

A GOURMET'S THEATRE

G rard Henry

Almond Chu (Chu Tak Wah), a Hong Kong photographer, is a master of portraits and the exploration of the human body in a manner that could be compared to that of Helmut Newton or Mapplethorpe. In his latest exhibition "Life Still" at the OP gallery, he reveals a hidden facet of his field of work – a fascination for cooking and food, developed during his trips to the market when he was living in New York in 1993. This fascination for disembowelled flesh is hardly new in art – we are all familiar with the brutal ugliness of Rembrandt's and Soutine's blood-soaked beef carcasses!

Almond Chu began making negatives of meats that were brought home, only to reject them later for being too crude. It is really the transformation that man submits his "objects" to before eating them that interests him - "a dead chicken is an object whose shape has been fixed. It is cut up in the market, destroying its original shape, and giving it a new shape. I too can transform these objects in my own way". From these animal parts, fruits and vegetables used in cooking, he creates installations that he photographs – the blood and the ugly violence is removed from these objects, as he totally changes their nature to give them a new identity. He ennobles them, presents them with great theatrical art, combining the humorous with the grotesque, sometimes with surreal connotations, by mixing together that which should not be mixed together, like for example, when he combines a melon with a cow's tail. Also, he often makes wordplays using either the Chinese or the English language, playing with semantics or homophonous words – "ma dou gou", a cake made from yellow beans, whose word for word meaning in Chinese is "cake-bean-horse" becomes Frog Bean cake (Wha dou gou), a cake made from frogs' heads. Or a collection of dirty glasses in a sink after a cocktail party, with each one filled with a chicken's head becomes *Cockhead after party*. He also plays around with flavours, reinforcing the bitterness of bitter melon by spiking it with nails, or with sexual connections (the sexual organs and food go hand in hand with each other), like for example, in the "coupling" of two durians that have been cut open, exposing for all to see, the inviting and decadent flesh that sensitive souls find revolting.

As always in Almond Chu's work, nothing is left to chance, the production is closely controlled, the printing of his photographs is close to perfection. The blacks and the whites that border on cream give the objects a sense of distance that banishes all sentimentality. The exhibition is accompanied by a Leung Ping Kwan poem entitled *La mutinerie des objets* (Mutiny of the objects), a sort of rebellion by the works against their creator. In the image of this temple of food that is the city of Hong Kong, Almond Chu, who is also an excellent cook, has created his own theatre, a theatre made up of rituals where, like the cat with a mouse, he plays with food items before devouring them.

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Translated from the French by Bernie Mahapatra.