Heman Chong’s Chinese Conceptualism

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Can Heman Chong (b. 1977, Muar) define a Chinese aesthetic that goes beyond borders? Shanghai-based art critic Jacob Dreyer takes a closer look at the Singaporean artist's first museum solo exhibition in China, “Ifs, Ands, or Buts”, opened on 23 January 2016 at the Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) Shanghai, curated by Li Qi.

**TEXT**: Jacob Dreyer  
**PHOTOS**: Courtesy of the artist and Rockbund Art Museum

For many conceptual artists, it’s frustrating to be defined by the outside, whether by market forces, national ideologies, or hierarchical cultural imperatives. The impulse towards conceptualism and abstraction for contemporary Asian artists has always been a strong one; some conceptual works are impossible to understand even by art historians, and thus easily evade categorization or censorship. If the conceptual movement that arose primarily in New York in the 1970s was an attempt to engage with difficult questions of authenticity, reproducibility, and the autonomy of the artist, it has made for an easy fit in Chinese art worlds accustomed to abstraction, subtlety and indirect approaches; for artists like Xu Bing or Ai Weiwei, conceptual work was a way of reacting to Western art world trends and ideas while remaining authentically themselves, and thus, as per Alexandra Munroe’s definition of the task of contemporary Asian artists, “defin[ing] a space that absorbs the cultures of traditional Asia, the Classical West, and of modernity.” Heman Chong’s latest works, shown at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai, hint at the potential hybridities that exist within the contemporary Chinese sphere through a diverse range of conceptual media; ignoring many imagined hierarchies, his work engages with patterns of thought and life encoded in language, inhabited communities, and the imagination of the Other. In an art world that moves quickly, his work is utterly contemporary, alluding to our moment in which national identities are imaginary and dissolving, artificial geographies are constructed to symbolize our dreams, and the borders of language themselves are being tested as forcefully as the borders imposed by geography.
If measured in selfies alone, *The Mysterious Island* (2016) is one of the strongest works in the show. Using cheap plastic blossoms from the e-commerce site Taobao, he reconstructs ancient poet Tao Yuanming's (365–427) *Peach Blossom Spring*, long a synonym for utopia in Chinese. However, while in English “utopia” alludes to its own impossibility as well as to specifically political views, the *Taohuayuan* [Peach Blossom Spring ] is more environmental and comprehensive in nature; it is not merely a political utopia, but an ecological one, and has been taken up not only by artists but by architects and urban planners, notably Yu Kongjian of Peking University. In an era of technocratic politics, Chong’s utopia is not a politically or socially constructed one, but an ecology created by commerce without any state at all, an idiosyncratic, almost Situationist use of banal economic structures; in interview, he expressed wariness towards the sort of politically driven utopias that the English word implies, saying that “it’s important that every person gets to have an equal say of what his or her own ideal state of things should be, no matter how small the idea is.” There’s no irony here: a Taobao shop, with the direct possibilities of actualizing small and real desires, offers more utopia than the mass collective movements of the past.
In many of the other works in the show, including *Legal Bookshop* (2016), *Baike (Everything)* (2016), *Endless (Nights)* (2016), and *Papaya Daily* (2016), Chong comments on political and social realities across the contemporary Sinosphere using the medium of language, which takes on a powerful role within his practice. As a Singaporean artist who engages so powerfully with contemporary Chinese realities, Chong’s China is much more cosmopolitan and diffuse than the one we are accustomed to seeing in Beijing galleries. Rather than a national project, a shared history, or a clearly delineated geographical space, China here is the Chinese language and that which is shared by its speakers and readers. *Baike* was the most arresting of these works, in a quite direct form; an “attempt to vocalize everything about the world[1],” it amounts to a recital of random articles in the online encyclopedia. As with the evocation of digitally-driven forms of life in *The Mysterious Island*, though, the work is unmistakably ironic, and merely flags the impossibility of ever getting a grasp on the shape of things. Still, the value of interrogating these structures of information that are so present in our everyday life is important; as Heman told us, “things [which] tell us what to desire can have the effect of constructing our future.” If we take for granted the hierarchical structures with which we organize information, we risk losing control of our autonomy from this massive interior.
At the opening, even as the usual chaotic scenes of unidentified old men snatching pawfuls of canapés, wechat exchanges, and the generalized hubbub of the vanity fair continued (conversations interrupted by the loudness of Baike), some of my companions expressed impatience at works of this kind, that didn't immediately tell you what they were supposed to mean. The evasion of immediate meaning is logical within the context of an artistic practice that seeks to indicate the outside; these are artworks which tangentially refer to the world in which we live, but may perhaps be more appropriate for the coming world. Unlike many mainland-based conceptual artists, Chong doesn't seem to be in dialogue with the state or politics as such; if his China is unified by anything at all, it is the language itself, one that by using, he stakes out an ideological position vis-a-vis Singapore, diasporas, and global transformations. His artistic practice is arguably to be found in exploiting the rich vein of myths and legends that have accrued around the Chinese language, the myriad ways of classifying information and understanding how reality functions. His show is in some respects unsatisfying, for the very ways that it highlights the banality of language, which can only communicate that which is, never that which should be. Chong and curator Li Qi are to be congratulated, however, for introducing a discourse out of the mainstream into such a major art space in Shanghai, and works that pierce uncomfortably through the everyday, just like the manic chanting of Everything interrupted the everyday chat of... everything.
Heman Chong / Papaya Daily / Text, paint / Variable dimensions / 2016

Heman Chong / Re-Re-Re-Run / Dual-channel video installation, color, stereo sound / 450 × 900 × 100 cm / 2016
Heman Chong
“Ifs, Ands, or Buts”
Curated by Li Qi
Rockbund Art Museum (Shanghai)
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Jacob Dreyer is a Shanghai-based writer and editor. Recently, he has edited a special issue of LEAP magazine, and contributed to The Atlantic City Lab, the Architectural Review, and Domus. His book The Nocturnal Wanderer has recently been published by Eros Press; he is researching a second book about urban space and the creative economy in China.