

EVA KWONG

LOVE BETWEEN THE ATOMS / LIFELINES

PRELUDE

In his book *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes*,¹ Tadahiko Higuchi posits a number of fluid and inconclusive ways that landscape can be encountered visually. What follows is my paraphrasing of one of them as a way to set the stage for discussing the work of Eva Kwong:

Consider for a moment that you are standing on the upper slope of a rather narrow valley. It is the afternoon of a bright clear day. As you look across to the other side, you see the vegetation with varying clarity depending on its distance from you.

In the “Near Distance,” you can see trees in detail. Individual leaves and the pattern of bark are clearly discernible. Further away from you in what could be called the “Middle Distance” the specific pattern of these details becomes texture. And still further away in what would be called “Long Distance” that which was texture becomes value or tone. As the sun begins to set and light levels fade, you notice that crisp details compress to texture and then to tone ever closer to you; that the visual perceptions of near, middle and long distances are relative, contingent in this instance on the ambient light level. This variability is also contingent on atmosphere...

So now consider that there is fog in the valley. In this instance near middle and long distance are also compressed, even at mid-day. And as the fog thickens near, middle, and long eventually compress to the point that trees only a couple of meters away appear as tone.

At this point, a schism emerges. Your perception of these trees through the fog as tone implying they are a long way off

contradicts what your parallax vision tells you, that they are but 6 feet or so away. I have, for some time thought that this schism, this ambiguity is a key component in the poetic allure of fog and mist. Over time I have wondered whether ambiguity might always be a key component of the poetic...

Perhaps even a requisite one. Being an artist and not a trained academic, I am inclined to conclude that this speculation is useful and true.

HONG KONG

Eva Kwong was born in Hong Kong where she spent the early years of her childhood. She notes that the ethos of that city is infused with a pervasive sense and embrace of change... pronounced or subtle...change in the weather, in the produce and fish stocks available at the market, in business, or politics, or the advice of Taoist fortune tellers... that reality is never fixed; that change is a constant component of reality and that the trajectory of change is curved, perhaps circular, perhaps elliptical, or some other more exotic, (even random) curve. She remembers how, at a very young age, she began to look closely at individual things as well as the broad panorama of the city and in so doing to see how so much of life is relative and indeterminate . She also noticed that crowds of people are constituted of individuals each with particular histories, desires, loves but, as part of a larger group they are also very much alike... they are simultaneously unique and alike. This, later in her development, distills into the phrase "One of many, many of one." She also became intrigued with ambiguities and the entertaining musings they could suggest as well as the fact that, though inconclusive they could also make "concrete" sense.

NEW YORK

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At age 13, Kwong emigrates with her family to New York. another bustling metropolis but one this time rather more aligned with consistencies of Western linear rational thinking and its search for constants, predictability, and universal truths. Already attuned to ambiguities, her exposure to Western culture provides new grist for the examination of inconsistencies, differences and similarities in the world and the attendant possibilities for simultaneous contradictory truths. She spends much of her free time after school walking through various parts of the city looking at everything. This becomes not so much an exercise in cataloging as becoming familiar with the posture of remaining open to whatever might present itself to her. A useful consideration here is that by the time she is ready to go to college, Kwong is functionally bilingual. Over time she becomes increasingly culturally and, by extension, ethnically diverse.

RISD

Kwong enrolls at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) at the age of 17 and takes the obligatory introduction to various media, experimenting with glass, metals, sculpture, doing lots of drawing until finally focusing in clay. Jun Kaneko arrives in her junior year to teach Ceramics and she credits him with demonstrating through his own countless trials and errors how to be an artist; how to move into an original arena with one's own practice. Kaneko's teaching pushes students to become self-guided and autonomous. He does not give assignments, but instead expects students to be internally guided conceiving their own projects and then figuring out how to execute them. He is available for advice if a student gets stuck at some point.

Working as an assistant in RISD's Nature Lab Kwong is allowed to handle natural specimens of all sorts, and notices while drawing them that in nature, spots are never regular, the front is never the same as the back, the inside differs from the outside.

Flat colors and flat surfaces only occur in the man-made world. In nature, colors are always varied and complex...living things have many functions... their identities are always changing as they move through metamorphosis and growth:

“There is always diversity, multiplicity, and complexity in the simplest of forms. Living things can be many things at once, their different identities/ appearances can flip back and forth suggesting many things and many interpretations. The world is relative, not fixed, not monolithic.

“In hindsight, I realize how influential that experience was...I was able to study all those specimens. All the things I saw, studied, and drew became my visual vocabulary. Bits of a beetle, stuffed birds, seashells, rocks, leaves, pods, all mixed together.. My work is a hybrid based on multiplicities, rather than single things.” 2

And so it seems quite clear that from her undergraduate years, in the early 1970s, when the high art world is in the last chapter of High Modernism, that sublime end game of Formalism — Minimalism, Kwong is already a Post-Modernist. Post-Modern before she is even fully fledged as an artist, without even an awareness of what that category, then itself in its early infancy, might imply.

Kwong notices early on that individual creatures in a single species have differences from one another, that each individual has features different from the rest even though they are so similar as to often appear the same.

A working phrase comes to her during this time: “One of many; many of one”. It is a guiding mantra in her first large work, an installation titled “Thousand Shells” comprised of 1000 unique porcelain castings. In order to make each one subtly individual she makes some 30 different molds and each cast shell is

subsequently delicately altered to make it quietly unique from all the rest — one of many; many of one. From this point forward through her whole career, Kwong makes primarily sculpture grounded in the world of organic things. Sculpture that increasingly builds on the attributes that all living things share: color, patterns, life energy— things that swim, crawl, jump, fly simultaneously distinct and similar. In addition, she discerns that the mystery of the world we inhabit can be suggested by subtly dodging overt depiction. She makes sculptures which are quiet, highly simplified abstractions. Intentionally they are made to have multiple readings. The ambiguities she allows to take root in them are meant to subvert single readings of a given work. So, when one looks for some time at a given piece, these contemplative contradictions tend to invoke a mild sort of dream state, or meditation not that different from the state Kwong experiences when making the work. It is from this layering of delicate contradictions leading to multiple readings that whatever poetic aspects exist in a given work take root... in this gentle fog of quiet indeterminacy.

TYLER

From 1975 - 77 Kwong attends Graduate School at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and is assigned a tiny windowless studio space. Unable to work large she looks inward at first consulting images of Tantric art, Persian miniature paintings and Japanese dry gardens. She is advised by her faculty advisor the remarkable teacher Rudolf Staffel that she may get flack from others in the ceramics department but that she should follow her own intuition and instincts. Her work would tell her what to do next and she should stay true to her own instincts. Observations of snow covered hills in eastern Pennsylvania provoke images of the sorts of abstract forms that might appear in snow covered

Japanese gardens. She makes some small 3-D pieces springing from these images. Dissatisfied with their dependence on ambient light and wanting more control, she sees that working two dimensionally will allow her control of the image, its implied source and direction of light, nuanced coloration of clay, and glazes resulting in imagined landscapes that speak to her internal lived sensations: “Gardens of the Mind.” These become the focus of her graduate years yielding a body of small three-dimensional sculptural pieces and a number of glazed wall tablets each uniquely dimensioned in size. Each tile is made to be a unique artifact; a unique image; a unique “mental garden’.”

This series presents a sense of psychological spaces that are larger than their physical size so the viewer travels within the space mentally- “Gardens of the Mind.”

Her thesis exhibit is comprised of these works and is so arresting and unique it is given a page-long write up in the “exhibitions section” at the back of the November, 1977 issue of Ceramics Monthly magazine. It was through this article that the outside world first becomes aware of Eva Kwong and her work. It is unlike anything else pictured or talked about in the rest of the magazine. Rudy Staffel’s advice and quiet encouragement was the best she could ever have received.

SUBSEQUENT CAREER

At this point, Kwong sees that the content of her work can be drawn from nature, her own life experiences and her own body. She realizes that her observations and forms will be from the point of view of the organic experience of a female. She continues to use the strategies she has developed to subvert single or superficial —and especially any diaristic or auto-biographical —

readings of her work. Her forms are further simplified formally in order to provide fertile ground for diverse cues leading to multiple interpretations.

But, make no mistake, Kwong's work, while typically cryptic, is and never has been vague. She simply employs various modes of complication, contradiction and association to derail simplistic interpretation. She is adept in her articulation of forms and the subsequent marking and drawing or painting on them. Take, for example, "Passion Fruit" (incidentally not included in the Logan exhibition) which on close examination has details which can be read many ways. A slim wavy black line could simply denote the edges of the two halves of a bivalve creature like the giant clam, or on the other hand an overly attenuated sperm placed rather out of context. Perhaps this line is present to hint at some feminine essence inside this closed shell. When queried, she accepts all of these readings as valid and indicates there are more such situations in the piece. Here is her to a recent query:

"The wavy line on Passion Fruit is both male and female...at the same time, a sperm swimming line and a vagina, simultaneously or also just a giant clam. I like that it depends on which way you look or how you feel or which side you are on."

Or in "Pink Flow" (in the exhibition) which consists of two vertical cylindrical forms rising up from a horizontal connector at the base. Are these a pair of arms in a raised overhead gesture of exclamation or surrender? or a pair of legs propped against the tiled wall above a bath tub? or a pair of legs in some aspect of a sexual encounter? Again, she nods to all these readings as equally possible and then elaborates further:

"I have, over the years, been interested in the idea of metamorphosis and transformation. Transformation of materials, transformation of image, transformation within the

process, transformation within the viewer - all facets of transformation. Taking an object like a seashell and transforming it in some way through some sort of abstraction and coloration allows me to embrace the opening of associations into other realms of thinking and feelings in the viewer's mind when they experience the work. The firing of the clay materials gives it another aspect of chemical change that is not possible any other way. The object goes through an irreversible transformation in the kiln- this was important to me and is what drew me to ceramics."

To those steeped in Western Modernism, there could seem to be a connection to Marcel Duchamp's assertion that an artist is responsible only for the first half of a work of art; that the work is completed by the interface between it and the viewer's experiences that are brought to bear in the viewing. Though her graduate school years were spent in Philadelphia and there is a major holding of Duchamp works at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Kwong never had occasion for more than a quick look at them. She never studied them to any degree. Independent of Duchamp, she arrived at the same position as he but on her own:

"You learn to look carefully at the world you walk through and figure out what you might be able to do with something. And the viewers do the same with your work...When the work is put out into the world, it's the viewer's turn to figure out what sense to make of it,"

Kwong says to me over the phone.

Over some four decades after her years in graduate school, Kwong's work unfolds with an increasing range of subjects, complexity subtlety and ambiguities.

APPROPRIATION

Recently, Kwong has been experimenting with 3-D digital printing in non-clay materials. She's intrigued with the greater formal delicacy and physical strength this technology can yield than hand modeled clay. She is also keen to exercise the fluidity with which small models can scale up to large to pieces — life sized and even larger. While the primary reason for this move is that new materials and technology will permit new ways of exploring more complex abstraction, it will also potentially thwart various “artists” who have chosen in the name of “appropriation” to copy her works and then present theirs for sale at low-ball prices. This is, for her, a point of vexation experienced by other clay artists whose work reaches a level of sophistication that sets it apart from what the rest of the pack comes up with. Betty Woodman, who frequently did workshops in tandem with exhibitions, noticed this trend and found it to be a distracting and irritating response to her generous sharing of the special techniques and unique forms she developed over her career. Betty was puzzled because she was familiar with the genre of appropriation within the Beaux Arts tradition. But what people in the clay arena seem oblivious to is that appropriation of a motif was seen as a gesture of admiration and respect for the artist who made the original image. Integral to the practice of appropriation was the acknowledgement the original source often in the actual title of the derivative new work. It was a practice that acknowledged an ongoing conversation between artists. One directed toward the elaboration on and evolution of ideas and images. Furthermore, appropriation that did not in some way acknowledge the original source was considered a form of theft, or that the product of copying was simply not art at all. As a point of reference I offer an example by the painter, Gary Bower, who has recently produced a series of “treachery” pictures that appropriate images by the artists Goya, Rousseau, and Max Ernst. In these, Bower has literally quoted the precursors by including their original images at original scale in his own current

works. This is the sort of artistic behavior everyone in the clay world needs to understand when considering using the images of other artists past and present. If they hew to the traditional honorable practice of appropriation, they will find a greater reward swimming in the realm of ideas than a few extra shekels will ever buy. And they will find that they will be recognized fully as artists by their peers. If they don't, they will put themselves in the unfortunate position of spending a lifetime in the studio never knowing what it really means to be an artist. In other words, never seeing the forest for the fog. And as for the poetic, well the poetic will long since have taken its leave. All of this concern about appropriation has been slowly brewing in the U.S., but with increased incidents of groups of foreign buyers taking pictures of work by American crafts people at wholesale venues and then generating knock-offs for distribution from their home countries, one wonders to what degree this distortion of the tradition of appropriation is operating at an International phenomenon. Is copying an International problem? Continuing discussion in the art press around the tradition and practice to do with appropriation will benefit all associated with the art world: artists, curators, collectors, etc

LOVE BETWEEN THE ATOMS / LIFELINES

In her exhibition "Love Between the Atoms" at Utah State University in Logan, UT, (Aug 27 - Sept 27, 2019), Kwong was given the entire gallery consisting of two spaces each about 70 feet long by 14 feet and 20 feet wide respectively. She originally wanted one, or ideally 3, of the walls of the narrow space painted red to invoke the sense of a spiritual container akin to a tantric temple that would be the arena for presenting more personally referential and spiritually challenging pieces. The other space was to hold a range of older as well as recent individual sculptures

springing from observations of organic forms. One wall was dedicated to staging another iteration of a “bacteria installation” comprised of numerous modest-sized lyrically abstract forms posing as greatly magnified microbes. Various iterations of this work have been installed a number of times over the past two decades. It is never the same installation twice as she continually makes new elements to add to the array. The composition is site-sensitive and is constantly evolving like the microbes themselves. Other pieces installed in this space were abstractions of organic form ideas gleaned from her life-long interest in viruses, microbes, neurotransmitters, acalephoids, human reproduction, protein molecules, genetics, rock formations, etc. An example in this section of the exhibit is Filopodia:

“Filopodia is part of my Acalephoid series inspired by jellyfishes, squids and octopi. Their soft and sensuous bodies suggest movement and fluidity much like our human bodies and what I imagine our cells are like within the watery world inside of us. The extensions reach out to embrace and interact with the space around them.”

It should be noted that in assembling this group of works, Kwong chose less sexually provocative pieces in deference to the presumed conservative sensibilities of the large population of Mormons on campus and in the Logan community. As a result, the subtler sexual overtones present in these works may have been more difficult for the audience to discern, but were present nonetheless

When it turned out that painting the narrow space was unfeasible for the gallery budget to accommodate, Kwong was, on short notice, forced to rethink her plans. Wanting to have this space remain self-referential, she installed at one end “Lament” a wall installation that has been exhibited a variety of times made of

large celadon-glazed porcelain teardrops and at the other end, a stele-like piece “Navel of the Universe” in front of a wall covered with red photo back drop paper. When you looked through the opening in the Navel, you could see a circle of red on the other side and you were transported into another space. In addition to two more sculptures- Pink Flow and Zygote, she executed a wall drawing with red colored string that traced a delicate double spiral moving into a lyrical passage and then into a tangled chaotic snarl along with more red paper this time torn chaotically into strips. This piece, titled “Lifelines”, sprang from a very difficult passage she has had to navigate over the past twelve years “It was an unending, awful decade,” she says. Lifelines, with all the chaotic lines and shapes of red paper is an abstract distillation of all the tumult of this time in her life. It is the first thoroughly autobiographical work of her career. It has opened a new direction which she intends to pursue periodically. It will be very interesting to watch this unfold because Kwong will certainly continue to engage abstraction as a key component if for no other reason than to steer clear of pathos and the maudlin. She clearly has too much grit and too keen a mind for any of that.

TO CONCLUDE

While this exhibition was staged quite off the beaten path some 90 miles north of Salt Lake City, it happened to mark a significant transitional moment in Eva Kwong’s already remarkable career. It was in Logan that she decided to allow herself to explore and incorporate highly personal, even autobiographical content into her evolving oeuvre. And concurrently, she has decided to explore new technologies for forming clay as well as the use of altogether new materials that can allow for new, more delicately elaborated forms and larger scaled works to emerge. It will be very interesting to see how this unfolds.

THE AUTHOR

Michael Jones is an artist, curator and occasionally a critic. He received his BFA (in Sculpture) and (MFA in Ceramics) from Ohio State University. Between 1978 and 1991 Jones directed the Kunstverein style gallery programs in the Art Departments at Wright State University (Dayton, Ohio) and The University of Akron. These were fast-paced programs dealing with a wide range of contemporary art activity. More ambitious exhibition projects made possible by external grant funding were generally accompanied by catalogs, and symposia. A half dozen of these exhibitions travelled regionally in the Midwest US and two toured nationally. Since 1992 Jones has been a full time studio artist working primarily in clay with periodic forays into 2-D media, sculpture, and cross-media collaboration with a small handful of other artists. Occasionally he is involved with curating and exhibition installation work.

Footnotes

1. Tadahiko Higashi, *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes*, page 9, The MIT Press, 1988
2. M. C. Baumstock, *Six McKnight Artists*, exhibition catalog essay, Northern Clay Center, Minneapolis, MN

All other quotes are the based on email and telephone communication between Eva Kwong and the author.