

Looking at Lindy Lee's paintings is an act of meditation. Listen to the silence and feel the stillness. The bloody red, the sublime, acute indigo and blue and the rich golden orange all draw you into the looming black portraits of vaguely familiar aunts and cousins... of old identity card photos and studio snapshots from old family albums of school friends our parents only vaguely remember now. The sounds we think we hear strike painfully at the notes of memory. In these paintings, iconic Shanghai figure-types are stripped of their trivial contemporary poster-shop pop to confront us with the bittersweet resonance of a lost past. We are pulled into a space where the tunnel deepens, where the colors intensely around silent Kuan Yin, where the grids fill with light around heavy black Buddha heads.

LINDY LEE: OUR ORIGINAL FACE

by J. Anurendra

Lindy Lee's paintings are of this world and more so. They radiate with an energy that is moving, luminous and transcendent. Her intimate, spiritual portraits, arranged in a signature grid format, willingly expose her deepest feelings, pondering herself, her beliefs and her family with delicate honesty, care and respect. In exploring issues of identity and place, of deep spirituality and firm pragmatism, Lee, hailed as one of the most eminent Australian artists of her generation, continues to explore contradiction or, as she describes it, the second-degreeness born of being a first generation Australian of Chinese descent who grew up within the context of the White Australia policy (1). Simply put, the reason and meaning of her work seem to be anchored in the need to know where she fits. An infinitely more eloquent writer, Melissa Chiu describes it best as the attempt to explain differences between an original culture and the assimilation of that culture elsewhere (2). For Lee, growing up in Australia meant state school from Monday to Friday and family and the Chinese Club on Saturdays and Sundays.

Lee describes the early works that made her famous - her method of photocopying old master paintings - mounted and painted-over remakes of Rembrandt and El Greco fragments - as perfectly apt in the context of how she saw herself - as a person and an artist, a flawed and bad copy of both Australia and China. Reproduction and the flaws within the copying process were a valid experience, enabling her to express her art as she needed it to be - intangible but real, rather like faith. The appropriation of European imagery and the need to place herself within a European canon raised issues she evidently felt were at the heart of the meaning of her work of that period - the very fact that she was questioning her place meant that she did not belong.

As she became interested in Eastern philosophies and immersed herself in the precepts of Zen Buddhism, a related essential question arose in the intention of the work that followed - what is our original face before our parents were born and who are we beyond our parents? Incorporating Zen philosophy into her works, not so much as an abstract thing but rather in the context of the peculiarities of her life and her relationship with the world and the universe, Lee reveals in her love for the religious and cultural narrative, trying to understand and accept our place within our physical existence as well as the intangibility of our invisible emotional experience... the conundrum of being human. The meaning within her work - expressed through the dichotomy between the abstract and the representational - is directed towards our inner world, allowing us to feel with clarity and awareness, beyond the tension and turmoil and chaos of deep change. The result - a far from murky blend of abstraction and portraiture married to an Eastern mysticism told in very autobiographical terms.

Much has been written about Lee's post-modernist preference for appropriation - the photocopy, as well as the photographic portraits in repeat that dictate her compositions, content and their meaning. As important as the image itself, the artist is equally involved in how that image breaks down or degrades within the copying process. Lee sees this degrading or the alterations or flaws in the image as the perfect allegory for where the authenticity of our existence exists, a mirror of our own imperfections.

The works in *Cycles through a Chinese Landscape* continue to incorporate this method of composing the surface using iconic portraits, bringing together images, themes and approaches from the past several years. Here are images of family members copied from old photos, fragments of images of the Buddha, Kuan Yin and anonymous other actors, met during visits to China, specially taken by Lee's husband and longtime collaborator Robert Scott-Mitchell with the paintings in mind. Presented in a range of formats - scroll-like banners, panel paintings, accordion books, each work offers something of herself, embracing the silence of her

thoughts. Lee composes colors that create shimmering light and then sets faces against them in a still black that seems to imply an emotional darkness evoking a mood of mystery and destiny, of intimacy and detachment. These are atmospheric paintings where the instinctual play of brilliant color balances with the density of form and shadow, where subtle inner feelings reach under the heart. Each color evokes an emotion in the viewer - the layers of black imply deep loss and the loss of culture - the blackness of the past. Red symbolises blood, blue, spirit, healing, trust. Green - cobalt and jade - are the colors of birth, the ocean of life... and of death, of course. Gold offers compassion.

Twelve years ago, Lee took up a residency in China to learn traditional Chinese calligraphy. It proved frustrating so she simply appropriated and reinvented the tradition into a loose, distinctly expressionist play of pigment and wax markings and throws of ink that lend another emotional dimension to the tensions that inhabit the grids in her paintings. The splashed pigment relates to an ancient Zen tradition called "Flung Ink Painting". After meditation, the artist relinquishes her own will, throws the ink and lets all the condition of the universe that exists in that moment, create the mark.

In a large painting like the blue *Nonattained Kuan Yin*, Lee embeds the fragments of the face of Kuan Yin, goddess of Mercy within her electric blue spiritual landscape, and suddenly ordinary sight moves into visionary forms. Its monumental size and its dramatic closeness open new windows into the world beyond our senses, reflecting not only her personal consciousness but our collective ones as well. The undeniable power and dynamism of smaller panels like *Shin Chi (True Encounter)* and *True World* rely as much on the abstract color fields around them as the actual actors to encompass the silent energy of their aloneness. In works like *Auntie and Lily Anest*, the artist finds the light which contains the space, she expands the feelings and forms that evolve out of that space in thrown ink and calligraphic coils, and always within the context of the grid - inspired by the Hua Yen Buddhist idea of the net of Indra, that which connects the universe, connects us all, allowing us to exist and meet within the perfect jewels of its knots. In these works the silence is suddenly broken by the splatter of hot wax and pigment slashed across the picture plane. Just as quickly, this intensity returns to the silence of contemplation and acceptance.

We are inspired by Lindy Lee's paintings. In spite of the specificity of their characters and experience, Lee's stories of self touch us because they are our stories too. Themes of identity and race, of memory and loss, displacement and isolation fill our consciousness every day; but so do moments of inclusivity, integration, sensitivity, wholeness, wonder and awareness. Lee's paintings come from a place that is open and honest. She is willing to expose her deep feelings. She has shown us that without being vulnerable, there is no transformation. Her version of the truth, however painful, is quite beautiful... and hopeful.

- (1) *Lindy Lee in conversation with the writer, Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Malaysia, July 2006*
(2) *Ben Genocchio & Melissa Chiu, Lindy Lee, Art & Australia Monograph No.8, Fine Arts Press & Craftman House, Sydney, 2001*

FRONT COVER - *Nonattained Kuan Yin*
2006, archival pigment inks and acrylic paint on paper, 160 x 150 cm
original photograph by Robert Scott-Mitchell

Venerable Chu-Chih, 2006, archival pigment inks and acrylic paint on paper, 40 x 200 cm



Born in Brisbane, Australia in 1954, Lindy Lee is a first-generation Chinese-Australian. She has been actively practicing and exhibiting throughout Australia since the 1980s and holds a PhD (Art Theory) from the University of New South Wales.

Lindy Lee has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally and her work is included in most major public Australian collections. Some significant exhibitions include the Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales 1986; *Australia Beyond the Mundane: Australian Art to China*, 1988; *Proscure: Artistspace*, New York; *Prospect'93*, Kunstverein, Frankfurt; *Photography is Dead*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1996; *Element SIAC*, Beijing, 2005; *We are Australians Too: Women Against Racism*, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Casula, NSW, 2006. Lindy Lee lives and works in Sydney. From July to August, 2006, she took part in a residency programme at Rimbun Dahan, Kuang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Lindy Lee is represented by Rodlyn Odey9 Gallery, Sydney, and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne in Australia, and by Valentine Willie Fine Art in the Southeast Asian region.

Exhibition dates : 5th - 28th October 2006

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Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art

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From left to right : **Lily-Amah, Aunty, Grandma Lee Wooi**
All : 2006, archival pigment inks on pure cotton canvas, 210 x 61 cm

digital printing by blackstone print



From left to right : **Brother Wah, Dark Star*, Shih-Chi (True Encounter)***
All : 2006, archival pigment inks on pure cotton canvas, 210 x 61 cm
*original photograph by robert scott-mitchell

digital printing by blackstone print



From left to right : **True World*, Buddhadharma*, Chu-Chih, the Pilgrim***
All : 2006, archival pigment inks on pure cotton canvas, 210 x 61 cm
*original photograph by robert scott-mitchell

digital printing by blackstone print