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Fantasies so varied and bizarre?

Ruth Pelzer-Montada takes a look at the recent print works of **Hannah Lim** that seek to address and reclaim Chinoiserie

‘Fantasies so varied and bizarre’ is how Giorgio Vasari (1998) described the so-called “grotesques” of classical Roman design and wall ornaments discovered underground in 1500. It could also apply to the installation-based sculptures, ceramic objects, drawings and prints of Edinburgh College of Art alumna, London-based Singaporean-British artist Hannah Lim.

Lim’s artistic strategy revisits “ornament” in multiple guises. Her typical sculptural installations (like *Shards of Fire* recently shown at her solo ‘Ornamental Mythologies’ at Edinburgh Printmakers) consist of filigree laser-cut plywood, usually painted. *Shards of Fire* is reminiscent of – albeit at a hugely enlarged scale – china plate display stands. Patterns often appear adopted from intricate Chinese paper cuttings or wood carvings. The same plywood tracteries appear throughout her work, including as frames for Lim’s drawings and prints.

A feature of Lim’s work is the evocation of opulent materials, objects, colours and motifs and their respective historical stylistic provenances, deriving from a mix of both “East” and “West”, as already indicated: Chinese interior design and artefacts (re-conceptualised for the Western market as so-called *Chinoiserie*) as well as the aforementioned Renaissance wall grotesques. Yet everything is pre-dominantly fabricated by DIY construction and from cheap or playroom materials: In addition to flat-pack-reminiscent plywood, Jesmonite and polymer clay are employed to fashion her small sculptures, titled *Snuff Bottles*. Both substances figure large in hobbyist craft and DIY social media blogs. Even if the result of budgetary necessity for a young artist, the nature of the materials and their construction seems fitting – the luxuriousness and splendour of “Asian” (and Western) ornament hiding much uglier realities.

Lim’s colour schemes reiterate the discordant connotations of the objects and their construction. Tasteful rich greens, muted powdery blues and red dominate. The latter are indicative of happiness, signalling festivities in Chinese culture, with blue representing the taboo counterpart. This refined mix of colours is contrasted by incongruous pastel-shades, especially evident in the *Snuff Bottles*, but also appears in the drawings and prints.

As David Batchelor in his aptly titled classic *Chromophobia* (2000) has noted, despite postmodernism’s expunging of modernism’s conventions, there remains a lingering sense of colour and ornament as excess and/or its attribution to the “other”, the “oriental”, the “lower classes”, the “primitive”, and hence anathema to certain conceptions of modernity, vice Adolf Loos’s much-quoted verdict “ornament is crime” – only echoing John Ruskin’s similar distaste.

Lim’s motifs similarly comprise diverse references familiar in both Eastern or Western culture (the tiger; the lion) as well as hybrid, often mythical creatures, such as the multi-species Chinese qilin, the multi-bodied Heluo-fish and the Judaic celestial multi-winged seraph. In addition, the *Snuff Bottles* evoke the crucial role of china – porcelain and ceramics – in the West’s construction of the “East”, China in particular (see Cheng 2018).

Other than second-order references to Chinese culture in form of Chinoiserie, Lim’s most obvious allusions are Renaissance grotesques. Both valued and devalued even during the

Renaissance, grotesques, although derived from classical antiquity, did not serve the favoured Renaissance appropriation of classical order, proportion and clarity. Instead, their fantastical, “impossible”, “unnatural” melding of the organic and inorganic, of human and animal, topped by an excessive display of colour, contravened the predominant values espoused by Renaissance art and scholars (Squire “‘Fantasies so Varied and Bizarre’”: The Domus Aurea, the Renaissance, and the “Grotesque”” in: Dinter and Buckley (eds). *A Companion to the Neronian Age* (2013) pp.444-64). For Lim their hybrid nature offers a fitting avenue for her artistic project.

Reference to the grotesques is most apparent in her recent, mostly small-scaled, detailed drawings and prints. If originally grotesques were largely the décor framing mythological Greek or Roman painted scenes, in Lim’s scheme they become the protagonists.

In manner and style, Lim’s etchings, a technique she tackled for the first time for her show at EP, resemble the drawings. With its close link to engraving and its probable roots in the goldsmith’s art of armour decoration, the etched line comes closest to the detailed line of grotesque ornament and is deployed by Lim to imitate the latter’s illustrative, non-authorial drawing style, foregoing a personalised signature line. This also pertains to the linear, rather than tonal and painterly shading – the former reminiscent of the finely executed lines of fresco painting in order to overcome its limitations in rendering tones. The colour palette here consists largely of primaries that take on the cheerful mood of the playroom, hence perhaps a (deliberate) nod to a lack of sophistication or an incongruent note against too much “good taste”.

Lim also produced one screenprint in collaboration with EP which demonstrates this clashing blend: its internal ‘frame’ revels in rich colour ornament while its centre contains a faithful reproduction of a drawing in the manner and style just described.

ANY print ALWAYS carries the connotation of the non-original, of imitation, on account of its propensity for reproduction, multiplication, copy. Pragmatically, this can be linked to the phenomenon of mass publication of printed pattern books and albums spreading Renaissance grotesque ornament and design widely throughout Europe. In the context of Lim’s overarching theme, these predominant values of print fit in perfectly with the characteristics so far outlined that point to the “inauthentic” as the “essence” or essential ontology of “yellow” femininity, as conceived by the West.

Yet Lim’s skilful mixing of signifiers of “East” and “West” by means of grotesque imagery and Chinoiserie are also motivated by the fact, as the artist has stated, that today ‘cultural designs are shared as opposed to appropriated, it is no longer about one culture being moulded to the demands of another.’

More specifically, her work responds to scholar Anne Anlin Cheng’s contribution to feminist and modernist theory, which examines both similarities but also differences between the female ‘black’ and ‘yellow’ body respectively and proposes an alternative model of personhood based on the latter (see Cheng ‘Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman’ in: *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2018) pp.415-46).

Coining the term ‘ornamentalism’ – with a deliberate allusion to Edward Said’s influential, if now critically viewed *Orientalism* (1978) – Cheng argues that the ‘yellow woman’ in the Western imagination is always already conceived as ornament, that is, as artefact – beyond

the familiar critical understanding of racialized femininity in terms of commodification and sexual fetishisation. In contrast to the black female body that is wholly identified with and reduced to fleshly 'flesh', the 'yellow' female 'emerges *as* and *through* ornament'. Cheng acknowledges both the real problematics of individuation that the Western cultural imagination poses for "Asian" women, but also posits that the tenets of ornamentalism permit not only insight into the non-humanness that haunts, even as it is purged from, (Western) notions of the human body. Additionally, it also presents the possibility in conceiving of modern personhood as always already based on 'inorganic, aggregated, non-European flesh'.

Lim's recurring motifs of eyes, flames, drops/droplets, often mirrored or doubled, in addition to the amalgamation of the animate and the inanimate, plants and animals, hybrids of different species all point in this direction and hint at Lim's personal grappling with her double identity which in (predominantly white) European culture reduces her to one – the 'yellow woman' at that. She herself has traced her thematic focus to the contrast between multicultural London, where she grew up, and the dominant whiteness encountered on arriving at Edinburgh College of Art. But as we have seen, she astutely avoids representing the female 'yellow' body, instead taking seriously Cheng's suggestion of the 'yellow woman' as artefact that entails not only domination but also promises a way out.

Cheng has argued that 'flesh that passed through objecthood needs "ornament" to get back to itself'. Hence, 'ornamentalism points us not only to disciplinary usage ... but also to what it might take to reconceptualise personhood for unmade persons'.

'Fantasies varied' – yes, indeed. 'Bizarre'? – absolutely not.