

Shirley Tse

By NAOMI LAWRENCE

Shirley Tse is an artist whose work pushes conceptual boundaries and calls attention to the artificial sense of today's society, and the idea of mobility across borders, cultures, and generations. She was born in Hong Kong in the late 1960s, where she grew up as one of five siblings in a working class family, later attending The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her large-scale sculptures and installations have been shown internationally at places such as the Osage Kwun Tong in Hong Kong and Murray Guy in New York. Working mainly with plastic mediums, or a term that she prefers, synthetic polymers, she also explores her presence as a bicultural Asian woman living in the United States. She is currently based in Los Angeles, where she teaches art at the California Institute of the Arts and spends much of her time in her studio in Downtown Los Angeles.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

Do you recall any specific moments in your childhood when you were inspired to become a visual artist, as this career choice seems so far away from your early life in Hong Kong?

SHIRLEY TSE: My mother sent me to a strict Christian secondary school where we were not allowed to have long hair and I would want long hair all the time, so the one object I remember from this time, to this day, is cassette tapes. I would take a cassette tape and the next thing I knew was I would stretch it until it became really thin and I just fashioned together a wig. Another thing I remember is that we moved to the Kenyi district, which was right next to the container terminal. This was the world's third busiest terminal responsible for a huge amount of the import and export for China and as a teenager I would be coming home late and I would see the containment terminal on full operation, lit so bright you could see it for miles and then there would be cranes and mechanical arms moving giant boxes off of the vessels onto the dock with not a single person in sight. It was so interesting that everything was so automatic and that you could not see any humans.

AAN: Did you ever have interest in any other forms of art while growing up?
ST: When I was in high school I wrote a lot of poems, mostly in Chinese. But I did not think this would be a good career choice. I was very practical, so I did not pursue writing. Becoming a visual artist was pretty much an accident.

AAN: Do you think your interest in poetry comes through in your art?
ST: Absolutely. I work with sculpture and installation and a lot of the time my work involves using objects that are found in our culture and our society, there are already a lot of meanings that are embedded in these objects. I think to do this work is to decode the meaning of these objects. I approach my work in a much more poetic way, so if I use this object, it might be about the obvious meaning, but it also might be a slight twist, a transposition or a displacement in its meaning, or even maybe a pun. I use it so that the choices really are not direct and I really enjoy working with that poetic combination with meaning and form.



Quantum Shirley Series: Squaring the Circle (2010), foam core, polystyrene, reflective fabric, 96 x 16 x 36 inches



Shirley Tse in her studio

AAN: You are known for using polystyrene and plastic, can you talk about your choice behind using these materials in your work?

ST: For the last 15 years, I have been using synthetic polymer exclusively and it is a deliberate decision. I really wanted to address what kind of world we live in and I think that objects such as Styrofoam, or bubble wrap, have a huge significance in our world, because they are objects that are used in transportation, packing, as well as many other ways in the 21st century. If you look at the 20th century, to me the single salient feature is mobility: the movement of people & migration and immigration & as well as the transportation of goods. There has never been this level of trading as there is today, and I feel personally connected, because I am a product of immigration, therefore, this gives these objects great meaning to me.

And, as a woman, I really enjoy working on a bigger scale and so the lightness of these materials has allowed me to make really big installations without asking a single man to help. So it is very empowering to be able to manoeuvre the material on my own, to be able to have this physical mobility.

AAN: Does your more recent work convey the same ideas?
ST: About three years ago, I asked myself where to go next, and one of the ideas behind using synthetic polymer is not just the material itself, but also the idea of plasticity. I think this idea is related to me being a bi-cultural person in the US. I enjoy the idea of hybridity and that materials do not stay static. In my more recent work, I want to move away from the exclusivity of material and more into the idea of connectivity and networking & how our world is so interdependent and connected to each other. So you will see a lot of strands and webs in the new work.



AAN: Does your work have religious or political themes?
ST: I would say more spiritual. And political. Definitely political, but in a much more indirect, subtle way.

AAN: Why did you pick sculpture over other forms of art?
ST: I really enjoy the three dimensionality; I am not talking about a physical one, but a mental one. When it comes to working with sculpture, it is so challenging and exciting for me to have to negotiate between a real world of substance that has chemistry, weight and gravity to it as well as meaning. I have to consider the physics and the financial aspects as well. To be a true sculptor, you almost have to learn everything: cooking, woodwork, metalwork, using a sewing machine, and alchemy! Which is all challenging and exciting, but frustrating sometimes. I like this negotiation between all of these different things. It is training in the world that I think we need to be able to live more peacefully.

See You At The Bottom Of The Sea (2007), aluminum, jade, resin, cable, pulley, flash light, steel, post-consumer plastic debris, 50 x 150 x 40 inches

AAN: What is your relationship between teaching and your work?
ST: What I make in my studio reflects the exchange I have with my students, because I talk a lot about this negotiation within a variable factor. I call my work my art practice, it is not just an artwork, or an art piece, it is my art practice, and teaching is a part of that practice. This is because I enjoy conversation, dialogue, and being intellectually stimulated by artist's ideas and concepts in history. The result of experimentation in my classroom might end up in my studio & vice versa.

AAN: How do you feel about contemporary art in today's society?
ST: I think contemporary art is an exciting field, as it is no longer limited by media. We are in a post-medium-specific world. We are not limited by the simple dichotomy between material and concept.

AAN: How do you see your future as an artist and your work evolving in a different direction?
ST: Well, I see my future vision and my statement in my work to keep exploring the same idea of negotiation that I was talking about earlier. It is the future, or the vision, in my work that is the statement in my work. I also to pass this on to my students who are learning from me. I think the world is stuck in two-dimensional thinking, black-and-white thinking, and so many people do not understand that things work in a dynamic way, in a negotiated 'conglomerate'. So if there is any mission that I have, it is to put artwork out in the world that will encourage this perspective.

In April 2012, Shirley Tse of Cal Arts and Terri Friedman of the CCA are organising a symposium on sculpture pedagogy, specifically to begin a conversation about the state of sculpture education and visions for its future. To be held at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. <http://shirleytse.net>.