

Review: Studio Visit

Studio visits can resemble a trip to a haunted house—the sort where they offer you \$10,000 if you’re still sane by the time morning comes, but in the case of Bay Area-based Christine Wong Yap I never felt my endurance seriously at risk. Her studio at CCA’s San Francisco campus is neat and bright; I could have picked up a pin from the floor had one fell out of my mohair Continental suit. Her work is uniformly exciting and assured; the only hesitation she betrays is, perhaps, a sensation of too many projects going at once, nearly all of them worthy of discussion, but at the same time, perhaps one too many really to see all the way around. But on the other hand, is anyone’s work really so globular that you need to see it 360 degrees, and in any case it’s obvious she’s not working towards transparency. Even when she makes her vehicle invisibility, you can still see the plus and minus signs of its making.

One such series, “From Bad to Worse,” involves the artist’s own mistakes, painstakingly documented and photographed. A scraped car door, a parking ticket, the mess of a spilled toolbox, each gets the full Wolfgang Tillmans beauty treatment: why not, a ticket is more than a measure of infraction, it’s a whole course of deportment in one amply designed text. They—the traffic police—teach us how to behave. I found some of this attitude disconcertingly

reminiscent of the work Cary Leibowitz used to do in the 1990 era when identity politics met up with what Ralph Rugoff dubbed “pathetic masculinity.” Leibowitz’ “Kick Me” signs and sad sack autobiographical excoriations seemed like rips in the social fabric then, during a time when self-esteem scored the highest possible human value. When Christine Wong Yap displays her collapsed toolbox, she seems less a loser than a collector—a connoisseur of frailty and forgetfulness, and God bless the child who’s got her own.

I had noticed her work around San Francisco when it popped up here and there in alternative art spaces. These were what she calls her “cuts.” Dozens of alphabetical characters scissored into a large piece of paper spell out, in Goth/biker type, words which must be deciphered out of antiquity. Looks like the signature on Shakespeare’s will, the one so baroque an idiot must have written it, and Bacon the plays. Try to make out what the words say, these slaps in the face of linearity, and the kicker is that as often as not the most banal of texts emerge, laundry lists, blog entries, “ONEHALFGALLONOF MILK,” etc. One such cut hangs from the ceiling, its letters dripping down in black curls, Burroughs’ language as virus mutated into a toxic rain. The word itself, the use of the word “cut,” tintinnabulates with overtones of the body, like the etchings on Cathie

Opie’s back, the slash in the Lucio Fontana.

Finally there’s a new series of sculptures, I suppose they are, anyhow they’re packages wrapped up in ornamental ribbons, but without the packages, so you just see the ribbon stretched and folded around an imaginary space. The ribbons are actually taped to thin tiny strips of some thin wood like balsa, bent at 90 degree angles everywhere, then topped with the curly festoons professional wrappers like to decorate with. These extraordinary creations (her “Presents” she calls them—“Green Present,” “White Present,” etc.) make you think about inner and outer life; the contrast between the imagined agency of 90 degree geometry versus a curl’s resolute frou-frou. They’re about Asian paper folding arts, and they’re about American excess and Bataillean potlatch, for what we gives pales next to the manner in which we give it. I came out of the studio thinking—about going home and trying to wrap up my empathy,—how to make what’s material disappear in general. As Kylie Minogue sang (in “Your Disco Needs You,” from *Light Years*, 2000-2001), “We’re sold on vanity, but that’s so see-through.” Are things made invisible more real than before? That’s been the question on all of our minds ever since Plato, and Christine Wong Yap’s new spin on it provokes as well as entertains.