

[F]ortune of Lives

What is 'fortune'? The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as an "arbitrary force affecting human affairs". It's natural that people especially seek good luck for their lives, but what does it consist of – wealth, prosperity, longevity, happiness, health? Obviously the term 'fortune' itself can be understood arbitrarily and is therefore highly subjective.

In his second solo exhibition with the Wei-Ling Gallery, Wong Chee Meng goes on an investigative journey through Chinese culture and traditions focusing on the content and message of his works. Chee Meng has once again, employed the techniques of woodcut and stencil art, where each layer has a meaning and the complexity of the message intensifies with each added layer.

The Chinese civilization is one of the oldest known cultures in the world. The three most common religions in China are Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. An important trait of these is, in comparison to others, the strong orientation to their worldly existence. Therefore longevity (寿 shòu) is one of the best blessings you can wish somebody and hardly any other term has such an abundance of representing symbols (crane, deer, pine, peach, etc.).

Symbols are another way of communicating their thoughts, meanings, and hopes and many Chinese believe that through surrounding themselves with auspicious items it could lead to a more harmonious existence.

The nature of their written and spoken language influenced the development of symbolism, because as a tonal language it is very conducive for homonyms, puns and rebuses. Thus depending on how a word is pronounced it could mean several different things (homonyms). For example, the words for 'deer' (鹿 lù) and 'high rank' or 'wealth' (禄 lù) are pronounced very similar although they are written with different characters. As a result, a deer can symbolise besides longevity, also a high rank.

(Auspicious) Objects

The original question, the artist dealt with was: What is an object and what can people make out of it? A thing is just a thing, but if there's perception, its original purpose changes and it becomes loaded with meaning. A statue is an object to most, but for some it can be seen as an icon, a talisman or even a representation of a God.

In comparison to the previous series 'Urban Abyss', where he responded to specific current events in Malaysia, this body of work reflects upon his own identity, background and practice. It has to be noted that although the artist is not a practitioner nor a believer in Chinese superstitions and beliefs, it has always piqued his curiosity.

Many parts make up a whole

Why the square? The square is a very firm format. For the artist, the round shape is too limited for composition. But nevertheless he's trying to reach in every painting a harmonious balance between a square and a circle, and the 'geometrical vs organic'. For even shapes are of vital importance in Chinese belief: the square represents earth and the circle heaven.

"Hundred Subgraph" refers to an old Chinese painting that displays many children playing in a traditional garden. Each child is painted vividly and none resembles another. The belief is: that the more children one has, the more longevity and wealth one will acquire. These days, it seems a rather paradoxical idea in relation to China's one-child policy. But above all to get a son is the best luck you can have. In consequence, Chee Meng has depicted two little girls with five boys surrounding them. His method of reinterpreting this subject matter in a contemporaneous way is through a playground (climbing frame) as a setting, so a traditional motif gets rearranged in a modern environment. The simultaneity of antipodes has always a great power to surprise and enthrall. The Belgian artist René Magritte called this phenomenon "poetry".

'Kitsch'?

This series could be labelled 'Kitsch' because of the artist's use of neon or pop colour layers and somewhat kitsch subject matter. Chee Meng explains that his works mirror the characteristics of the contemporary world. For him his environment seems to be full of artificial and shiny plastic-like objects. 'Maitreya' or the laughing Buddha has taken his place in this world by being copied and reproduced multitudinous times. Starting as a religious statue, 'Maitreya' has gradually evolved into a real modern icon. Formerly the rubbing of his belly was a form of blessing, but these days, he is placed as a window display item losing its original meaning. With adapting 'Maitreya' in his artworks Chee Meng aims to elevate him once again to high art. If he had placed a realistic Buddha statue on a table, instantly it would have been associated with a more serious meaning and would be perceived only as a religious object. Having a closer look reveals that the golden butterfly on 'Maitreya's' right hand is a symbol for

the arrival of good fortune and satisfaction in life. The peonies in an underlying layer, also known as the 'king of flowers', symbolise lasting wealth and honour. The warm colours emphasise the elegance of this flower species and remind us of its fragrance. Again, besides all these auspicious elements, somehow it also contains a hidden message. The resting positions of the butterfly's wings can symbolize both, arrival and departure. In consequence it means: as randomly good fortune arrives, in the other second it can fly away. Neither a butterfly nor good fortune you can force to come to you. If you try to hold it, the butterfly will die and you would destroy everything of what you had. As a highly filigree insect it symbolises the fragility and fugaciousness of good fortune and luck.

"Learn to enjoy the way as much as you would enjoy when you reach the destination."

-Sakshi Chetana, Laughing Buddha: The Alchemy of Euphoric Living

This quotation means the journey should be the reward. Besides everything we are doing to reach the destination (should it be prosperity, wealth or success in life), we should not forget to enjoy life, with all its ups and downs. In 'Fortune Voyage' Chee Meng has used a title which is an allusion to the second English ship (1621) which was destined for Plymouth Colony in the New World (Cape Cod). Because of a navigation error, the ship sailed to the coast of France, where it was overtaken and seized by a French warship. At last it safely arrived back in London in 1622.

Chee Meng relates this story to the obstacles in life. The trolley symbolises our life and the goods we are putting in are our values. So at the end of the voyage we want to have a full trolley as a reward. This is what the sign on the trolley says: full. But full of what? How do we decide what we want to put in the trolley, what we want for our lives, and what not? It's a very subjective issue.

The different shapes of houses in the trolley could mean on the one hand a full trolley of material things but on the other hand they can be a metaphor for living, new homes for the families. The viewer's mind and background forms the message. Actually none of the symbols' meanings is translated with 'money' or 'gold'. Wealth can also mean being healthy and prosperity being happy. Many Chinese people interpret these terms as having money and being rich.

In parallel Chee Meng watched 'South of the Ocean: A New World', a documentary about the Chinese who migrated to South East Asia. This film well underlined the idea of an image that deals with the struggles in our lives. In the end "Fortune Voyage" became a commemoration to the Chinese ascendants, who travelled far away from home, worked hard, just to offer their children and descendants a better life than they had.

The deepest layer is in your mind

The painting “Well Wealth” is indicative of the viewer’s importance for the message of an artwork. Chee Meng depicted a toad with a crown sitting on a pile of coins. There are many different ways of interpreting this motif. 1. Some could see a hidden criticism in this work. The toad is well-known from early medieval woodcuts as an animal of one of the Seven Deadly Sins, avarice (lat. avaritia). Avarice or greed is a sin of excess and is applied to a very rapacious desire and pursuit of material possessions. Hence this painting could be understood as a warning for Chinese people to not be too greedy in life. 2. To the Chinese, the toad is a lucky animal, because it’s a three-legged toad, based on the Chinese legend of Jin Chan (or Chan Chu). Jin Chan was the greedy wife of one of the Eight Immortals who was transformed into a toad for stealing the Peaches of Immortality. Since then she attracts and protects wealth and guards against bad luck. 3. For Chee Meng in turn, it’s a humorous way to display this subject matter. It is not a critical view of Chinese society, and is more about making people smile and laugh. Humour is a gentle way to let people rethink what they see. Why is it so funny, why does it make me smile? The toad is thus a metaphor for the question: in what do I believe and why? This single example shows that an object can be simultaneously simple (a toad with a crown) and complex (avarice, auspicious motif, etc.), and that’s what art in general is about. Art means not only one way but can be many different ones at the same time. If his art evokes nothing in the viewer, then Chee Meng states “I have failed as an artist”. His mission is to move people and let them (re)think.

Being a landscape architect

Last year Chee Meng travelled to China and spent a lot of time exploring Chinese Gardens. There he began to study their characteristics and realized that he could adapt these techniques into his work. Chinese Gardens are like ideal self-contained worlds, where people can take refuge from everyday life. Their design is artistic, concise, harmonic, and filled up with many spatial contrasts like ‘visible vs invisible’, ‘twists and turns’, ‘hints and metaphors’. A classical Chinese Garden is not meant to be seen all at once, it was laid out to present a series of perfectly composed sceneries. Therefore usually a little lake or pond is placed in the center. On a winding path the visitor had to go from scenery to scenery. The classical garden is surrounded by a white wall which served as a pure backdrop for the flowers and trees.

The artist is synonymous with a gardener (creator), it’s an old analogy in the history of art. Also Chee Meng compares himself with a landscape architect who tries to imitate nature. Imagine the exhibition space as an empty and plane landscape surrounded by white walls. The visitor will enter a new world through a narrow door and step on a path through the exhibition. By starting at “Maitreya’s Smile” the journey will take him from one painting to the other. The series shouldn’t be seen all at once. The viewer should dwell on every artwork and try to reach its depths before going on. The gallery and the

artist are pleased to offer visitors an opportunity to take refuge from the dullness of everyday life in a new, vivid and colourful world. Engage with this wonderful opportunity!

But at last there is still one question left. If 'fortune' is an arbitrary force, why do some Chinese believe they could influence their 'fortune of life' with all these auspicious objects?

"If you think you can win, you can win. Faith is necessary to victory."

-William Hazlitt

FAITH is the keyword. You need faith to succeed (in anything). Faith can be very powerful. It purportedly can move mountains. Why? Because it gives you hope. This is what we are actually seeking for. HOPE. 'Fortune' is nothing you can have but hope (for anything). Hope makes people feel more comfortable and gives their lives more emotional stability facing the unpredictable future. For Chee Meng every painting is a beacon of hope.

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May 2015

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.