

Choy Chun Wei is an artist whose predilections and ideals of art are based predominantly on design language. His immersion in Graphic Design studies at the tertiary level has provided design oriented conceptual reading and contextual imagination into his chosen practice in the fine arts. This confluence of design and fine art is germane to an exciting development of his art, clearly distinguishing Chun Wei from his contemporaries. An articulate and demanding artist, Chun Wei is never one to rest on his laurels constantly seeking to develop and improve himself as an artist. Already an established artist in the Malaysian art scene, Choy Chun Wei is much sought after by Malaysian public collections, as well as, international collectors.

Choy Chun Wei in Conversation with Kelvin Chuah

Could you describe your art practice and how you have evolved over the past 10 years as an art practitioner?

My early works consisted of vertical cut up photos of urban homes. The small works focused on selected living spaces that were interspersed with hand drawn grey graphite strips. These were very much worked upon and lacked tactility as compared to the feel of actual materials incorporated in later works. I am happy to note that I have since evolved from aesthetically driven works and have shifted my energies to transcribing the process of design as my intent. It has become more of a reflection of my thoughts and my approaches to mapping my own design language. Instead of being interpretation reliant on a particular subject matter, I am now reevaluating interpretations I have done by conducting an art as research practice. My art pieces have occasionally been misconstrued as being located within the premise of abstraction. It was not my intent to produce abstract images but to invite the viewer(s) to partake in my pictorial dialogues. Plausibly, the resultant compactness and tensions created from the placement of different mediums on a canvas generated non-focal images that emit abstract suppositions from the audience.

You are also an art educator, delving into youthful and developing minds.

I was lecturing at a private college for a period of time when I came back to Malaysia before I became a full time artist. I am still an art educator today as teaching allows me to reinvigorate myself and to instruct local students with design principles that I was formally taught. I vividly remember my own artistic training relevant to my practice until today, gaining stimulation from Jean Dubuffet's Styrofoam works. His deviation from common aesthetics, handling of materials, processes, attitude towards art and daringness to deviate from art practices from his contemporaries in France served as inspiration to me. So instead of working with conventional art mediums and materials, which have a place in art training, I advocate for more experimentation and development. A more 'hands-on' approach to understanding the values of natural and fabricated products we have around us. In other words, it is my attempt to cultivate an attitude and aptitude towards organic and elastic forms and to draw influence from such sources. Ideas are not from text alone, but are gained from thinking, doing, making and connecting. I always believe that we teach to educate but we learn more as educators.

How has your work in fine art been integrated with your training in design from Central St. Martins?

The training I received from Central St. Martins was essentially to prepare oneself to conduct investigations on their own. They trained us to be critically inclined, to express our opinions with a comprehensive understanding of facts and historical developments in relation to art and design. It goes beyond the surface of advertising and editorials, as we are inoculated with the importance for deeper inquiry through reading and discourse with others. In Central St. Martins they imbibed in us a mentality of not being overwhelmed by industries but to become units that make the industries. Units function as an important component of my work today.

I still observe principles of design from my undergraduate training, which is very much reflected in the outcomes of my work today. Design language is deeply ingrained within my work process and I have sought to push the limits of my understanding of design and exert to

integrate it with the fine arts. In my opinion, graphic language is essentially a composite appropriately applied for industrial and commercial functions. Yet, its application may yield artistic elements that may be worked and refined from mundane to more complex forms.

You are working on your Master's program. Can you elaborate on it?

I embarked on a postgraduate program to open myself to art studies with foci on subjects and thematic distinctive from my undergraduate training in design studies. I am exposed to different approaches and engagement with art, delving into fine art, theoretical discourses and a general understanding of Southeast Asian Art. I felt that it is essential to have an understanding of regional art developments as I am practicing within the region itself.

As I learnt more about art methodology and history of art, questions arose from within myself, triangulating enquiries towards my own art practice. I developed an innate interest to conduct personal research relevant to my own practice. You can say that it's my attempt to reassess and reevaluate my own art productions and practice for the past decade in order to move forward. The reconsiderations are proving insightful in this attempt to displace and position myself on a critical platform to revisit artistic choices that have determined my direction for ten years. It is invigorating to appraise artistic choices made and to cogitate on subject and matter with current perspectives. This is a dislocating exercise and an entirely new experience in my growth as an artist. I searched for models of reference in Malaysian art practice but was unable to locate documented evidence invested within practice-based research. Perhaps it is not unexpected, as visual artists tend to focus on the making and of contextual readings of their pictorial imageries.

What is the research topic of your postgraduate thesis?

I am working on Art Practice as Research, reading and researching into my practice with equal weightage between contextual analysis and material transformation. I believe this is somewhat new for contemporary artists in Malaysia to be more reflective and less reflexive of one's practice. As you know, my art making involves meticulous and patient execution, drawing inspiration from the natural environment. Working with mixed media necessitates an innate sensitivity to the materials being selected, as well as, apposite handling. In the process of my investigations, I am continuously catechized on every facet; from choice of materials, composition, art influences, materiality to my objectives in art making. These are some of the issues raised in confabulation. The consistent probing and 'un-layering' years of self-constructed notions provided clarity in the search for fundamental interests and wellspring of my intentions.

For your art making, what are the types of objects that draw your attention?

I deal and have dealt with various materials ranging from what others may consider as garbage, newspaper cutouts to recycled objects. I look at the environment, searching for existing materials that is part of our proximity. I believe this leads to criticality of our surrounding. From selected objects, I construct my own forms. All of these are derivative from design principles and elements. It is a formulation of my own open-ended design language. In my work, there are no ready-made objects ala Duchamp. I am determined to formulate my own direction and signature by drawing upon my background, training and philosophy of life.

Can you articulate on your working process and development?

My previous works were very much based on developing found objects, constructed compositions, which are melded to form my own dialogue with the natural surrounding. Indeed, the natural environment and space are imperative elements in my dialogue with art. It is only recently, when I revisited my working processes and methodology that I reconfigured my thinking process and determined my intentions relevant to the making.

What are your current thoughts? Are you working with any particular paradigm at the moment?

A recent dialogue revolved around my handling of found objects and my connection to those articles. It is perhaps a less examined trajectory of my work dealing with the materiality of objects; altering and molding, exploring its malleable and organic properties to create possibilities for my designs. Material and material culture are still important considerations in my works. Instead of focusing merely on how I have manipulated existing objects in the past, I would like to highlight the influence of 'seeing' as the crucial element in the aforementioned exercises. No doubt I have been influenced by John Berger's "Ways of Seeing", but my views (of seeing) and resultant selection of items were very much determined by observations of my immediate surroundings. The significance of objects is thus related to a Malaysian material culture as I am based in Kuala Lumpur. I would say that I am interested to explore the process of seeing and to a further extent how seeing leads to the selection and handling of materials.

Also, I would like to invite the audience to explore my works by observing different angles for enhanced viewership. Due to the different properties of layered objects and its transformations, most people tend to view only the frontal surface. The dialogue runs around the entire canvas generating visual stimulations at different trajectories. Each piece is carefully formulated to reflect much-layered surfaces mapped in an intricate manner. Hence the textures, correlation and intertwined composition provide fresh openings to discuss about the mediums and their interlocked connotations. Though visually similar in some ways every piece displays its own characteristic.

Can you elaborate on the correlation between text and words in your more recent endeavors? How did this start and which direction is this leading?

Fonts, texts and its inherent meanings have always captivated me. Simple words like 'go' and 'new' are indications or markers if you will, for me to create narrative(s) within a painting. There are also other words that are very important to my construction of a dialogue within a work of art. I do not simply take a word and work with it. Rather, the text/word is significant for me to conceptualize and develop it as an entry point to fashion a dialogue as a manner of conveying my message. There have been misconceptions that I take random words and develop incorrigible messages in the works. In actuality, the words and texts form a personal dialogue of my concerns interrelated with my life and work. The textual entries avow conceptual ideas, meanings and concerns shaped by the words. From the words, the tactile assertions are stretched, contested and negated. While the formation of visual imagery and aesthetic considerations derived from textual organization have deconstructed initial meanings and intentions, the process also created new meanings and intentions. Even the spaces divided by spatial considerations provides an interlude for more intimate reflections, which have led to other developments on the surface of the art works. The medium is now the message.

The strategies initiated from textual concerns have transgressed to the linear structures of grid. I was deliberating on the purpose of text and its functions as a tool. Constant observation and contemplation on the words have thawed the line works (that formed the text), bending the lines to striation, grid like lines that define spaces and boundaries. The grid lines are becoming carousels, organic and malleable space I can arrange and control within the canvas.

What is grid to you? Why is it important for you to map space within grids?

I grew up in Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia. My parents relocated to Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia during my schooling years. I was used to tranquil, open spaces. The shift to the urban city life created a major shift that affected my perception of living in a tranquil, nourishing and natural setting. I began to see space, little pockets of green becoming big structures with artificial lights. I witnessed an intrusion of space publicly and privately. This 'intrusion' meant other sources have control over space that affects us due to reasons of profiteering. We are inevitably encroached, controlled and encapsulated by the lessening of

space in our surroundings. It is in a way acts of power and control by certain quarters that demand for our compliance. I refer to these as 'logos' and they are everywhere.

Sorry to interrupt but what is your definition of logos?

Logos are my way of signifying innumerable influences ranging from corporate bodies and billboards to screen advertising. The aforementioned are inoculated into my perceived ecosystem of space and environment for future developments. I have always mind-mapped subject and matter as logos since my undergraduate days.

In my art, I now have a chance to draw upon logos as a reservoir of inspiration. These thoughts are reflected in my layering and mapping of grid spaces in a metaphorical manner over actual spaces and boundaries. Grid is part of our lives and grid from Marshall McLuhan's 'Medium is the Message' is a manifestation of the medium, how we extend ourselves. Art is an extension of us (physically) and on the physical. What is the medium in my work? The words, the found materials and my natural surrounding - the environment. Grids controls and compartmentalize different areas, demarcating how and what I perceive them to be. Therefore, I see the entire mapping and its contents in units, which are more defined in segregation. I find this schema more distinctive as compared to the classical way of looking at shapes. Also, grids coated with images and wording creates more complex readings of the imagined over the real.

Within grids I would like to emphasize again what I would categorize as 'units' that formed the basis of my compositions. By working from within this singular element, units developed a chained progress that formed the story in its entirety. The units and all the other elements hence elicit triggers evoking imaginings and coalescing all the elements together.

Allow me to add that looking at elements in compartments and relating to them made the images more wholesome. The relation of the parts made better sense. Dismantling things allowed for insertion of newer articles. I now have better control as personalization of space within grids and units takes place. The grids in its currency created and refracted tensions, relations and dialogues of imagined space derived from words, treated objects and logos founded on my storyboard (the canvas). It is a process at this point of time. Again, the grids are not constructed borders but a composition of space utilizing design knowledge and language.

Is this development your conception of pictorial imagery and integration of how art imitates life?

Yes, very much so. Perchance it may be seen as my manipulation of pictorial images through subtle transformations. Much of my work for the past decade has revolved around the handling and hybridization of materials, space and text. I was attempting to expand the possibilities in my image making. Having invested a significant amount of time to study, interact and to integrate the individual units together, it came to a stage where I felt really comfortable with the singular units as mediums channeling my messages. I have deliberately disengaged from this comfort zone, shifting my focus to highlight contextual concerns instead of fitting logos to attractive aesthetics. As you can see, my current efforts seek to accentuate the artistic process. I am using grids as my design language to formulate a new visualization. Hence you see a lot of 'bleeding' beyond the borders of the frame. There seems to be more fluidity as subject matter mesh together in a more intricate manner. Basically, I do not wish to initiate quick pictorial changes but to induce subtle progressions via manipulation of imagery. I am interested in investigating the attitude of making and to cogitate on the mark(s) I make to be more self critical towards the ideas of existence and humanity. The completed work you see is not accurately viewed as complete but it is sufficient for the time being.

Kelvin Chuah is an artist and art writer. He is currently pursuing his doctorate at Universiti Sains Malaysia, focusing on the modern condition in Malaya and Singapore.