

Title: Jason Lim's Clay Addiction! by Zulharli Adnan.

Smashed into a million pieces! An accident, every ceramist avoids.

Just Dharma by **Jason Lim (b.1966)** is falling within an instant. Propelled downwards by her weight and mass as gravity enforced its pull, caused *Just Dharma*, the ceramic installation cum chandelier, to explode when it came into contact with the floor. The installation is a heaped mass of shards of baked white clay, set onto a circular base with a white umbilical chord. Shards of ceramic scatter about post-dropping and thus began, *Just Dharma's* life as an installation organized by and of, incidence.

Lim's *Just Dharma* was initially comprised of 1,200 individually handmade white translucent porcelain lotuses suspended from the ceiling by threads and electrical cords. Each pinched individually with petals which were lengthened show minute details and evidence of the artist hand pulling and stretching the clay. Dictated by gravity as much as spatial considerations, its shape and form was unlike a Baroque chandelier. It was long and tangled measuring 4.5 metre by 1.5 metre. Its flowers downcast, shying away from the heavens as were the stemmed lotus leaves, as if hung out to dry. Illuminated from within by over 500 amber bulbs, *Dharma* is incandescent. The installation was slated for destruction as initially planned for the inaugural event.

On the opening day, Lim began his performance by lighting *Just Dharma* from within. Enlivened, *Just Dharma* breathed and was led to pulsate rhythmically. Slowly at first and then followed by a quickening, it reflected Lim's own breathing. Soon, however the rhythmic lighting was affected accordingly to the cacophony of the on-looking audience's expectant breaths. Heaving constantly the expunged air bellowed behind closed doors for the viewers' own protection. Within an instant, *Just Dharma* was released from its anchor. *The work thus performed.* Upon its own self-destruction within an instant, a roar of applause and relief was audible.

Just Dharma's purpose was to testify to, Lim's presence at the 52nd Venice Biennale, The International Art Exhibition.

This year marks Singapore's fourth continual presence at the Venice Biennale, Italy. As a national representative, Lim is one of four male artists selected by curator - Lindy Poh. The exhibit was framed by the overall theme of ***Figments, Fictions and Fantasies***¹ and the pavilion included *Tang Da Wu(b.1943) with Zai Tang*, *Vincent Leow(b.1961)* and *Zulkifle Mahmud(b.1975)*.

¹ Visit <http://www.nac.gov.sg/eve/eve11.asp> for the curatorial brief by Lindy Poh. Retrieved; 16.08.07.

Lim's contribution to the national pavilion is two-fold. *Just Dharma* and her sibling installation, *Light Weight* are site-specific installations. Currently being housed at *Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti*, Venice and are on exhibit till 7th November 2007². These works extend Lim's use of ceramics as a visual idiom, which is symbiotically parallel to his other visual art productions especially his performances.

SPECIFICITY; conceived as sculptural responses to the weight and scale of Venice Biennale, a historical site, an idealised target, a reality, an important international survey, more importantly, *Just Dharma* and *Light Weight*, both are responding to the intricacies of the exhibiting space; the palazzo rooms. Undeniably opulent and irreverently futile to deny or refute, the rooms are overbearing.

Its walls are of vivid crimson red, clear brilliant Murano glass Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, its rich smell, the room's significance in its own histories and geography, its echo and emptiness, these all intersect with an ideological place clay has within Lim's visual art practise; are a stark contrast to the white walls and are apt responses to the SITE.

The painstakingly long process of creating, *Just Dharma* or its beauty, is circumvented in favour of a collapsed structure. The installation is currently contrasted against four LCD videos panels placed at North, South, East and West. They recount that eventful moment. The installation thus becomes a constant dialogue between a 'remnant' or 'relic' or even a 'vessel' and what constitutes a performance? While revealing at its own making and un-making within that instant, interjecting between the clanging sounds of ceramics falling and smashing, Lim has chosen to switch his place with *Just Dharma* as THE performer. Clay is functioning more than mere material to be moulded into a beautiful form by the ceramist's hands.

Performance and clay are Lim's bedfellows in Art. Continually inventive and remarkably sensitive to clay, Lim's works are at the forefront of both contemporary visual and ceramics art in Singapore and abroad. His relationship to clay has been long and fruitful³. Trained at Central Saint Martin, London⁴ his constant dialogue with clay has expanded beyond sculptural objects or artefacts of individualistic artistic preservation and beauty, but as he delves deeper into the malleability of form, structure,

² For details of exhibition, please visit; <http://www.nac.gov.sg/eve/eve11.asp>. Retrieved;16.08.07.

³ Lim has extensively exhibited at USA, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and etc.

⁴ Lim was at Central Saint Martins, College of Art and Design, United Kingdom at 1992.

representation, display, significance and the discourse of visual politics of his performances and ceramics, Lim is undoubtedly one of the influential artists in Singapore. Deemed as a maverick, Lim is sharp and is a pleasure to chat with about art, clay and his views on life or share a pint with. Perhaps that is why, he along with the other 3 artist has contributed much to the development of contemporary art in Singapore.

This influence is partly precipitated by his symbiotic paralleling of clay and performance as his involvement in many projects, alternative art spaces and independent organizations. Clay is integral to Lim. It is a tool for transferring discoveries made when handling clay⁵: the repetitious actions and often executed in minute and ornate details, is remarked by Lim to be revealing the inconsistencies and contradictions of the processes itself. The signification of gestures within Lim's visual art performances functions in the same manner: small gestures repeated over and over again but are intensely visceral and at times confrontational.

In another room in the pavilion is *Light Weight*. It is a brazen and calculated riposte to a challenge by Lim and is totally distinct from *Just Dharma*.

400 clay figurines are arranged on the floor. *Light Weight*, is a mesh of figurines assembled from an array of shapes and sizes. They refer towards many cultural icons that abound in Singapore; Chinese deities, mythic and symbolic icons, figures within Christianity and others. Notwithstanding, they are also profanely mundane objects, accrued by default of their materiality - clay and their failings from a local figurine producing factory. Damaged in an instant, either cracked or chipped, these clay objects are abandoned and are left to weather in time.

Lim has collected some of these figurines over a decade and had them shipped to Venice. Transposing kitschy cultural iconographies into the context of Venice; a place densely populated by churches and saints, perhaps becomes a gesture of cultural infiltration or is showcasing an idea – collecting clay mementoes or objects. However, *Light Weight* is constantly conversant with an iconic interior fixture in Venice; the Murano chandelier. They are polarities in situ.

The whole installation sits on a tier in a large floral shape. Thus like a mount, its octopus tentacles petals extends outwardly. It reaches well beyond the canopy of light the large chandelier casts. Laid against the arrangements, are *bunga manggar* (tinsel paper palm blossoms) which normally adorn the gates at Malay weddings or the bridal couple's arrival, invokes an opulence found walking on the streets of Little India in

⁵ In conversation with the Artist: Wednesday.09.08.07.

Singapore; visions of excessive glorification or similarly in the clutter in many long gone antique stores. Illuminations utilised project long and harsh shadows of the figurines onto the red walls, thus enveloping the room with dense silhouettes much like those found in shadow puppetry shows. The readymade: these clay figurines / objects are hand selected by Lim himself being an important element and material in the installation.

Lim has utilised various visual mechanisms such as kitsch, contrast, light as inherent element of both and highlights an antique store or junk mass aesthetics, to subvert and conquer the space by laying and orientating the clay figurines, colourful tinsel and elongating shadows in contrast to the operational mechanisms of *Just Dharma*. Both however, consider the value and place of clay in Lim's practise, as being didactic to his understanding, analysis and thoughts on contemporary visual arts and culture.

Light Weight and *Just Dharma*, plays on subtleties of language as well, not intended as puns. Rather they operate at revealing contradictions much akin to his private language within ceramics. Is Dharma⁶ just? And does lightweight denotes or connotes to the weightlessness of light?

In many of his works, the inconsistency of clay is revealed through minute and inherent variations within the repetitions. This is further reactive as, water, temperature, drying rate and firing are all contributing variants that have some impact onto the form, or textures or colours of the final work. For instance, the lotus flowers buckle or blossom while firing⁷. It records and crystallizes itself, particularly bearing in mind the use of porcelain and its behaviours here. What parallels could be drawn as a symbiotic relationship to performance? And how does, Lim extend the use of clay?

I propose to distillate Lim's Venice installations via these 4 parallels;

- i. *Durational - Static.*
- ii. *Activation - De-activation.*
- iii. *Animate - In-animate.*
- iv. *Performativity - Objectivity.*

⁶ *Dharma*; The underlying order of nature and life, a fundamental Buddhist belief.

⁷ In conversation with the artist; Wednesday. 09.08.07.

Durational – Static; Time is certainly a factor. The lengthy duration of preparation and execution of a ceramic work is as crucial as the planning, careful consideration of a performance and how it unfolds in time. The word, *instant* connotes a jarring treatment towards making time visible and tangible, as presented by the gestural markings found on the objects Lim produces. The marks move in and with time thus encrusting itself onto the object or as in *Lightweight* is affected by time.

Meanwhile *Just Dharma*, however, is *adharma*⁸ to this. Being released in an instant, its destructive force compels us to address its ‘cathartic-making’ as relational to the construction methods and time suggested within ceramics. It is a gesture that pronounces clay’s materiality and fragility by erasing its structure, form and intricate details and preferring its incidental remnant.

Lim’s performances unveil *through* time. It is a durational experience and something that has to be experienced in its totality and if possible physical proximity.

Thus, reflecting unto *Just Dharma*; a ‘static’ *objét dé art* assumption is undermined and replaced with an active role as the performer performing through time and it ended with its reincarnation and juxtaposed with *Light Weight* which is a ‘static’ installation informed by time.

Activate – Deactivate; the structural integrity of a performance is activated by significance and context, differing from actions or gestures in daily life. Thus, when does and could, a performance actually begins and end? Does it begin when the clay - a significant material in ceramics is cut and kneaded; or whence it is introduced as a base material activated by actions in an ‘art’ space?; or does it begin when the artist begins pinching the clay alone in the studio?; or arranged onto the floor?

Or when *Dharma* began falling within that split second of an instant?

Performance and its spaces are clearly delineated and validated by various entities, one of whom is the artist. Its intended suggestions (*readings*) and significance (*reception*) is often open to attack or embraced and produces further discourse. My own ramblings above questioning the grey areas when, a performance begins and ends, are intended as a method to distinguish those spaces, context and time when Lim activates his beloved material into key component(s) within his performances from the daily solitude Lim adheres to in his studio. The difference lies not with the boundaries of spaces or mere usage of clay but artistic intention, action and activation of clay into a criterion of semblance of ceramics.

⁸ *ADHARMA* – an antonym of *Dharma*.

For instance, *three tones of clay*⁹ in 1994 at the Substation, Singapore and *Just Dharma*.

Just Dharma was enlivened and activated by light. She breathed and fell into her reincarnation. Its order is governed by disorder and chance. It is static currently, yet came into being from a durational action in time and place as echoed by the videos.

Lim pronounces an active area of engagement *vis a vis* his own ceramics, installation and performances. His assemblages or sculptures 'grows' as it takes into account the viewer and the inter-determinate spaces of viewing and perception and leads them into a discussion on what is permissibly valuable in ceramics or art; imagination, thought, action and guts! Not the finality of the object but rather a process of active sensory or perceptual engagement.

He activates his viewers and peers passionately thus.

The area or proximity for his performances is often closed. They are intimate. He seeks to activate the audience through proximity amalgamated with 'gestures' and 'actions', which are drawn from and informed by the close handling of a material, which is given life and form. Or when viewing Lim's ceramics, the experiences are derived from shallow distance. That area of active engagement expands to include questioning the rarefied art object or ceramics and its place in contemporary Singapore art and valid methods to activate clay as a viable material in contemporary visual art, while refuting to adhere to clay and thus by default, ceramics into being tied to a singular craft tradition or discipline.

Animating - Inanimate; through the use of accretion of marks or pinches and the suggestion of time passing, Lim's ceramics thwarts simple and functional vessels. Lim is suggesting, they are symbolic (as beakers or as assemblages or as sculptural) manifestations of animation (of giving life to) through his own gestures and clay's own revelation of its minute inconsistencies. Like the bones of archaeology, objects do tell. The difference herein lies that Lim chooses to engage with the problematics of clay as craft / tradition / discipline and offers an alternative. He animates the inanimate clay into visually codified objects pregnant with process and meanings.

⁹ The exhibition was in collaboration with Ng Siew Kuan at Substation in 1994. A week long exhibition under *New Criteria 3* which included the use of grog (fired clay) and clay smeared onto the gallery walls and himself while the grog were projectiles. See, Ed. Gunalan Nadarajan; Eugene Tan; Russell Storer, 'Jason Lim' in *Contemporary Art in Singapore*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2007., pg 94 – 97.

Fall, throw and drop, are words that describe clay's function within Lim's performances. They suggest clay's animation through performing simple acts. Falling, throwing, dropping, slapping; the clay is rigid yet malleable held in the hand becomes a tool and material whence released, it often causes the clay to change in shape and placement. It dries after. The equation - for every force there is an equal reaction applies rings true in Lim's performances. Thus giving life to clay extends beyond forming a shape or deciding a texture but acknowledges its materiality and its state of being.

Performativity – Objectivity; much in contemporary sculpture took Michael Fried's seminal book, *'Art and Objecthood'* as reference to expand the visual, philosophical and methods of Sculpture contra to the modernists. If art history is to be considered as a chronological timeline, the book spoke of Minimalism particularly. Since then, the expanse and plethora of visual works that straddle the fine line distinguishing between what is a sculpture or an installation or a drawing or a painting, are testimonies that *'objecthood'* or *'objectivity'* produces an affect which is subsumed into many practises within visual culture especially installation and performance art. It has also informed the viewers.

The thing or the art-work is standing or is giving reference on and about itself and is discussing about itself in relation to its context, being and is inclusive of the Viewer(s) being in the space with it, rather than pictorial or symbolic significations.

Lim's *Just Dharma* and *Light Weight* are osmotic in ideology of both *'objectivity'* and *'performativity'*. As further explained below,

Judith Butler describes *'performativity'* as "...that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains."¹⁰ Meanwhile Lim has written that..."*Occasionally, I would repetitively make shapes and gather found/ready made materials as structures for them. Other times, i make part and bits and pieces. Decisions are made in a way like prayers and mantras are used and everyday gestures are repeated. As a group, they can be interchanged or be built upon. The pieces are assembled in different ways each time they are displayed. As my ideas are constantly shifting during and after the work process, the identity of things, therefore, is also constantly changed, making layers of meanings.*"¹¹.

¹⁰ Butler; Judith, *'Critically Queer'* in *Identity ; A Reader*, Sage Publication, London, 2000.

¹¹ <http://www.craftculture.org/tab/lim1.htm>, Retrieved, 16.08.07, see also, Exh.Cat, Lim; Jason, *'Recent Works'*, Substation, Singapore, 2002.

Lim creates a new language, vocabulary and discourse within his practice; the knowledge gained through playing and working with clay, its metonymic affection onto himself and his faithful viewers produces this '*layer of meanings*' or *phenomena*. This rhetoric parallels his vast outputs and in fed into his performances and installations; as mentioned earlier repetition of gestures and actions.

Here we observe a working method – visual linguistics that advances with time as Lim creates / performs. The works are *re* occurring manifestations which re-creates and maintains their own organic and systematic discourse, however applies objectivity and acknowledges the viewer and the plenitude of meanings that proffers from them.

Contrast *Just Dharma* and *Light Weight* and it is this parallel between '*objectivity*' and '*performativity*' that surfaces. Both are divergent and antithetical to the other in display, construction, material and its place in Lim's practise as responses to a site.

Both of the installations and the performance heighten the viewers' awareness of how exciting at this juncture clay and Lim is in Singapore¹² even though the work is miles away in Venice, Italy.

An '**ADDICTION**' refers to a dependency, a very strong habit or an obsession with *something*. I have chosen to use '**ADDICTION**' rather than any other word, in order to give a sense of how involved Lim is with Clay and ceramics. '**ADDICTION**', is also in keeping to Lim's faith and belief that true provocation bears fruit and or results. '**ADDICTION**' implies stimulants or being stimulated. *Lim's addiction is clay*. He pushes the boundaries and place clay / ceramics has in contemporary visual culture as important and viable and has many possibilities with reference to many other visual disciplines through dissemination and transferring the '**ADDICTION**' to the next person.

I am addicted as I am under the influence and being stimulated by,

*"I find it important to capture visual tendencies that could **influence** and **stimulate** the viewer's perception and imagination...the clay picks up the emotions and the process of working transforms them."* Jason Lim excerpt from artist statement¹³. (my edit)

¹² A sentiment echoed by Business Times, Singapore in 2004.

¹³ <http://www.craftculture.org/tab/lim1.htm>, Retrieved 16.08.07; see also, Exh.Cat, Lim; Jason, 'Recent Works', *ibid*, 2002.