

TIFFANY CHUNG

Finding Galápagos: fish, pigs, youngsters, old folks, men, women and the Black Canals (not in any particular order)

October 31 – December 12, 2009

In her first solo show in Europe Tiffany Chung, one of the most prominent representatives of the Vietnamese art scene today, presents a body of work that is compelling for the diversity of media it draws on and for the consistency of its themes. Encompassing drawings, photographs, video works, sculptures and an installation, the works included in the show represent a complex exploration of the social, cultural and spatial changes brought about by the rapid pace of economic development in Vietnam.

Tiffany Chung, who was born in Vietnam and lived in the US for many years before returning to her native country some years ago, compares these changes with the American notions of modernity that, in addition to influencing US cities, now also shape the face of a number of Asian cities. Thus, for example, she juxtaposes the two large-format drawings *1°40'N 1°36'S 89°16'E 92°01'W* and *34°03'N 118° 15'W – 1934* (both 2009) with each other—both are works from an ongoing series begun in 2007 in which Tiffany Chung painstakingly draws with oil-based and Copic markers on floor plans, city and underground-railway maps to create layers of colourful filigree structures. While she has drawn over a land-use plan of Ho Chi Minh City extending to the year 2020 in the first work, the second is based on a city plan of Los Angeles from the year 1934. As art critic Ulrike Münter wrote in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: “An expanse of lichen represents the fallacious promise that indiscriminately advancing towards a global standard of living will automatically result in improved quality of life. [...] Fungal spores are parasites, encroaching upon and living off other organisms. Expanding cities demonstrate similar behaviour by swallowing up suburbs and the surrounding land and thus destroying established social structures.” (pp.17/26)

The fields of bright colour that sprawl over the city and land-use plans to such an extent that they become almost unreadable are echoed in the installation *Signs-Sites-Sights-Sighs* (2009). A dense jumble of street signs in signal colours, which Chung based on actual signs seen in Ho Chi Minh City and various other cities in Asia, blocks the view into the room. The work vividly conveys an impression of the cacophony of enjoiners, regulations and warnings that accompany rapid urbanisation and the constant deconstruction and reconstruction of living environments. The arrangement of the signs ironically recalls clusters of trees, often among the first victims of urban sprawl.

Coniferenoki Tree – Share the Wonder (2009) takes up the idea of nature’s disappearance more overtly. The “tree” is made of white plastic, latex and green plush material, and is more reminiscent of a comic-book image than of anything organic. It is a prop from Chung’s biting satirical science-

fiction live-action series *Enokiberry Tree in Wonderland*. This series describes, among other things, a classified mission in which three genetic engineers must breed all sorts of hybrid organisms, including new species of trees.

We also encounter the genetic engineers in two of the photographs included in the Berlin exhibition, which show selected scenes from the third episode of *Enokiberry Tree in Wonderland*, but also work independently of the sequence. In the photo series, Tiffany Chung combines elements from contemporary popular culture (the scenes are staged by young cosplay actors) with the visual rhetoric of communist propaganda art (the poses are borrowed from historical depictions of idealised workers). Thus Tiffany Chung directs our gaze to the seamless transition from one totalitarian system to another— from communism to consumerism. Young sales promoters are the “workers” of the new generation and megaphones are their “tools”. Due to their politically touchy subject matter, it is unlikely that Tiffany Chung will be able to exhibit these photographs in Vietnam.

The two videos shown in Berlin point to a new direction in Tiffany Chung’s work. In contrast to her highly stylised, candy-coloured installations, photographs and performances, which seem to be inspired by Pop Art and Japanese Neo-Pop, her films are toned down visually and are characterised by an underlying melancholy. In a few tranquil shots, *across the sea of dust* (2009) reflects on the sensibilities of a new generation of young “global citizens” who, as globalisation and migration increases, no longer seem to feel quite at home anywhere. The video was shot with Asian actors who hail from Norway, Japan and Vietnam. *Land of Ahhs* (2009) traces the history and rapid growth of Los Angeles over the past 100 years and goes on to describe life in the city from the perspective of one of its residents. As a result, it provides a kind of synopsis of the issues that unfurl throughout the exhibition.

Text: Kristin Rieber

A same-named catalogue is being published on the occasion of the exhibition.