Shifting Focus

I still remember my first meeting with An Gee Chan when she entered the interview at the RCA with a large folio of work, anxious and intense with a shy smile. As she leafed through her images, worlds spilled into the room, and stories tumbled from the mouth of an individual seemly reluctant to speak yet eager to share her wry observations and extraordinary imaginings, mixed with the news stories and overheard conversations, which populated her papercuts, ink drawings, and zines.

One of the most prolific and hard-working individuals I have ever encountered An Gee Chan experimented ceaselessly in the RCA workshops and has the ability to work in a wide range of media at vastly different scales. Adapting her papercuts to screen-print on enormous hoardings bounding our (then) building site in Battersea she created a narrative of building as process; connecting the building of the workshops with the making of work inside them. A characteristic doubling, playfully deconstructing the conditions of image making, buildings and presses have faces, things shift scale dramatically as things and people exchange places or merge.

Chan revels in the ambiguity of images in endless recombination. Viewing an early work, ‘Future head’ zooming into a papercut face, closer and closer to the person you instead get further away from the individual and more towards the conditions of the world. The head is crowded with ghosts and aliens living amongst people as they go about their everyday lives. The ‘Stressful City’ ink drawings also teem with ridiculous incident. A shocked and excited population is devoured by the city they also consume, fuelled by ‘Jamie’s Pies’ and ‘Anabolic Steroids’. The density of these cityscapes possibly echoes the density of Hong Kong, Chan's birthplace and home. Whilst Londoners tend to think of their home as crowded, a recent visitor from Hong Kong said it must be lovely to be in such a spacious city as we looked over the dense rooftops of Hammersmith.

If there is a trajectory in the work since 2009 it is that the images have got simpler, with an emphasis on the emotional relations of a small group of characters and less on the tumults of media or busyness of cities. A technique of painting directly onto screens using left over screen ink at the RCA required simplification and speed. The directness developed in recent work echoes the work of Rose Wylie, part diary, part wild fantasy. Recent trips to Ireland have given Chan access to very different pictorial traditions and underpopulated grey-green rural landscapes.

Working and living between two languages, Chan has an acute sense of the ridiculous and the possibilities for humour and misunderstanding that literal translation enables. *Melon Colin*, is both a sad fruit on a table and a person with a melon head. In Chan’s self-portrait *Loopy* (2016) which grew from dwelling on the strangeness of the word, a self is simultaneously erased and expressed. The face as puzzle, maze, brick and rings of tree growth, appears as both a revealed core and a mask. Many of her faces have doubled eyes and mouths, a disquieting kind of misregistration. In *Quiet Night* (2016) an elegantly dressed faceless woman sits next to a head on a table, it could be a hat stand, it could be a decapitated lover.

However, despite a melancholic emphasis on failures of communication, there is humour and tenderness in the dilemmas of her characters as they, like us all, navigate an unpredictable world, carried along by Chan’s sheer joy in image making and the confidence of her gestures.