



Quiet and Unsettling

A response to *Soft and Precious* from Henry Heng Lu

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Aestheticizing ancient Chinese culture has been a common practice conducted by western museums. The narratives surrounding the exoticized Chinese objects are constructed to contribute to the ongoing practice of *Othering* on an institutional level. The exhibition *Soft and Precious* is comprised of a new body of photographic sculptures by Toronto-based artist Alvin Luong. In the making of the work, Luong samples the metal surfaces of a wide range of objects in the Chinese Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) which are placed densely in an enormous space provided for the Chinese Collection. The objects used include wine vessels, Buddha sculptures, vases and decorative basins. Metal is an economic asset, as Alvin notes. In this case, it is melted down and duplicated onto a flat surface, subject to re-examination and re-evaluation.

Digitally altered and stitched together in a wallpaper-like composition, the textures and patterns of these objects are stripped of their cultural connotations and specificities, although they might still be able to be considered "Asian" when examined closely. The act of viewing and sampling a non-western culture in a western museum is incorporated in Luong's work as a performative gesture. The problematic act of viewing and taking away is an integral part of the conceptualization of the work, as it references how the Chinese antiques at the ROM were precariously acquired. Without explaining the histories and contexts in which they arrived at the ROM, most exhibition labels for the antiques are merely plain museological introductions.

In contemporary Chinese culture, the term 'banana' is used to describe an East Asian person, especially one of Chinese descent, who was born or has lived for a long time in the west and has been disconnected from the Asian culture to which they supposedly belong. The metaphor is very straightforward: yellow on the outside, white on the inside. They might identify themselves as a western person, while they may always be seen as an outsider in the west. Luong's work reminds me of this. In these sculptures I see the indication of such shifts of identities and related confusions about the artist, but from a reversed angle. Borrowing what are usually considered western forms of sculptural works by minimalist artists such as Richard Serra, Donald Judd and Robert Morris, the work is weaved with boiled down "Asian" surfaces. In contrast to the seemingly masculinist quality of the original minimalist works, the often feminized Asian culture, as the exhibition title suggests, is often seen soft and gentle. Luong's utilization of materiality instigates an east versus west dialogue on cultural characteristics.

Alvin Luong's grandparents were refugees who fled from political turmoil in China and relocated to Vietnam in the 1960s. His parents immigrated to Canada later on. Born in Toronto, Luong has been adapting himself to paradoxical positions as an artist operating in western art as a diasporic Chinese person. *Soft and Precious* is his self-portrait. It complicates the notion of performing Chineseness in a

western context. Concerned with representation of Asian Canadian art practices and the western gaze directed at Chinese culture, the proposition of Luong's work allows him to reconnect with his culture and investigate his in-between identity negotiated by intercultural experience. Playful yet unsettling, Luong's way of approaching Chinese culture confronts the west's ongoing essentialist views of the Chinese culture. The generalizing of Asianness in this sense transforms the body of work into an embodiment of critique on institutions and socio-political injustices in art practices.

"Chinese" is a highly ambiguous and debatable term. It is dangerous to conflate the realities and identifications of the Chinese in the diaspora and those who live in Greater China. Born and raised in the post-socialist People's Republic of China, I certainly experienced a different Chinese culture from Luong. Could the collective memory of a Chinese culture sometimes just be an illusion? How does the application of Chineseness affect the ways we think of ourselves?

Another issue the exhibition brings forward is the visibility of Asian Canadian art practices. In his statement, Luong asks: "Why are there no Chinese-Canadian or Asian-Canadian artists exhibiting in Canadian museums?" Indeed, Asian Canadian art practices are still being under-addressed in major spheres of Canadian contemporary art. To illustrate: As of today, Paul Wong, the pioneering media artist, is still the only Asian Canadian artist to have had a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada (in 1995). Under the implicit rule by the aesthetic value system controlled by the mainstream Canadian art world, do the Asian characteristics of the work by Asian Canadian artists determine whether they could get recognized? Typecasting seems to be one of the few ways nowadays to pique people's interest in Asian Canadian artistic endeavours. How could artists of Asian descent position themselves in a predominantly white artscape?

In its physical aspect, the existence of the body of work in *Soft and Precious* could be conceived as quiet and lost, just like how the Chinese antiques are displayed at the ROM. Interestingly, the takeaways titled *Footnote* featuring photographs of the sculptures situated in Luong's own home, which may be read as a façade of East Asian culture, are also presented in the exhibition along with the work. The awkward placements of the sculptures in a domestic setting depicted in these photographs poignantly mirror an unsettling space of cultural displacement and aesthetic politics.

Henry Heng Lu, 2017

Alvin Luong | Alvin Luong is an artist from Toronto. Luong is interested in why documentations and instructions are created and how they can be interpreted. This set of interests is put into practice through research, performance, moving image, and photography. Luong has exhibited in group exhibitions at Gallery 44 and Trinity Square Video, and exhibited commissioned works at Trinity Square Video. He has performed and lectured at Blackwood Gallery. Most recently, Luong has exhibited a collaborative video installation copresented by Y+ Contemporary and the Images Festival, the exhibition was awarded as the strongest new media installation in the festival. Upcoming projects include a group show at Idea Exchange in July, a collaborative installation taking the form of an escape room game at Bunker2 in August, and a film commissioned by VTape and Reel Asian for Ontario150 premiering in November 2017.

Henry Heng Lu | Henry Heng Lu is a Chinese-born, Toronto-based artist and curator. Lu primarily works with photography, video and performance to investigate cultural identities in terms of values, doubt, insecurity and vulnerability. He is the translator of The New Gallery in Calgary, and co-founder and curator of Call Again, a Toronto-based initiative dedicated to creating space for contemporary Asian diasporic art practices. He is currently a candidate in the Masters of Visual Studies: Curatorial Studies program at the University of Toronto.

EXHIBITION

26 May - 08 July 2017

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday 26 May | 8 PM

ARTIST TALK

Friday 26 May | 7 PM

PLATFORM

Director | Collin Zipp

Communications | Ray Fenwick

Admin Assistant | Genevieve Collins

IMAGE | Alvin Luong, *Footnote*, 2017

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