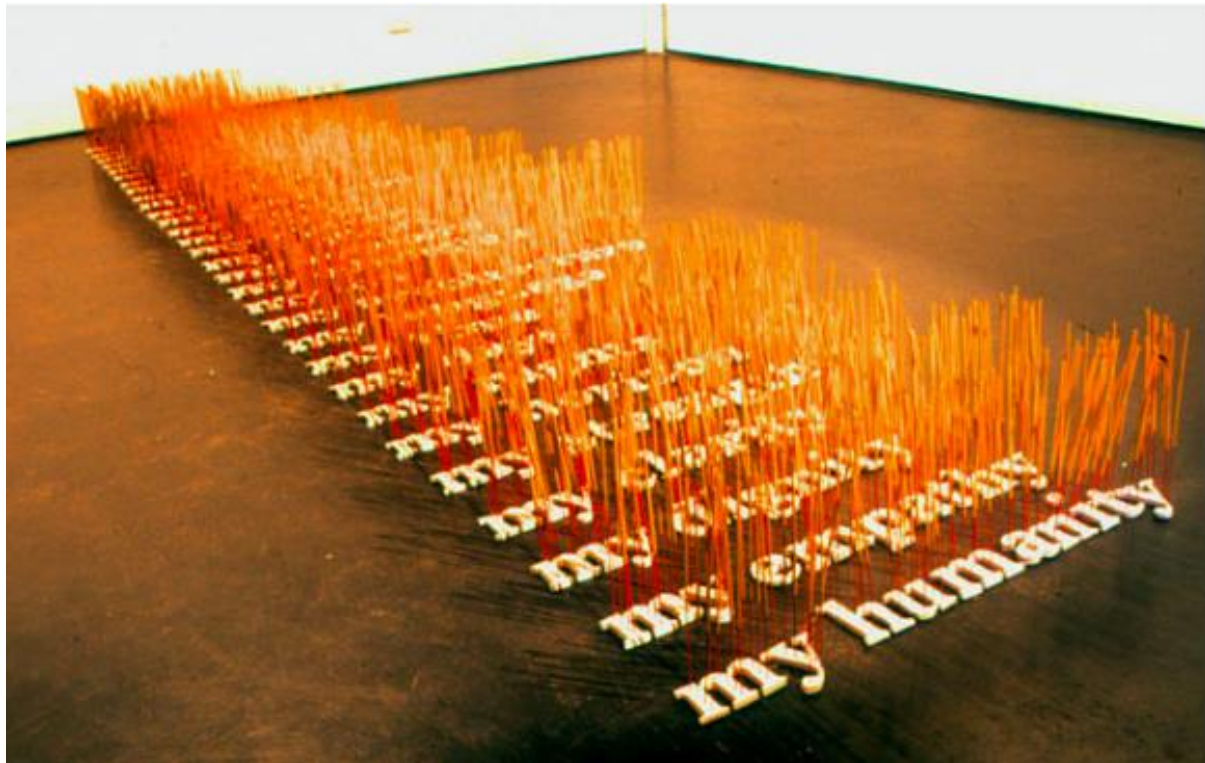


## Sharon Chin: The Individual within the Collective

By Su Mei Tan

Made out of wet clay, laid on the floor to dry. Joss sticks, used in Buddhism to aid spiritual communication, stick out of the clay letters. The smell of the incense coming from the joss sticks engulf the air of the gallery, over the days of the exhibition, the aromas fade to a faint trace, until there is nothing. The clay letters, dehydrating over time, with no protection or strength from the usual process of firing, are left to be fragile. Reduced to a crumble, unable to be immortalised, returning to dust and ashes after being displayed.



“Rise, rise, rise”, 2004, Sharon Chin <sup>1</sup>

Having majored in sculpture at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Sharon Chin came from a background of relating art, in terms of an object. Prior studying sculpture, she trained at the Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland, where one of her tutors, Caroline Rothwell, had introduced her to the likes of Annette Messenger, an artist known from her installation works. Messenger was also known for the “bricolage” works that combine media and subvert value systems<sup>2</sup>. Messenger is an early influence, though Chin does not focus on the same thematic concerns of gender and the apocalypse<sup>3</sup>. The late Montien Boonma continues to influence Chin and initiated the transition from sculptural objects to installation, seeking greater impact with smaller units<sup>4</sup>.

Ephemeral art is described to be the reflection of a desire to dematerialize an art object in order to evade the demands of the market, or to democratize or challenge art museums. The works often cease to exist in a steady state, changing or decaying slowly. In the west, this shift

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Chin, “Rise, Rise, Rise”, published 2004 <http://sharonchin.com/archive/exhibitions/rise-rise-rise/>

<sup>2</sup> “Annette Messenger”, Wikipedia (22 May 2019) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annette\\_Messenger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annette_Messenger)

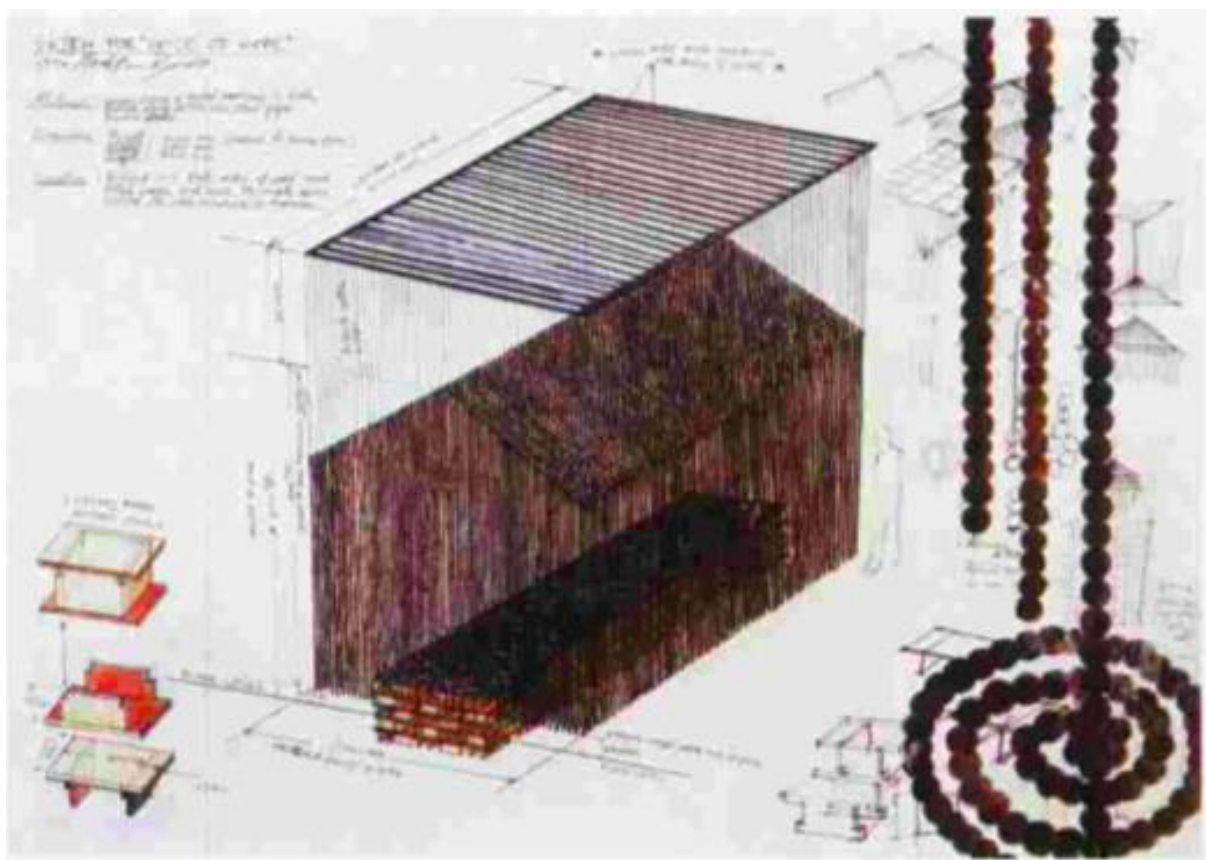
<sup>3</sup> Swenson, Kirsten. “Annette Messenger at Marian Goodman.” *Art in America*, no. 2 (2007): 144.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Chin, *skype interview*, May 27, 2019.

is exemplified by artists working in the 1960s, particularly those influenced by John Cage, however this concept has long been used in Eastern cultures particularly those influenced by Buddhist philosophy. In contemporary art, the use of non-traditional, non-durable materials and the incorporation of chance and ephemerality, mean that the resulting worlds possess an ‘inherent vice’ which results in the demise or disappearance of the works.

“It was a time when I thought art was limited to objects and images. The use of the element of smell was very provocative for me. It brought about an ephemeral nature of the art work which was not to be kept and was changing over time.” – Sharon Chin, 2019<sup>6</sup>

Chin’s earliest piece of resolved work “Rise, Rise, Rise, 2004” which was her final project for her art degree indeed evokes the spirit of Boonma’s works. In particular, Boonma’s “House of Hope, 1996-97”, where the artist used fragrant prayer beads hung in the shape of a house, with spices on the wall, allowing the audience not only to be a viewer, but also an inhaler of the art works.



Drawing of “House of Hope”, 1996, Montien Boonma<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> O’Neill, Mary. “Ephemeral Art : Mourning and Loss,” 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Chin, *skype*.

<sup>7</sup> Koplos, Janet. 2004. “Mindful Living: On View in Traveling Retrospective Organized by New York’s Asia Society, the Sculptures and Installations of the Late Thai Artist Montien Boonma Use Buddhist Forms and Medicinal Herbs to Create Peaceful Reflective Environments.” *Art in America*, no. 2: 90.

Boonma's "Temple of the Mind, 2003" form a creation of meditative spaces in which, the audience can explore, evoke the sense of smell and the use of breath. It is this underlying influence of Buddhist aesthetics from Boonma's work that carries through Chin's later works, not only visually, but intrinsically.



Entrance of "Temple of the Mind", 2003, Montien Boonmas

Chin's "Rise, Rise, Rise" was a series of cut out unfired clay text, placed on the ground with a large number of joss sticks sticking out of the words. It creates a sense of impermanence and the idea of the ephemeral concept in Buddhism. Chin describes the art work being so fragile that the only thing that can be done after the exhibition is to throw it in the bin<sup>9</sup>. This artwork has been exhibited three times having to be freshly made each time.

Upon returning to Malaysia to find work in the contemporary art world, Chin was first based in Kuala Lumpur/Petaling Jaya. Chin worked as a gallery assistant with Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery where she met Wong Hoy Cheong. Wong's influence opened up different opportunities for her, one of which was Chee Sek Thim of Reka Art Space. This was a fundamental contact made where Chin held her first solo exhibition "Boats and Bridges, 2005". Chin was also drawn to the independent art spaces such as Rumah Air Panas (Yap Sau Bin) and Lost Generation Space (Yeoh Lian Heng). Furthermore, she formed "Buka Kolektif" in 2009 with Rahmat Haron and Poodien which was her introduction to the Malay punk scene and a continuation of her performance art. Through the collective "Buka Kolektif", she came in contact with Intan Rafiza and Tan Hui Koon who are currently the curators at Balai Seni Negara (National Art Gallery), where "Buka Kolektif" organised a performance art festival in 2011<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Koplos, "Mindful Living"

<sup>9</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>10</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

It seems like Chin immersed herself in both grassroots level initiatives, as well as making connections with more established institutions to fully understand her identity as an artist in the Malaysian contemporary art scene. She was an art critic who wrote for a publication called “Off The Edge” and it was through her time spent with the editor, Jason Tan, where writing became an important element of her art practice. Chin has done several collaborations and projects with the Japan Foundation of Kuala Lumpur through meeting Kyoko Kugai, where she had the opportunity to work with Japanese artists.

However, one of her most provocative works stemmed from her connection with Khairuddin Hori, who introduced Chin to performance art. She was a collaborator with “Open SEA, 2006” where she met Lynn Lu, a performance artist. Hori also commissioned Chin’s “Mandi Bunga, 2013” for the Singapore Biennale that year. Khairuddin Hori is currently director at Chan + Hori Contemporary, in Singapore<sup>11</sup>.

The biggest change came for Chin when she moved from Kuala Lumpur to a quiet seaside town called Port Dickson, in 2011. She moved there with her partner in life, Zedeck Siew, who also became a key collaborator in art. Chin admitted to having an existential crisis and was disillusioned with the art world but also the political changes which were happening in Malaysia. She did not create any art for two years. “Weeds/Rumpai, 2013” was a product of her trying to get back to life as an artist. Having told many of the locals in Port Dickson that she was an artist, the first response from the locals was to ask her to draw their portrait. Having originated from genres of sculpture and installation, Chin realised that her practice did not have a strength in drawing. Rather than challenge her status as an artist, Chin sought to adapt to the local needs by learning how to draw. The process started by simply drawing the weeds in the garden as practice on getting back to the visual.

It was the time before the 13<sup>th</sup> General Election and there was a plethora of government propaganda which were mostly appearing as flags all over Chin’s neighbourhood. The ruling government in Malaysia at that time, the Barisan National coalition, had been in power since the British had left Malaysia. Chin, disturbed by the presence of all the government propaganda started to take down as many Barisan National flags as she could. The juxtapose of placing the imagery of the weeds that she had drawn from her garden on top of the flags, created a narrative of the resilience of the people who do not hold power against the never changing image of the government which beared a static, powerful institution. Each weed, on each flag, was drawn individually. Each weed bearing its own individual identity on top of the flag which was never changing. It was an expression of the resilience of the people on the forefront of the symbols of the political parties. The people, shut out from the political process, while still having their own collective power. This seminal work set about Chin’s interest in themes using her art work to challenge the powers that be and understanding the role of the individual within the collective<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>12</sup> Chin, *Skype*.



Weeds Series #1, 2013, Sharon Chin<sup>13</sup>

“The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and the right. The ten thousand things depend on it; it holds nothing back. It fulfils its purpose silently and makes no claim.” Lao Tzu<sup>14</sup>

Having read Ursula K Le Guin’s translation of the “Tao Te Ching, 1997”, a book first written approximately twenty five hundred years ago, Chin learned that the first clear expressions of an anarchist sensibility may be traced back to the Taoists in ancient China from about the sixth century BC. The principal Taoist work may be considered one of the greatest anarchist classics. “Lao Tzu” the old philosopher, trying vainly to describe what is ineffable, likens it to an empty vessel, a river flowing home to the sea, and an uncarved block. The Tao, he asserts, follows what is natural. It is the way in which the universe works, the order of nature which gives all things their being and sustains them<sup>15</sup>. It is important to note that Chin’s interest in the Tao is not merely an outsider discovery, but could be seen as a process of gaining wisdom from her own Chinese ancestry. This philosophy set a precedent, for Chin’s way of challenging the authorities, giving her a sense of the bigger picture beyond her art work, especially at a time where freedom of speech was very much controlled.

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<sup>13</sup> Sharon Chin, “Weeds/Rumpai”, published 2013, <http://sharonchin.com/archive/exhibitions/weedsrumpai/>

<sup>14</sup> Le Guin, Ursula. “Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way.” Shambala Publications, Inc, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Josh, “Anarchism and taoism.” Josh. Published January 1, 2005. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/josh-anarchism-and-taoism>

“Tracking various art-related controversies over the years, I believe the ‘ruptures’ have set us back, creating more misunderstanding and mutual suspicion than anything else – both within the arts community and in how the public relates to art.” – Sharon Chin, 2016<sup>16</sup>

Living in Port Dickson made Chin reflect on the intersection of life and politics. At this time there was a movement called “Bersih” which was meant to be a people’s movement. The term meaning “Clean”, which was advocating for clean and fair elections in Malaysia<sup>17</sup>. Chin was moved to join in the movement and activism however having been involved, she learnt more about the origins of the movement and was not quite satisfied by the politics of the “Bersih” organization . It was disturbing, but not in a good way<sup>18</sup>. “Bersih” branded itself as being a people’s movement, the reality was that much origins of the leadership were closely tied to the opposition coalition “Pakatan Rakyat”. According to Chin, the rhetoric did not match the reality of it being a true people’s movement. More than that, Chin was made to feel like just a number to make up the volume of the movement.



Bersih Rally, 2011<sup>19</sup>

Chin sought to understand what was going on rather than just being there as a number. This idea that something was not tenable was where the conception of “Mandi Bunga/Flower Bath, 2013” originated. “Mandi Bunga” is about exploring how to conceive collective action while still remaining as individuals. The artist describes the Malaysian political psyche having

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<sup>16</sup> Chin, Sharon. "Spectacles – Cermin Mata: A Conversation." Sharon Chin. Published April 4, 201. <http://sharonchin.com/spectacles-cermin-mata-a-conversation/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gooch, Liz, “Thousands of Malaysians Rally for Changes to Elections”. New York Times Published July 9, 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/asia/10malaysia.html>

<sup>18</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>19</sup> Gooch, New York Times.

strong roots in feudalism, and this has not changed even with the rise of the opposition forces who challenged the ruling government at that time. It did not seem enough to just be calling something a people's movement, but Chin explored the need for politics to be done a different way<sup>20</sup>.

“Nothing important can be achieved alone. It is not just about maintaining an individual identity, but also about care. To care for each other on a personal level.” -Sharon Chin<sup>21</sup>

Not wanting to accept that the means can be justified by the end, this exploration of care for the individual, within a collective, is the heart of the project. “Mandi Bunga” is a flower bath, which is a ritual of personal care, that women perform often before an important ceremonious event such as a wedding. The traditional flower bath, is literally having a bath in a vessel full of flowers. Chin uses this traditional act of care in her work to perform a public ritual with 100 participants as part of the Singapore Biennale 2013. It is a contemporary take on the tradition which explores themes far beyond personal care and goes in to the idea of collective action. At the time of the project, the participants each decorated their own sarong to wear prior to the performance. It was about participation and individuality in the democratic process. Chin links this to the idea of not just showing up to elections and voting, not merely participating in a process that has been engineered by the elites. The artist's image of true leaders are people who include people in the political process. She acknowledges that this requires a lot of trust<sup>22</sup>.



Mandi Bunga/ Flower Bath, 2013, Sharon Chin<sup>23</sup>

Prior to the performance for “Mandi Bunga”, there was no rehearsal. This was strictly intentional because the workshop to create the personalised sarongs, was seen as the rehearsal.

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<sup>20</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>21</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>22</sup> Chin, *Skype*.

<sup>23</sup> Sharon Chin, “Mandi Bunga/Flower Bath”, Published 2013 <http://sharonchin.com/archive/projects/mandi-bunga/>

The colour theme of the performance was yellow, which incidentally is also the colour that “Bersih” used, bringing the sentiment back towards the people’s movement in Malaysia. It was the contact and communication which seemed to be important in the process of being an individual within the collective. “Mandi Bunga” takes elements of tradition, performance, individual and collective action. The relation between the individual and the collective has occupied psychoanalysis since Freud's writings on group psychology (Freud, 1955 [1921])<sup>24</sup>. Freud states that the greater the number of people in whom the same emotion can be simultaneously observed, the stronger does this automatic compulsion grow. The individual loses his power of criticism, and lets himself slip into the same emotion. However, in doing so, he increases the excitement of the other people, who had produced this effect upon him<sup>25</sup>. In the case of Chin’s experience with Bersih, she does not seem satisfied just by the fact that the movement had reached a similar identity of intensity of emotion. Her exploration was more than achieving an effect or goal, but having an identity in the mass movement. Chin explores this widely analysed concept in a contemporary Asian context in her attempt to understand the socio-political landscape that surrounds her better. While “Mandi Bunga” might have given Chin a sense of resolution about how to care for the individual in the context of a collective, one must ask if this is a replicable model from a national movement involving tens of thousands of individuals.

The works of Sharon Chin explored in this article make up only a minute representation of her body of works. Nevertheless, they are still key milestones through Chin’s artistic career. Having made some of her most notable works overseas, Chin continues to be concerned of how her artwork can return home, for Malaysia to benefit from her works. Her isolation from the art world has pushed her to push the boundaries of the gallery, extending the lengths of her influence in to production design, illustrating graphic novels and continuing to be concerned about the state of her nation. Malaysia has since had a change in government in 2018, the first in six decades. Chin’s art works remain relevant even in the new ruling, a call for a new type of politics to be done, be it from the new or old leaders.

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<sup>24</sup> Freud, S. (1955 [1921]). “Group psychology and the analysis of the ego,” in *Standard Edition, Vol. 18*, ed J. Strachey (London: Hogarth), 69–143.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, S. “Group psychology and the analysis of the ego”



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