled *Magical Drawings*—appear as objects and illustrations of untold stories. Their importance, thanks to their rendering in gold leaf and deep indigo, is incontrovertible. In the coffee table art books of my early childhood, illustrations were on loose leaves protected by spider-web-embossed glassine. And similarly, Chong's 'signposts' are like pages removed and assembled from volumes rather than a gathering of loose sketches. Following the theme of the "factless autobiography,"⁷ no single narrative emerges out of the collected works, however, some recurring threads can be pulled from them. A plane, a van, a boat, a globe, some arrows—all point to movement from one place to another. A spotty chair, a stripy glass, an unused coathanger—the scene is a domestic one. Each drawing is titled individually, each title conveying a weight of responsibility for signification to the marks on paper. For example, the van is not just a van. In fact, it is not even just a silver and gold van but a *Hiace Magic Pod*.

This is a tale of many small journeys and an over-arching quest. The questions that have motivated Chong to make objects and images, about who she is and what and how she is to be, are rephrased frequently in new materials and forms. She writes: "Each emergence has been an attempt to re-orient my practice within the cultural landscape I am slowly

• • • • •
7 See footnote 2.

discovering around me. It appears as though I am still trying to find a fixed reference point from which to operate. I don't know if I will find that fixed point, and even if I did, I sometimes wonder whether it could be the wrong quest. However, it would be interesting if I did 'find' what I was looking for and then realised it was all futile, would it not?"⁸

§

In the cycle, the circle, we come back to find end and beginning are connected and familiar. Pessoa, in writing with many different heteronyms (not just pen-names or styles, but complete characters with biographies, jobs and daily routines) escaped the risk of imitating himself. "Because he did not find his voice, but his voices, Pessoa never fell into the trap of knowing what he was doing."⁹ I do not believe that Chong is unknowing in any way—this artist demonstrates absolute control over whichever media she chooses to use. However, by considering her career as a quest, one that is looped with stories and overlapped with myths and histories, she has chosen a path through the forest that is as yet unmapped. It will be fascinating to see what fragments she has gathered together at the conclusion of another decade.

Dr. Cathy Tuato'o Ross

8 Liyen Chong: email correspondence; 26 April 2013.

9 Adam Phillips quoted by Nicholas Lezard: 2010. Accessed 1 May 2014.

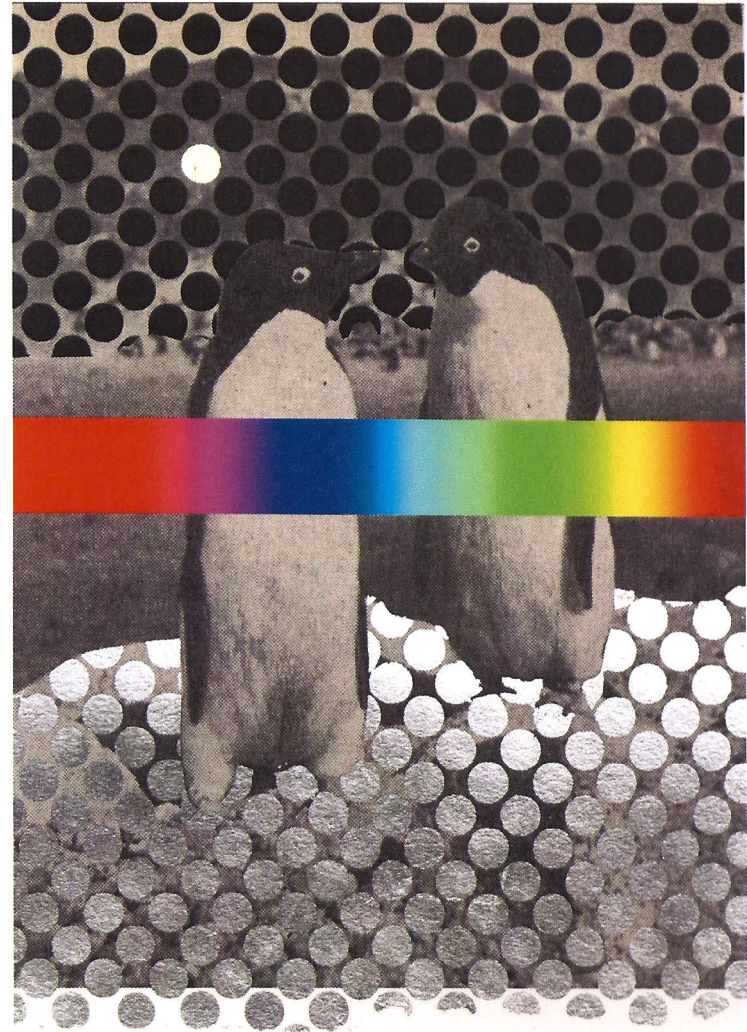


Fig. 1.4 Magazine Cover
2007

Physical printout and online PDF
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist



Following fumbling falling finding fantasticities
2013
Mixed media on archival inkjet print
335 × 460mm
Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery



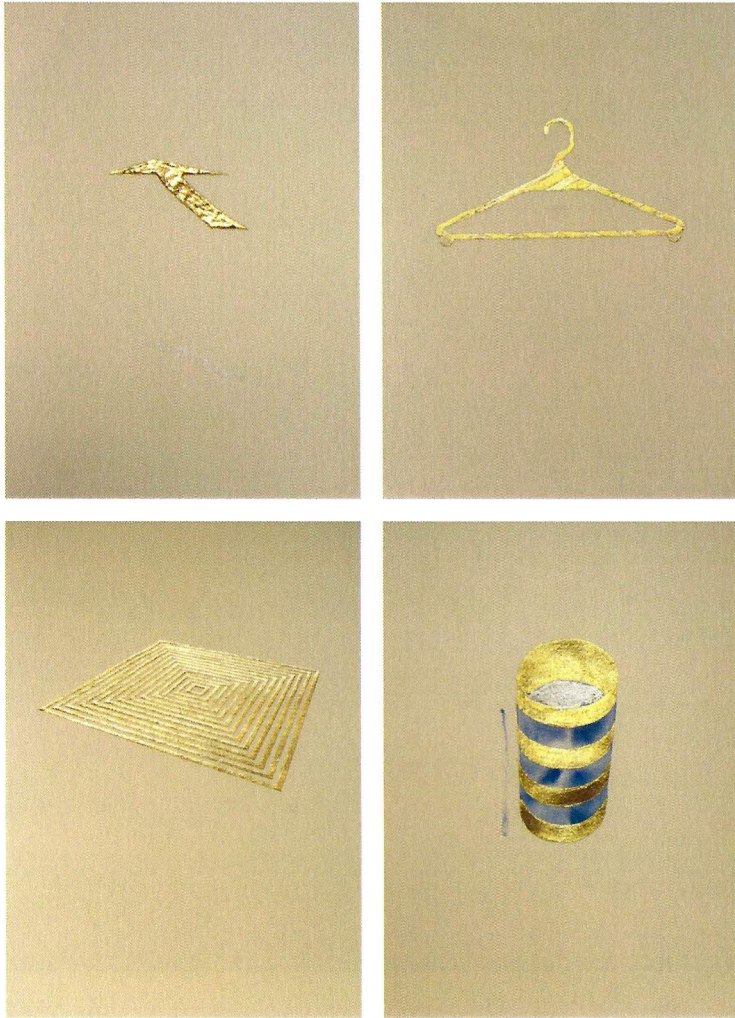
The economic interpretation of history for birds
2013
Mixed media on archival inkjet print
330 × 250mm
Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery



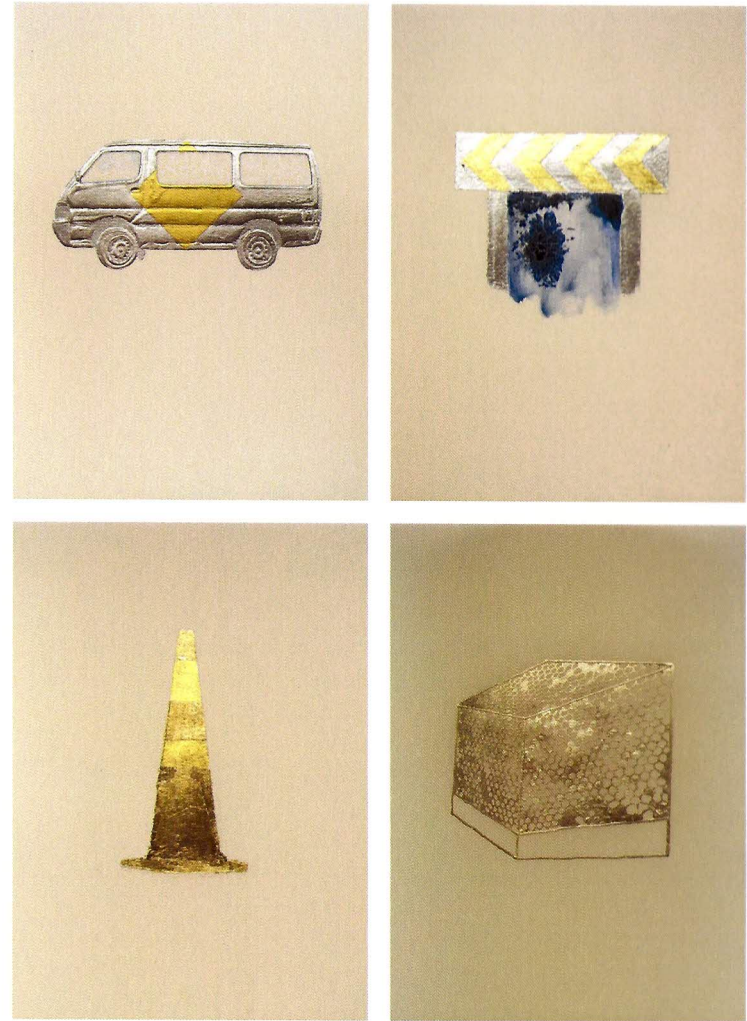
Moon Bowl II (unframed detail image)
2010
Human hair (personal sources) embroidered on cotton, framed
530 x 630mm
Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery



Disappearance scheduled for Friday Night
2011
Duratran on LED Lightbox
880 x 660 x 80mm
Courtesy of the artist

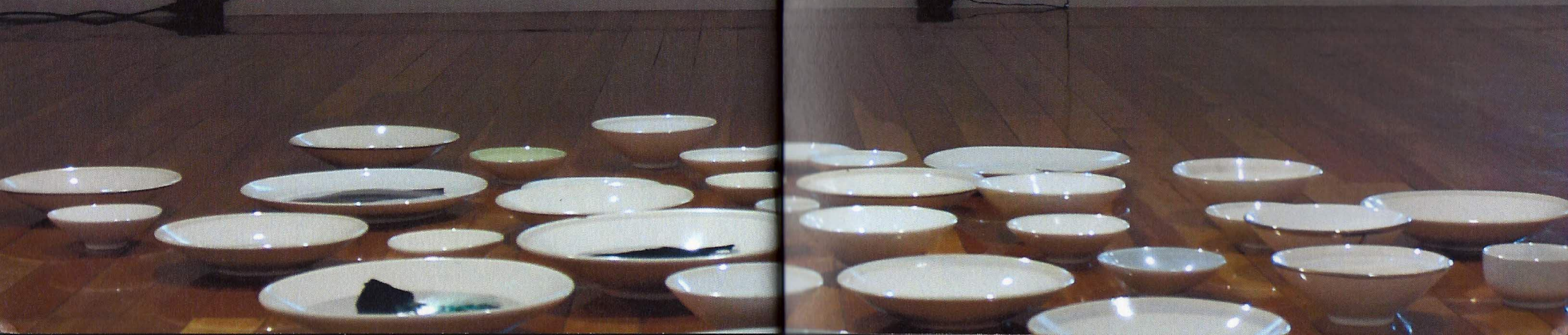


Clockwise from left:
 Heavenly signalling Straight Ahead; Variegated Raimenter, Optimimsical; Mindfield
 2012
 Mixed media on various substrates
 Variable dimensions
 Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery



Clockwise from left:
 Hiace Magic Pod; Heavenly signal veering Left; Hokusai's Cage ; Familiar spirit of Silence
 2012
 Mixed media on various substrates
 Variable dimensions
 Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery











Autonomous translocation of forms
2012

Acrylic paint and imitation gold and silver leaf on archival inkjet print
450 x 315mm

Courtesy of Melanie Roger Gallery

Published by Papakura Art Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition
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floor of disquietude)* by Liyen Chong held at Papakura Art Gallery
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Liyen Chong's work can be found in public and private collections in
New Zealand and Australia. She considers Auckland home.

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