



A LOVELY LIGHTNESS OF BEING

VISUAL ARTIST CHIN YUEN HAS A GIFT

PROFILE

BY KATE CINO PHOTO BY GARY MCKINSTRY



THE PAST TWO YEARS have been exceptionally busy for visual artist Chin Yuen. During that time she has launched five new bodies of work and participated in four group and five solo exhibits. Her travel itinerary reads like an eclectic

transatlantic tour, with whistle stops in Virginia, Huntington, New York City, Italy, Maple Ridge, Vancouver and Grand Forks.

In mid-March she had two openings back-to-back in very different locales. The first opening featured Accounting for Lost Objects, her richly textured and imaginative series that talks about cultural displacement and adaptation. The Community Arts Council of Greater Victoria, whose Sussex Place gallery promotes local and emerging artists, hosted this exhibit. Two days later, Yuen flew to Huntington, New York, to attend the opening of an international competition judged by Phyllis Braff, author and art critic of *The New York Times*. Yuen was one of eight winners chosen from 400 entries.

This exhibit featured new works from her Abstract Diary series — the confident and colourful paintings that are sought after by international collectors and designers. These divergent locations point out the artist's flexibility and philosophy about art-making. "I'm happy in any venue that allows me to connect with the public," says the artist, "especially an environment that fosters education and discussion."

Yuen's own education is impressive and international. She holds a Painting Diploma (Honours) and Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, a Master of Arts in English and a B.C. Teacher's Certificate. She was born in Malaysia in 1966, the third of four daughters. Her father was an architect and her mother a teacher and businesswoman. Her mother was determined that her daughters receive an education, and at a young age they were sent off to attend school in Singapore. There they lived with an adopted aunt and returned home for vacations. When Yuen was 13 she moved with her three sisters to England to attend a private school.

In 1981, the family was reunited in Edmonton where Yuen spent her teenage years. "My mother wanted us to become doctors or computer experts," says Yuen, "but it turned out we are all artistically inclined." She describes all four sisters as adventurous globetrotters who are highly independent, and she attributes these qualities to their early experiences of adapting to foreign environments and cultures. More difficult aspects of her upbringing included separation anxiety and the racism she experienced living far from home.

Chin Yuen with April #4 (*Rinds*), 18" x 36" (actual size), acrylic on canvas, one of her current abstracts from her award-winning Abstract Diary series.

Above: Another of the series, July #7, 12" x 12", acrylic on canvas.

Not surprisingly, one recurring theme in her artwork is the emotional cost of living abroad. This theme is found in *Migrant's Dream: Eclipses in a Foreign Land*, a work chosen for Artropolis 2003

by curator Vjeko Sager. The series consists of four mixed-media collages that chronicle one of her many vivid dreams. Yuen uses a personal dream experience to show how constant displacement can create anxiety on a subconscious level. In the dream sequences, she and her lover are exploring the winding streets of an historic city much like Québec. Gradually, the dreamer's sense of dislocation from herself and her travelling companion escalate. In the wake of several other strange disappearances, she wonders if she has somehow usurped or eclipsed her lover by mistake. The final scenes have her pinching her arm in a desperate attempt to verify her own physicality, then fleeing in fear. "The most severe form of banishment," says the artist, "is the loss of connection with oneself." The dreamer, not being able to feel "at home" in her own body, becomes deeply troubled.

Curator Vjeko Sager explains that Yuen's surrealist collage (with text) adds a new dimension to the theme "Art in Exile." Her dream space is similar to the virtual reality of cyberspace, our newly created digital world that is rewiring global consciousness.

But the artist has illuminated and humanized the space by taking the viewer on a personal guided tour and sharing her most intimate and confessional thoughts. "I have a great respect and admiration for this artist," says Sager. "She has managed to tackle complex human issues with a series of simple, focused images." He concludes that this is exactly the kind of work we



Chin Yuen's *Migrant's Dream: Eclipses in a Foreign Land*, four panels of 6" x 12.75" each, mixed-media collage on paper.

need to be in order to "build the tribe" and lessen the "unbearable lightness of being" that comes from exile on all levels.

The theme of migration and metamorphosis are further explored in Yuen's Accounting for Lost Objects series. The artist uses the visual symbol of an abacus (an ancient accounting tool of Chinese origin) to imagine the way that transplanted objects might adapt to new surroundings. The Maple Ridge Art Gallery hosted this series in February 2004. The exhibit supports the gallery's mandate to be an educational centre with strong community ties. "The images stay with you, they are strong and original," says curator Sherry Threthewey Stewart. She describes Yuen as a natural teacher who spoke eloquently during her "Artist Talks" to the public and the docents. The curator was also impressed by Yuen's ability to be accessible and comfortable within the "small-town-gallery" milieu of Maple Ridge. "We see Yuen as an artist poised on the edge of an international career," she says. "We'll be watching her progress with interest, and hoping that she'll be able to return to us in three years time."

In 2003, Yuen received the honour of being asked to attend the Florence Biennale. An international panel of art specialists selected her artwork after viewing her website. She was unable to attend that year because she had an exhibit already booked — *Il Corpo: The Body* — in Besozzo, Italy. Fortunately, the offer was extended to 2005, and Yuen is creating a new series for the event.

What are the exceptional qualities that the judges saw in Chin Yuen's work? First, there is the high calibre of her drawing. She is able to delineate the human form with deftness and skill, using energetic calligraphic strokes to sketch out mass, muscle and expression. Motion and energy are conveyed through the repetition of lines, cross-hatching and subtle shading. "I never rub out lines," says the confident artist. "I prefer to let them stand as part of the artistic process." Bodies in motion enliven her work and tell of many moods and states of being: they swim, dance, float, leap and rejoice in the sensual pleasures of human affection and the natural world.

The artist embarked on her award-winning Abstract Diary series to challenge herself and explore new territory. These small-scale abstractions (12 x 12 inches) are full of vibrant tones, patterns and textures. Organic shapes intersect and collide in strong fields of colour. Regenerative energy pulses through the rich, ripe hues and forms: roots descend and branches climb, particles of matter vibrate, robust cells and seed pods burst with life. "I have a gift," says the artist, "and it's important to me that I use and share this talent. When I see people moved and excited about my work, it gives me great joy and inspiration." For Chin Yuen, art-making functions as one constant within the ongoing changes of life, a place of deep connection that sustains her through the turning of the seasons and the passing of the decades.

Yuen welcomes studio visits. Call (250) 381-1688 or visit her website at www.chinyuenart.com. ▼

Kate Cino is an arts writer who loves her work. Becoming acquainted with the talents of Chin Yuen was like unpacking a box full of treasures.