

Preface

In Details

by Charles LaBelle, Hong Kong, May 2010

With keen perceptions of all things delicate, attuned to the realm of the miniscule and sensitive to the emotional shifts brought about by slight changes in one's environment, the three female artists, **Choi Yan Chi**, **Ivy Ma** and **Wai Kit Lam** presented in this exhibition, *In Details*, use their work to "pin" and carefully display – like a butterfly collector – small but significant details from their lives' experience.

Details here refers to those particular moments that typically pass unnoticed in the course of one's daily life; those moments in-between other moments which are easily forgotten or ignored: a fragment of a pop song heard in passing, the color of a shard of broken glass, a tiny bird hidden in the tangle of a bush, the breeze stirring the pages of a book, the sheen of water on just-washed tiles. All of these tiny "events" lie hidden in plain sight, surrounding us and playing upon us just beyond the realm of consciousness. Nevertheless they are always somehow "sensed" and when they do capture our attention they provoke moments of child-like wonder or Surrealist marvel.

In Details speaks of another way of addressing the world, reconsiders the notion of time, and challenges us with off-kilter perspectives. Here the nature of things seen takes on an alien atmosphere- sometimes dreamy, occasionally horrific. More than simply transforming such minor epiphanies into representational 'art objects', these artists' practices engage in a pure pursuit of knowledge, making discoveries which are rooted in a phenomenological, sensual realm.

The artists' emphasis on details does not consist in the too-easy (and god-like) gesture of enlarging the small but rather consists in physically getting closer to the seemingly insignificant. It's a gesture of supplication, a humble bending and stooping that literally brings one in closer contact with the world.

Thus, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous statement "God is in Detail," is reversed in the hands of Choi, Lam and Ma, who search not for perfection but find, in imperfection, a real beauty and a poignant echo of our very human relationship to the world. Starting from an empty place and refusing pre-conceived ideas, their work is neither "conceptual" nor "political" (though it is, in fact, both) but rather an "embodiment" or "incarnation." Refusing to make statements (which are always, at heart, justifications), their work aspires to a condition of facticity or state of being that is, quite simply, undeniable.

Choi Yan Chi's work involves the old childhood game of folding and playing with paper, but here the paper is printed with ready-made flower-patterns and images from the active protest movement in Hong Kong. The folding process itself is the formation (also the fragmentation) of the flower; while the playing of the paper is akin to the life cycle of the flower – opening and closing, its blossoming and death. Seeming like an ordinary game, but one that on a deeper level evokes a magical and mysterious part of life. The work, **Not just pattern, light penetrates through windows**, reminds the famous "poem" by Oe Kenzaburo where he discovers, through his teenage eyes, another side of the world inside a drop of rain on a window-pane. Here consciousness of a visual realm- a realm of reflection - becomes itself a reflection of the writer's practice and spirit. Similarly, we find the same innocence in Choi's work, but an innocence that never leads us to something banal or easily dismissible. In other words, there's always another layer of complexity and meaning to be excavated in the work. Tantalizingly, the seemingly obvious, in Choi's hands, metamorphoses before our eyes: the rain drop is more than a rain drop, a pattern more than a pattern, and a game more than a game.

Cultivating an aesthetic of quietness, stillness and meditative contemplation on Nature, **Ivy Ma's** work evolves slowly, through a process of careful looking / collecting / working / drawing / thinking that owes as much to a tradition of philosophy (Rousseau comes to mind) as aesthetics (though in art one thinks of Joseph Cornell and Ann Hamilton). This process is clearly evident in her recent works based on three single frames from **Yasujiro Ozu's** classic family drama, **"Tokyo Story."** Eschewing the narrative, Ma instead focuses on the cut-a-ways of objects and still-lives with which Ozu populates this film. After repeated viewings, Ma became fixated on the recurrent image of a section of a house in which a single plant stands in the foreground. Over the course of the film's narrative the plant changes, subtly, marking the quiet passage of time

and, ultimately, of life. Infused with melancholy, we see in Ma's numerous drawings of this plant, a kind of struggle between the artist and time. Time is grasped, pulled back, made to stand still, but defiantly. And then let go. Adopting and schooling herself in the Japanese style of "mono no aware," which embraces the pathos and deformity of things, Ma's work reaches us from afar yet when it does, it always pulls us close. Her work is, at heart, an act of embodiment. And her devotion to thinking with her hand leaves everything she touches with an aura of intimacy.

A perverse travel photographer, **Wai Kit Lam** has made a growing body of work whose images, which are always specific to a place, somehow always take us elsewhere. Paris, Berlin, London, Milan – all big cities brimming with recognizable monuments and architecture – yet Lam avoids all things big and obvious, preferring to look awry, in the corners and in the folds; in those places where evidence of life's transience lingers. Hints of sex and death fill the work, though in the most unexpected ways. There's an uncanny power to these pictures. A stained table-cloth arrests our gaze as if it were pornography. A worn stone floor suddenly feels horrific. Ambiguously titled **Orientation**, these images refuse to sit still or give us the comfort of feeling like we know where we are. They are paradoxically disorienting – and that is their brilliance. Light always plays a part in Lam's work, as if she were a candle-bearing guide in the underworld or a flashlight-wielding police detective illuminating the scene of the crime. Her photographs encourage us to follow the light and to see the world as it truly is: a place we do not know well.

Copyright © 2010 Charles LaBelle.
All Rights Reserved.