

Here and Now (2011) – Choy Chun Wei

Cut from popular magazines and shopping brochures, or painted with graphic verve floating above densely collaged layers, the word new is visibly repeated across this body of work. It is part of an incessant chatter – choose, go, subscribe, now, gain, spend – words that populate Choy Chun Wei's recent exhibition "Here and Now". While they might scream for our attention with the zeal of their commercial origins, one wonders to what level do we filter their noise within their spatial context? To call upon T.S. Elliot,

My words echo Thus, in your mind. But to what purpose disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves I do not know. ¹

In our contemporary world we are bombarded with textual stimuli, a fraction of which we absorb. On buses, bus shelters, billboards, store signage, it grows across a city's structure like barnacles. But this assertive use of text is more than spatial clutter in the hands of Choy Chun Wei. Like a dervish whipping up a dust storm, it enlivens his new works. And, when pushed into a three-dimensional dialogue as his canvases are expanded into freestanding sculptural constructions, it becomes palpable.

Across Choy Chun Wei's career his works have been framed against the accelerated urbanism of our built environment. While the foundations of architecture – its visual stacking, striation, spread and geometry define the spaces we occupy – this body of work pushes beyond that singular dialogue. Architectural critic George Katodrytis wrote, "The city has definitely ceased to be a site: instead it has become a condition." ²

Katodrytis's comment strikes at the heart of Chun Wei's exhibition. An evaluation of the space we occupy must also examine who we are. Take this word new that recurs across the work like a pop-up event. It is a word riddled with complexities. While it heralds a pushing forward in fresh directions, it is also a surging new that threatens the balance of the social structure –

rapid development, consumer consumption and globalisation – a bittersweet pill we swallow. The psycho-economic space trumps the physical space.

Speaking with Chun Wei about these new works he explained, “Modern development has inscribed and demarcated space as a meter of value, essentially commodity pragmatism. The shopping mall is a massive air-conditioned box fashionable for the modern lifestyle. It is the NEW convenience. It is the absolute future. There is something definitive about this contemporary symbol of urbanity and its commodities, metaphorically fenced in, defined by its imposed boundaries.”

Architecture has increasingly become a means of manipulating society based on tactics of inclusion / exclusion – the corporate skyscraper, the gated community, the shopping mall. Increasingly Chun Wei turns to these codified spaces as his primary subject. A good example is the painting *Absolutely New* (2011), which plays out this demarcation graphically through a black line; a definitive last gesture that seemingly ‘fences off’ sections of the painting. Apart from the word ‘new’ that is badged across the work in a Constructivist palette of red and black, this collage is littered with discount price tags that play a new graphic role. Chun Wei describes them as, “...the very core existence of urban markings, signposts for survival.” Increasingly our world is a zone to be navigated.

These tags occur again in his huge triptych *Instant City (Yellow)* (2011), a painting of billboard proportions it uses the vernacular of advertising to speak about consumerism. Here the ‘price spot’ is stripped back to its most elementary form, floated across the surface with pop abstraction. Yellow symbolises everything from wisdom, an imperial position and happiness to the colour executioners once wore in ancient Spain. Chun Wei uses yellow as a subliminal register reassigning commercialism with a positive psychedelic tone - a retinal ping.

Instant City (Yellow) is less about landscape per se and more about its fragments of text exorcised from their original source and recontextualised within a structural field that alludes

to our built environment. It is interesting in comparison to another work of similar scale in this exhibition, *Master Plan - Right Here Right Now*, which blocks out the landscape with graphic clarity. Again there is a Constructivist echo to this bold line; the mechanics of a city inscribing itself 'over' the place.

Both paintings have patterned across their surface grouped horizontal and vertical lines almost like machine templates that pick up their palette, red and blue in *Master Plan* and black in the case of *Instant City*. Their deliberate repetition takes on a texture of their own. Chun Wei says of these marks, "They are controlled and random pressing down onto the skin of the collage." Skin is an interesting metaphor. It holds our scars, our age, our colour and is our first line of defence to the world. Like a tattoo, Chun Wei inscribes his voice over the noise and clutter of the city through these marks.

It offers an interesting leap to Chun Wei's more sculptural works. *Architecture of Desire* and *Web-goal* flutter between 2 and 3-dimensional space. Through wooden battens Chun Wei lifts the text off the canvas in *Architecture of Desire*, bringing that illusionary depth of field that has defined much of his earlier work into physical relief. The battens sit in an orchestrated rhythm between horizontal and vertical, stacked at varying heights creating a surface tension and energy.

In *Web-goal* the text is collaged onto ribbons of canvas that are woven and held aloft from the substructure of the canvas. Colour becomes inconsequential to the text. The repetition of the word 'goal' threads across this construction and parallels the kind of bland aspirations of contemporary society – material aspiration, competition in sport, at the office - uniting people in the constant forward surge, caught in its web. A delightful aspect of this work is the way it flirts with the protocols of painting moving beyond the canvas edge as rogue pieces find their way into the gallery space.

It is an easy leap to Chun Wei's most ambitious mixed media works to date, his Shopping Ghettos series. Architectural historian Sabrina Foster notes, "Architecture addresses our metaphysical, philosophical and cultural identities within a material context..."³ Chun Wei takes that material cue to push his work into unexpected spatial and temporal frameworks that lift everyday objects into a world fantastical and surreal, like a sci-fi skyline populated with nostalgia.

Composed with a good dose of improvisation, these timber and paper constructions have grown organically like a city. Take Shopping Ghettos: Absolute Towers for example; its airy construction gives it a fragility and yet encrusted with text it stands defiant like graffiti on a concrete structure. 'Absolute', like the word new, is heavy with connotation: unwavering, conclusive, blind sighted – there's no going back. It grows ever taller; ever ambitious.

While it is loosely defined by a stacked box-grid, Chun Wei's tower is consumed from within with almost baroque excess. This fetish tone of consumer kitsch is best played out in Shopping Ghettos: Instant Child, its array of plastic toys and building blocks a blatant comment on this highly marketed industry.

The labyrinthine structure of Chun Wei's Shopping Ghettos, deceiving everyday, layers urbanism, mythology, commercialism and domesticity in a complex system of order and knowledge. Spatially, like Web-goal, they extend beyond their own physicality playing off the architecture of the gallery and, placed at eye-level to the gallery visitor, allow us to connect across and through their forms to his canvases.

Architecture, we must remember, is a catalyst for the socialization of space. The very title of Chun Wei's series Shopping Ghettos sets up that stage – a new landscape and language that sits at the core of this exhibition. To return to Elliot's question, 'my words echo but to what purpose' we can only conclude that above the drone of commercial text and contemporary boundaries, there is a humanity that breathes resilience into the frameworks around which

we build our lives. Chun Wei's see-through cities are dynamic and terribly exciting metaphors for that place where occupy, and the tone of experimentation and individuality that carries this exhibition is one to be championed in our 'boxed-up world'.

Gina Fairley, 2011.