

Locating Shiau-Peng Chen

David Thomas

Shiau-Peng Chen's work is located amid the world. As an artist she has traversed the world, shifting and residing between centres and peripheries.¹ Her work and life reflects the fact that we are globally mobile and globally connected.

She has moved East, West, North, South, working at various times in Taiwan, the USA, Australia and Europe.

In doing so her work and life raises questions regarding the validity of defining her work in terms of a singular geographical, national or cultural perspective. It is both Eastern and Western.

Her work celebrates this complexity.

It is global yet it retains its cultural origins and at the same time questions them. It is situated amid cultures. This I believe is one of the qualities of contemporary practice today. It is also what makes her work dynamic and valid.

Initially her work has the appearance of contemporary Western hard-edged abstraction. There are flat coloured geometric shapes...vibrant colour fields... tonal relationships activating and activated by dynamic shapes. Her work appears abstract in the NY sense... but it isn't.

There is more at work here than a new form of the Neo Geo of Peter Halley, or the Non-Objective forms evident in recent Australian and European practices, (although one can see obvious connections to them).

Chen is aware of these genres but she adds something that is not simply Eastern or Western. She adds the idea of personal narrative. Her work whilst initially looking "abstract" evokes memory, of personal spaces, of remembered geometries of the sites that she has inhabited. One reading of her work aligns it with the original meaning of the word "abstraction", that is the image is abstracted FROM an external reality.

This attempt to engage with personal offers us something beyond idealisation of purist modernist abstraction. Rather than generalise and create an ideal form, Chen's work references specific sites and it particularizes shapes from her experience.

We as viewers of her paintings are not engaged with ideal form but with contingent form.

She achieves this by employing memories of logos, maps or plans of cities: sites that she has lived in, worked in, creating (almost) a new type of landscape painting. In the case of *My Taipei III - My Galleries* Chen riffs on the logos of galleries where she has exhibited in Taiwan. These shapes filtered through memories generate specific compositions and colour relationships.

Her strategy of turning objective designs, plans or maps of external places into a subjective experience through the object of painting generates deferred experience of memory and thus of TIME not only of space.

The element of time is further enhanced through her use of seriality of her works. Chen works in series.

¹ By using this terminology I am not ascribing a more positive value to centre over periphery. Though the terminology of centres and peripheries is problematic and in many ways is a questionable characterisation today.

The size and scale of the works in the *My Taipei III - My Galleries* series are big enough to generate powerful optical effects through their specific relationships of coloured and tonal shape, yet they remain small enough to remain intimate.

Memory is transformed through her abstracted forms into energy and feeling.

Her work is a balance between representation and presentation.

In them there exists a dialogue between the objective language of maps, plans, logos and subjective feeling, sensation and energy.

According to Oswald Siren the great Swedish scholar on traditional Chinese painting, the first law of Chinese aesthetics concerns “qi yun” or spirit resonance.

Shiau-Peng Chen’s work has this but not in the traditional sense of brush and ink painting but we find it cloaked under the guise of a contemporary cloak of abstraction of dynamic colour contrasts and active shape. These paintings exist as sites of energy, of feeling because of Chen’s articulation of form and colour.

As I have proposed whilst her paintings retain the appearance of the genre of “abstraction” they are not. They have the look Non-objective art but they are not, they deal with signs, but the signs are unstable. Her meanings shift and move.

These paintings contain paradox, irony and humour combined with a deeply felt engagement with painting, politics and histories.

Her works are a testament to her passage through time, place and history.

Shiau-Peng Chen allows us to come for the ride.

Enjoy the journey.

David Thomas

Melbourne

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