

Cheng Yen Pheng | Blowing up gender, self, and sexual identity

essay by Rachel Jenagaratnam

We have to look in retrospect to find the source of Cheng Yen Pheng's latest body of work, as the artist states that the seeds for this series were sown in one of her earlier paintings for a Wei-Ling Contemporary exhibition titled *The Garden of Hidden Desires*. The exhibition saw local fashion designers and visual artists collaborating on a single theme, and Cheng was paired with designer Alexandra Yeo, who created a dress from tumbling lengths of dusty rose chiffon with punctuations of black detailing. Cheng's complementary painting utilised a brighter, almost neon pink palette, and her canvas was flooded with phallic balloons – some featuring lace detailing on their taut surfaces, and one at the very top, an unidentified but suggestive glob of liquid.

The notion of fetishism was what bound these two works together. And it's precisely this subject that has given life to Cheng's latest works, although on a whole, Cheng's works look at gender, sexual identity, and the artist's own personal self. Once again, balloons have been adopted as arsenal for commentary, but this time, they have been presented in a myriad ways and with a stronger, more palpable hint of sex in the air. In *Air Balls No.1* "Too much love will kill you, too much air will break you", for example, there are balloons that stand fully erect and stiff, and in *Air Balls No.8*, the taut balloons seem to be copulating and entangled. And with a thick yellowish liquid dripping over half of the balloons in the work, there's also the suggestion that some have already burst or ejaculated.

With this, it's clear to see how intelligible balloons are as symbols to channel the artist's thoughts on gender and sex. Deflated, they are innocuous objects, but fully blown and presented in the way that Cheng has done, they can exude strong sexual connotations; latex, condoms, sexual acts, desire, and fetishism all spring to mind when considering Cheng's imagery, and by positioning the balloons upright in most of her paintings, there's a strong suggestion of masculinity and virility.

Cheng's body of work also includes balloons that are tightly contained in circular shapes, all of them forced together in an instance that the artist dubs "many lingas screaming together". Linga is the Tamil word for penis, and Cheng's choice of using this word instead of the English word is deliberate; there is one manifestation of the linga that has been a particular influence on this series – a small linga-yoni stone sculpture that Cheng acquired from Cambodia. Linga represents Shiva and male identity, whilst yoni is a symbol for Shakti or female creative energy. The linga-yoni sculpture thus represents the union of man and woman, and as one expert in the subject of Hindu iconography states, "the indivisible two-in-oneness of male and female, the passive space and active time from which all life originates".^[1]

However, with phallic shapes dominating Cheng's paintings, isn't the artist referring to just male identity? Like how the artist demystifies the potency of male power through balloons in the work *Full of Hot Air*, where a towering 11-foot balloon phallus is mocked by the presence of a teddy bear, proboscis monkeys, and two copulating deer. (And what exactly is the stag mating with? The doe or the balloon?). Cheng's works appear to be a poke at masculinity and manhood, using balloons to represent how their power is just empty rhetoric or a hollow body that can be reduced to a powerless pile of rubber with a mere poke by a sharp object, but the artist's works are also about much more. Cheng comments that women today have developed a tendency to behave like men in order to advance in their careers, life, and relationships. So, even though Cheng's balloons are emblematic of manhood, they also refer to women – just take the feminine lace on the balloons in *Air Balls No.8* as a rough indication of this.

The lace detailing signifies the artist's love of textures. She speaks fondly of the intricacy of lace and the shiny, smooth surface of balloons, and you'll see the former dominating a painting from 2008 that the artist has included in this solo exhibition. The only figurative work in this showing, it does seem like an odd inclusion in the sea of balloons and colour. White lace patterns surround the central figure who poses against a light blue background, and you can only see the individual's shirtless back. At first glance, it appears to be a slender, young man, but the painting's title gives the subject's identity away – it is actually Cheng herself.

This indeterminacy refers to the subject of androgyny, and the work sheds light on Cheng's more recent paintings that ultimately contemplate both genders at once – that notion of oneness, as seen in the *linga-yoni* sculpture. Gender, to Cheng, is a blurry subject and all our definitions on masculinity and femininity are shaped by social conventions. What makes someone a man? What constitutes femininity? And what if a man or woman is in love with someone of the same sex? One of Cheng's painting seems to draw a conclusion to all of this – a painting of maggots instead of balloons that signifies decay and death. Does our gender or sexual identity matter at all, as we all eventually return to the ground?

Cheng notes that her thoughts on sexual identity stemmed from being surrounded by individuals who spoke openly about their homosexuality, and she also argues that her penchant for exploring the subject of gender and sexual identity is only natural considering her artistic and conceptual lineage.^[2] But though her works look at these sometimes prickly subjects, Cheng's works aren't meant to shock. There's a strong likelihood of this happening though. How many viewers sit comfortably with these subjects, let alone brought to light by a young female painter? There's definitely a sense of brazenness in drawing so much attention to sex, gender, and sexual identity in what is essentially a patriarchal context (both Malaysia itself and still much of its art scene). And whilst there are certainly exceptions, the norm has been for female artists in Malaysia to veer towards 'safer' themes related to female identity, such as motherhood or procreation, domestic interiors, and faith or piety. But why should we even read Cheng's works as provocative? Like death, which the artist touched on in her previous paintings of skulls, sex is an inherent human act.

We would fare better if we read Cheng's paintings as a remark on women's shifting role in society. Cheng is the quintessential twenty-first century woman – career-driven, single, and independent – and a stark contrast to even her own mother, who Cheng notes had already had four children by her age. Indeed, there's an interesting slice of personal history that subliminally informs this body of work – Cheng's own identity in her own family. The second daughter in a family of three girls and a boy, an uncle of the artist once joked that she had rushed out too quickly at birth, leaving behind 300grams of flesh – an unabashed comment that Cheng was meant to be a boy.

In even modern Chinese families, the importance of male heirs cannot be underestimated, so speaking about gender and sexual identity, as well as sex so blatantly relates directly to the artist's own identity. These subjects have affected her on a deeply personal level, and in a performance that is scheduled for the exhibition opening, the artist makes it personal for her audiences too. Butoh dancer Yeoh Lai Chee will circle the room with a giant balloon phallus attached to her waist, and will hand out pacifiers to the audience, an act that yet again comments on how women today suppress their femininity in order to get ahead in society; the performance looks at the idea of servitude and how women wear a mask of masculinity (the fake *linga*) to mingle with others. The artist's argument, however, is this: why should women constantly be compared to men? And why not celebrate female identity without this constant referral?

Like the self portrait of 2008, Cheng has undressed herself publically with this body of work, which she regards as an important milestone in her practice and which she feels will ultimately determine her next steps with her art. These recent paintings began as a comment on sex that developed into an

exploration of gender and sexual identity, and whilst the artist had hoped to draw attention to these matters on a macro societal level, there's the inescapable factor of her own identity to consider too. As such, Cheng's paintings aren't such prickly works after all, but works that many of our time should be able to relate to well.

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[1] Jansen, Eva Rudy (2003) [1993]. *The book of Hindu imagery: gods, manifestations and their meaning*. Binkey Kok Publications. pp. 46, 119. ISBN 90-74597-07-6.

[2] Artist Kow Leong Kiang, known for his portraits of women and more recently nude figures, was one of her instructors at Dasein Academy of Art.