

JACQUELINE LI AND CHRIS LO – “SCULPTING TIME”

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Baudelaire said that time is man's “obscure enemy”, that it “consumes life”. Hong Kong is a vibrant city that rarely looks back on its past, instead it does quite the opposite, continually erasing all traces of its past. Man lives under constant pressure in this city, in a lack of not only physical space but also mental space. This incessant forging ahead precludes any chance to take a break, to do any soul-searching, unless one makes a concerted effort to escape from it all. These concepts of space and time crop up repeatedly in Hong Kong art. Embody time, unfurl time within space, hold onto time - this is, in a way, what Chris Sze-Lim Lo and Jacqueline Yu-Fan Li tried to do in their installation “Sculpting time” that was exhibited at the Martini gallery in August 1999.

Jacqueline Li's calendar - a personal and universal collection

Every great civilisation has had its own calendar. A calendar provides a rigid framework for man's history, it sculpts the past, the present and the future in time, it gives structure to memory and enables us to keep track of man's experiences. “I have always had a fascination for the way in which humans have dealt with the idea of time, how the ancient calendars were established... just imagine our life without dates, without a calendar”, says Jacqueline Li by way of introduction to her installation.

And so Jacqueline Li, a ceramist, designed her own calendar, covering a full year, its 12 months, 365 days are spread out on a wide, dark wooden display unit that is reminiscent of both a bookcase and an ancient dresser. There are no pages to mark the days, just bizarre ceramic objects in the shape of cushions or small pillows - grouped together into months, there is one for each day. The visual effect is quite striking; one has the impression of being faced with an ancient collection for which one must find the key to decipher the language that it uses. But the key is in fact to be found in each of these small ceramic cushions. Square in shape, each the size of a hand, the hole that is pierced through their middle reveals their internal structure – fifteen or so strata piled up like a layered pastry, like the succession of the hours in a day, like the many layers of memory. On one side, the day and the month are engraved in Chinese, whilst on the other, there are a few words in English written with the help of the characters from an old typewriter, “in search of my father”, “Andrei Tarkovski time within time”, “Babylonian calendar 200BC”, “canned food 1812”, “911 Chinese revolution”, “Hadrian visited Greece 123AD”, “the chicken massacre 1997”, “the little white house”, “Tolstoy in his house in the forest”, “Germany invaded Poland 1st September 1939”, “Italo Calvino and the baron in the trees”, “story of the stone 1765”.

365 events scan Jacqueline Li's year, a selective memory of her own history as well as that of mankind, an historical and personal memory, inextricably linked to each other – her personal recollections, the titles of books that have made an impression on her, the great myths of various civilisations, artistic and historical events that, in her eyes, occupy a position of great importance in mankind's development. In a way, it represents the totality of her culture, culture acquired and culture accepted, Hong Kong culture and universal culture. As Jacqueline herself says, "a journey through memory, through the various layers of time that can be reinterpreted from different perspectives". And so the observer penetrates the artist's memory and discovers chapters of memory that are identical to his own, a collective memory that belongs to him too. Each day thus becomes a doorway into a new space-time that reflects his own memory.

Chris Lo – Memory is like a light and ethereal material

Chris Lo's installation also takes time and memory as its subject matters but here they are treated in a manner that is much more evanescent, more impressionist, one might even say. Arranged in piles on an old wooden desk, are masses of ceramic leaves, rectangular in shape, with curled up edges like sheets of paper. They are beige and brown, burnt in places, soft-looking but coarse to the touch, like the dried skin of an orange. Light like a pile of dead leaves, Chris Lo wanted them to be "the colour of the earth, of fire, of the air and of water". The same tablets can be found hanging on the walls, connected together like an inextricable mobile. "I was obsessed by those old lattice work windows and the late afternoon light that forms the dancing shadows of the plants outside. At the bottom of the stairs the balustrade stood upright like some pre-war memorial. All these antiquities invited me to make something that related to time, space and light, that lets old memories and intense recollections resurface". In an abandoned house, Chris Lo's installation could be taken for a pile of fallen down old tiles and would not be particularly noticed. Transplanted to a different location though, it gains meaning, as if the past had been dug out of obscurity. A past, however, that keeps itself hidden from the hollows within these leaves of clay, the infinite layers and complexity of human memory. Light, evanescent memory, ready to vanish at the first breath of wind and that Chris Lo has captured in its immateriality, like a final bouquet of dead leaves.

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