



LAYERING THE FRAGMENT

A CRITIQUE OF MICKEY MOUSE PAINTING

WORKS BY JUNEO LEE
2003 - 2009

*"your works done in 2003 has visual impact because
it's monumental... and the works done in 2009 are
more insightful..."*

By Tang Dawu

"your Chinese calligraphy have improved"

By Cheo Chai Hiang

Layering the Fragment

**A Critique of Mickey Mouse
Brush Painting**

Works by Juneo Lee

2003 - 2009

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About the writers

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Preface

By Juneo Lee

It is my absolute pleasure to present to you this body of work. It is my hope that through this exhibition and the publication, concerns on the notion of Chinese-ness layered by contemporary issue on identity and the visual art are represented. It is also my desire to use visual form to draw viewers to think about the many interesting issues relating to 'art and life'.

Though it is known that art is the product of individual artist, to me, is also a construct of external forces. In this context; this body of work is a result of encouragement, inspiration and with much help that shapes its current incarnation. Firstly, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Associate Professor Chia Wei Khuan, Associate Professor Eugene, Dr Lycia Trouton, Dr Subhash Jaireth and Mr Yow Siew Kah who have gracefully offered to contribute their critical thoughts through their written paper for this catalogue. I must also apologise to all of them for the short time-frame that I have subjected them to complete their written text.

The artist-in-residence program (August-September 2009) hosted by University of Tasmania has provided me the scholarly environment to shape and experiment on my concept in both visual and intellectual term. I also want to express my sincere gratitude to my mentor, Professor Vincent McGrath for his precious advice on this body of work during my residency.

It is my great fortune to receive all the much-needed help for this exhibition from my current and former students. For all their valuable help, I would like to thank Mohd Fahmy, Candy Lee, Serene Wong, Janice Pek and Tay Kim Hong.

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Love Song for a Sheet with Chinese Calligraphy

By Dr. Subhash Jaireth

If my heart
were a white sheet
I asked you that morning
what words your brush
would want to paint?

'Don't miss me
when I am gone,' you wrote.
Was it a premonition
or just a harmless game:
easy to play and forget?

But I miss you;
How could it be otherwise:
the words like kites roam the skies
of my being with you and without:
a dream and its shadow walking side by side.

Paint for me
the word *water*, I said
you smiled and a fish appeared on the sheet;
fire, I dared you again,
and you painted a row of red lanterns.

That night
it rained in my dream
wetting me and the sheet
must be me, you said, and turned
and I noticed a snake tattooed on your back.

There is a script
called *Caoshu*, you said,
the brush is held firm
and the wrist turns like the neck of geese
swimming in the rice field.

The *Kaishu* is strict
but not harsh, austere but exact:
Like my grandfather
it rarely smiles but when it does
the lines float and the shapes fly.

Teach me *Caoshu*
I asked you then
and you took me out to dance;
The snow fell and melted
as we traced figures on the ground.

It's like a dance,
you explained, which like water
seeps through fingers:
to flow is its purpose
to vanish its glorious fate

I have to go;
Don't, I wanted to say,
but no, you went away,
leaving the day stained
like the sheet from the pomegranate seed.

As I slept that night
wrapped in the painted sheet
dreaming of blissful aubergines
a bomb went off on a distant continent
where you waited for a bus to stop.

Now, I call my house silence
and the silence my love is you,
But the brush has found new purpose:
the strokes are strong, the strings seamless
and the ink, dark as mulberry, glows.

Go-Between the Sheets: Painted Lullabies

By Dr Lycia Trouton

"That night
it rained in my dream
wetting me and the sheet...

a bomb went off on a distant continent
where you waited for a bus to stop."

An excerpt from Subash Jaireth's poem was specific response to Lee's artwork.

Through his provocative artwork, contemporary scholar and painter Juneo Lee re-constructs a new contemporary, post-colonial genre from the time-honoured art of East Asian narrative or landscape scroll painting. Thus Lee, the artist, takes an ironic pride in his role of Artist-as-Cultural-Critic for the Pan-Pacific Rim. With a professional career spanning two countries: Singapore and Australia, it is my hope that Lee will soon be adding the west coast of Canada¹, to his exhibition route.

Lee's paintings² are equally playful and disturbing. He utilises a clever strategy of both tempering and inflaming a mainstream viewer's anxieties for the times in which we all live. Our daily stressors include the following list of weighty worries:

¹ Vancouver, British Columbia, is where I grew up, from 1970 – 1984, and then worked as a site-specific sculptor and instructor from 1992 – 2001, after my BFA (Hons) and MFA (sculpture) training at university art schools in the U.S.A.

² See the practice of Washington D.C. U.S.A – based painter Sam Gilliam. He was one of the late 1960s pioneers of abstract expressionist "off-of-the-wall" painting-sculpture who experimented with the then-new acrylic paints and methods of 'staining' the large-scale canvases. (He was my teacher in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1986 – 88.)

- global pandemics (the most recent of which was Swine Flu),
- the inter-cultural impact of constantly-fluid emigration-immigration / or relocation and re-entry (in particular for Lee's audience: Asian-Australians and Asian-Canadians),
- a decade's worth of the impact of the World Wide Web digital imagery/information overload on 'real-time' art-making practices (including the normalisation of soft porn),
- the paucity of 'not-having-enough-time' and finally, also in our era,
- that terrorist acts can touch anyone, anywhere.

This is the 'endo-colonial'³ backdrop that informs Lee's 'art-of-textiles' and Pop-art informed (high-low) painting practice. Lee makes his calligraphic musings and mark-making in two languages. I can imagine that Lee's audience might be alternatively fearful, or temperamental: representative of the post-millennium Pan-Pacific hybrid persona.

Lee's paintings are also 'texts' which reference the material culture of contemporary and historic 'art of textiles'. His artwork also comments upon post-1960s western/eastern consumer culture and U.S.A inspired Pop art. Lee utilises a typical avant-garde 'bad boy' tactic when he knowingly and clumsily collages strips of rice paper onto cheap cotton calico prints.⁴ The mass-manufactured and printed textile, calico, is used by Lee as a typical *made-in-China-trade-good*. Lee purchased the lengths of fabric at the Launceston branch of an Australian chain-store, called *Spotlight*. This is a well-known 'haberdashery' shop frequented by the suburban

³ A term by theorist, Paul Virilio.

⁴ For more information please reference the global and British colonial cotton trade from 1200 to 1820s. See also author Huw V. Bowen, University of Leicester: presentation at The GHEN conference on 'A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200 – 1850' at the University of Padova, Italy, 17 – 19 November, 2005. The title of Bowen's paper was, "British exports of raw cotton and piece goods from India to China in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."

middle class hobby-ist with much purchasing power and leisure time. Juneo Lee is a very quick-witted artist who uses a broad lens to collage and comment upon:

- the 'bastardisation' and hybridisation of the ancient 'High' art of painting by competing and differing cultural traditions (China, Japan),
- low forms of mass-media entertainment, such as comic strips (which lampoon and 'conflate' everything and everyone, including aspects of Aboriginal sacred art forms) and
- ordinary vehicular street signs or road markings which use a universal language of symbols and codes (see 'the yellow line' which Lee uses as a double entendre metaphor).

The ambiguous white paper strips and 'cut-outs' on Lee's panels could be the 'bubble speech cartoons'⁵ in comic strips. Lee's paintings spare neither academic, nor formal art training 'reverence' for either his Australian-ness or his Chinese-ness in his choice and handling of materials! For example, Lee expressively bleaches out vast sections of his cotton calico surfaces, doing away with the sentimental (low, popular art) printed-art background. In this way, Lee 'constructs' his East Asian storytelling scrolls with irreverent behaviour atypical of what a Westerner might superficially judge as stereotypically 'Asian' cultural mores (e.g. 'constructing' Lee as a 1) well-mannered person, who honours his elders and 2) pursues traditional paths following his 'ancestors' art practice).

One of Lee's 'scrolls' references the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century 'Mille Fleur' medieval tapestry tradition⁶ because the background pattern is a reprint of "1000 flowers" and 'garden beasts', in this instance: lambs. Such tapestries were used as allegories to teach a moral lesson, sometimes about chivalry. Some of Lee's

⁵ See Dr. Chin Ming Lee, (Assistant Professor, Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan) and his 2002 unpublished thesis at the University of Wollongong, NSW entitled 'Comic Images in Taiwanese Art: An Exploration of Abject Culture.'

⁶ See the infamous European *The Lady and The Unicorn* woven tapestry held at the National Museum of the Middle Ages, Paris, France. It is an allegory about love and understanding and references the five senses.

hanging panels use reprinted 'popular tourist culture' Australian Aboriginal art as background decorative design. Lee may be commenting upon the contemporary 'denigration' of two ancient High Art traditions, neither of which are held 'sacred', any longer, by contemporary youth culture (those under 35 years of age). Another scroll-background is full of the criss-cross pattern of silly cartoon cars and roads. This is the painting in which Lee uses the double yellow line as symbolic of his dual identity.

With a neo-avant gardist⁷ approach, Lee has a contemporary artist's contempt for 'the beautiful' and 'the decorative' in the serious Academic art of his forefathers, such as the ancient Chinese and Japanese arts of landscape or narrative hand-scroll painting. Lee's painted re-interpretations and re-constituted collage with text, "make polite" conversation of his possibly subversive political-satire comments upon the ambiguities of being a well-travelled, bi-lingual 'soul' who no longer feels a shared sense of community belonging whether in The East or The West, at the North Pole or South Pole, and neither 'at home' in a suburban shopping mall of 'conspicuous consumption' nor at a Buddhist retreat centre.

CONCLUSION

The resulting "*go-between-ness*" is the title of this essay about Lee's messy Pan Pacific Rim-based art practice. Each of Lee's 'wallpaper'-scroll paintings create 1) a *lullaby*⁸ and/or 2) a *structured map*⁹ to get us from 'here

⁷ Lee's artwork fits in with a global movement in painting and installation sculpture since the mid-1990s which utilises the 'art of textiles' to aim criticism at post-colonial and intercultural migrant relations. This was most well-known are: Young British Artist (YBA) Tracey Emin (her bed /tent series) and Yinka Shonibari (British-Nigerian). Shonibari uses colourful, wax-printed cotton to design outfits and wallpaper for playful colonial-era, Victorian middle-class scenes with mannequins.

⁸ The lullaby is a wonderful cross-cultural 'sing-song'; it is repetitive and soothing for children and, as such, is related to the folk art tradition in many ancient cultures. A lullaby is meant to "speed up" and "sweeten" the sleeping process. Lee's paintings invite us to have a warm, wet and good, sound, slow sleep. It is my fantasy that, perhaps, in this surreal dreaming – that one is invited into a boyhood bedroom; when one wakes up – on the brink of adulthood – one finds oneself in a more mature...perhaps, a kinder and gentler Australia... So,

to there' in time and space, as well as in terms of new global practices of inter-culturalism and citizenship. In order to enjoy himself and conceptually 'play' with his bi-cultural, bi-lingual readers / viewers, Juneo Lee's paintings 'make cute' and more 'palatable' his concerns. These include the "mention" of The Yellow Line as a reminder of disturbing fault-lines of colonial race-relations and immigration policies of colonial Australia's nation-building project. Lee's paintings alert us, his viewers, to further scholarly research, such as that of Professor Ien Ang, the internationally leading cultural critic on citizenship and globalisation¹⁰. Ang's book '*On Not Speaking Chinese*', 2001, offers background theory on just the kind of '*in-between-ness*' about *Chinese-ness* that artist Juneo Lee hints at in his long-term 'scroll' portfolio. Indeed, Lee has been exposed to this area of cultural studies during his Masters at the University of Western Sydney and I, for one, am eager to read and view the outcomes of his doctorate practice.

While artist Juneo Lee Eng Keong constructs his new genre of equally fine art / lowly, mundane Painted Scroll, he also develops wonderful new cultural awareness avenues on the long continuum of how we might imagine and get along with one another. His artwork is situated within a broad socio-political landscape and he dodges, but also bravely scrutinizes and reworks the topics of historic and contemporary fabric(ation)s of ethnicity, sexuality and migration. Lee's painting practice can feature in the fine art arena and the popular commercial context: his creations (which one can wander in and around, back and front) are inviting for children, the mainstream consumer public and the serious, art educated gallery-goer.

perhaps, the mark-making memory of that visceral experience of 'the pubescent wet dream' has occurred on some of these paintings – and that, a viewer can imagine that inadvertently and, perhaps subconsciously, that painter Juneo Lee's sloppy bleaching and staining processes reference the abject bodily functions and processes of a maturing young adult. Such a young adult might have certain hopes and dreams. Lee's staining process reminds us of both life's 1) base instincts and 2) lofty objectives.

⁹ See Australian painter, Sydney-based Charles Cooper (Annandale Gallery), whose visual imagery and conceptual 'landscape' content also references the vehicular and pedestrian 'landscape' and the semiotics of maps, road signs and cross-roads.

¹⁰ recent Australian Centenary Medal holder.