



GREG LEONG

Greg Leong often uses cross-cultural symbolism to investigate the complexities of his identity as a Chinese Australian working in forms that traverse installation, sculpture and performance. His installation *The Tasmanian Migration of Oriental Carp** uses a 'pest' species in Australian waterways to refer to Australia's rejection of people from non-Anglo-Saxon countries. Greg writes, "My boat in *Partnership* is the boat that symbolically brings new peoples here. My installation can be read simply as a ghost ship, referencing the many paper effigies of worldly goods the Chinese living burn during ghost festivals and so keep their relatives in the nether world in comfort and well-heeled. To the Chinese the carp (or koi) is a symbol of love, courage and wealth. However my carp skeletons, wrapped in joss paper (gold and silver for the dead) tell a sadder story of migration and the search for asylum, and perhaps the references are to pitiless governments, drownings at sea and off shore incarceration."

*Carp frames and installation method designed and completed by Mark Hoban, David Hamilton, Terry Ryan and the artist

My mother was born in Cobar, New South Wales, the grand daughter of a Scottish woman and a Chinese man. Although she looked very Chinese to Australians, she didn't look sufficiently 'pure bred' to Chinese people. Australia was also very racist at that time. At the age of sixteen, when she accompanied her family when they returned her grandfather's body back to his home town in Guong Dong, she was put into a school for overseas Chinese girls, where she was met with the reverse racism from the other part of her cultural mix. Although she spoke Cantonese, at school she was absorbed into the company of other 'mixed blood'

and overseas Chinese girls, with whom she maintained friendships for the rest of her life. When the family later moved to Hong Kong she met my father, a Malaysian Chinese. Prior to the Japanese take-over of Hong Kong, they were married as a way of attempting to avoid the possibility of rape that often threatened the fate of unmarried women. My father's job as a pilot for China Air Lines relocated him to India. In order to be with him, my mother had to seek whatever means she could to travel overland from China to India. It was a journey of enormous difficulties as she was pregnant with my older brother. The difficulties of that journey were to

characterize her life. She joined my father in India, but their marriage was a very unhappy one.

I was born in Hong Kong in 1946 after the war. During my childhood I was witness to all kinds of emotional, economic and physical violence that have deeply affected each of my two brothers and myself differently throughout our lives. As far as locals were concerned, Mum was an outsider; even her parents-in-law treated her as a foreigner – she was ‘white trash’ over there. This sense of estrangement between cultures – of being treated unfairly for her lack of ‘pure blood’ earned her discrimination from both cultures on both sides of ‘difference’.

My father walked out on the family when I was 12. It came with a great sense of relief. My older and younger brothers were sent to Australia for their education. My Mum had to work to pay for our education, and in order to set herself up for work, she had to approach her father-in-law for financial assistance. My grandfather’s response to my mother was one of disdain and humiliating cruelty, even though he would hand out money at the end of the monthly tirade. This traditional patriarchal power exercised by both my father and his father has forever coloured my response to the cruelty that men can show towards women in their attempts to control them. When Mum came back to Australia she experienced discrimination yet again – and yet despite this she and my older brother agreed that his daughters should marry Chinese Australians if possible. Although this didn’t eventuate, it is evidence that the rift between cultures continues through the generations in different ways.

I stayed in Hong Kong for my high school education. My mother decided that learning French would be useful, which meant that I missed out on learning Chinese – a fact I regret to this day. I am only versed in Chinese in a spoken every-day sense, and as a result I can’t have an intelligent conversation in Chinese — I can’t write Chinese either. These ‘lacks’ in my capacities have in turn contributed to my own feeling that I can’t fully belong to the Chinese part of my identity.

I entered Hong Kong University with a scholarship. I loved European culture and literature and was actively performing in plays in the university drama society. During this period I had much less engagement with Chinese cultural experiences. No doubt this contributed to the fact that the thesis of my Master of Philosophy in Drama (1968 – 1974) focused on the work of George Bernard Shaw. After graduating I worked as a ‘fine music’ producer at the British Government-run FM radio station. During this time I applied for a Commonwealth Scholarship to university in Vancouver and was awarded one. However, the British Commonwealth Scholarship forbade my taking up the scholarship on medical grounds ostensibly on

the grounds of the tuberculosis I’d contracted as a child. At that time I had two degrees in English and yet, as a result of the still-rampant colonial rulings, was forced to undergo an “English test”. My appeal against the decision was eventually successful. But soon after that, I decided to throw in the offer of the scholarship to continue with a relationship I had embarked on. This is probably the first of a number of instances throughout my life where I’d followed my heart rather than my head. But in the long run, I have no regrets – each of them ended up leading to other experiences that changed my life in significant ways.

One of the life-changing decisions that followed my resolve to deal with the inevitable complexities of the relationship I’d entered was my decision to go to London. My family thought I was behaving in an irredeemably irresponsible way, but I enrolled in the Polytechnic of Central London to study Arts Management. I have to confess that the real pull that had drawn me to choose London was the lure of the opera and theatre at the West End and Covent Garden, as well as the wonderful concerts and art of the South Bank, but the training I undertook there was an investment that has never seen me out of work: I’ve been actively involved in the arts business ever since.

On graduating, I took up a position as a marketing officer in Youth and Music in London for a year, and after that I returned to Hong Kong to take up the role of Performing Arts Coordinator at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Later I became the Head of Programs. There were difficulties being an openly gay man in Hong Kong at the time. The Chinese view was that homosexuality was not an inherently Chinese condition – they held the view that it was a morally decadent condition that had been introduced by the British! With like-minded supporters and colleagues I was part of a grass-roots anti-gay lobby, a role that was particularly fraught as a result of the political implications and the scare tactics used by the police.

Unbeknown to me, at the time my mother had meanwhile applied for my Australian citizenship through the Family Reunion Program. In 1971 I was notified that I had three months to accept an offer of a migrant visa to Australia. Even though I had not actively sought it, the fact that I was in a very unhappy relationship at the time contributed to my decision to take up the offer as a ‘way out’. This decision, one that was not made in full consciousness of the outcomes, was the second of my great life-changing moments made as a result of my response to matters of the heart.

I took up my first Australian job in Devonport as Artistic Director of Tasmanian Regional Arts (formerly the Tasmanian Arts Council). I worked there between 1982 and 1988, during a period when Tasmania’s

homophobic attitudes made things very difficult. In Tasmania, anti-gay laws were not repealed until 1997. Towards the latter years of my role in Devonport I'd begun a relationship with a partner who lived in Launceston. I wanted to move there to be closer to him, and decided that enrolment in a visual arts course at the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania might offer a good solution. My decision to embark on a course that led to one of the most significant aspects of my identity – my role as a visual artist – was, once again, made on the basis of a choice of the heart.

My practice as a visual artist began in the late 1980's. I'd realized that there was a large part of my identity I'd chosen to ignore. When I enrolled in visual arts in 1988 (the same year I gave up smoking) I majored in textiles. I used this focus as a way of building installations through which I could allude to the fabric of so many aspects of my life. My first break as an Australian artist came in 1992 when I was selected to show in the Tamworth National Textile Biennial. This first national exposure was followed in 1995, when the Crafts Council of Australia curated a show of gay craft artists with the unsurprising title of *Homocraft*. My contribution was a work about being gay and Asian in a hostile environment. I used the carp as a symbol of this experience – a species initially introduced from China to Australian waters for recreation and as a food source for colonial residents, but which has subsequently become identified as a pest. During that time I also embarked on my first solo show held in Sydney and Melbourne entitled *Remembering Chinese*. The works included a series of garments remembering my mother and the difficulties she experienced being discriminated against by two cultures. The installation featured a wedding gown where the traditional Chinese symbol of double happiness was altered to an emblem connoting double sorrow. During that time – the early 1990s – I lectured part-time in theory and drawing, and in 1996 I was appointed full-time lecturer for the textile studio at Tasmanian University of the Arts where I worked until 2000.

In 1994, after the death of my then partner of ten years in Launceston, his family's refusal to acknowledge our relationship resulted in a time of deep trauma for me. That grief and trauma went on to coincide with an upsurge in 1997 of anti-Chinese rhetoric fanned up by Pauline Hansen's One Nation Party. Despite the repeal of the anti-gay laws in Tasmania that year, public resentment took longer to subside. Once again my Chinese-ness and my gay-ness seemed to be burdens for which I was going to have to pay an emotional price. As a result, I made an installation of white garments as a kind of memorial to my partner (white is the colour of the virginal Western bride, but the colour of mourning in China) – and an homage to the pain I felt. The work toured, and I experienced the way work can salve

wounds and change them towards positive outcomes.

In 2001, during the Centenary of Federation, I made *Greg Leong's Singing History Quilts for New Chinese Australians* – an installation in which the audience could participate by pressing a button in the hole of the quilt, in order to listen to some of Australia's most beloved bush ballads sung in Cantonese. The work soon developed into a performance work titled *Jia* (Chinese for family) – a cabaret about a princess who moves from China to Australia for a better life, finds it hard to integrate, so decides to introduce a Chinese cabaret program where she sings favorite Australian songs in Cantonese with a panache and aplomb to rival the spirit of Dame Edna. Of course this was, in part, a 'revenge' on life for the fact that I had not been able to embark on a career as a cabaret star myself, but it was, just as importantly, planned as a critical onslaught on some of Australia's most beloved icons as a way of re-writing Chinese presence into Australian history in an hilarious way.

In 1996 I moved in with Tony. I lived with him in Launceston and briefly in Burnie for eighteen years. Tony died in 2014. To assuage the pain of loss I ill-advisedly sold the house we shared. But I continue to work, to make art, and to enjoy life taking over from Tony in the garden.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced)

It depends on where you are in Tasmania – but in Burnie people have come out of their bias since the anti-gay law reform – people are more open now. Gayness is more accepted, and I don't feel 'noticed' simply for being Asian and/or gay, whereas in the big cities you notice racism more acutely, in contrast to what people think.

What might make it difficult?

Lack of opportunities to take part in and see contemporary art exhibitions. When I was the Director for both Burnie Regional Art Gallery and the Burnie Arts & Function Centre, you have to be aware of how your private life might impact on your public role as part of a relatively small community. But that kind of awareness also comes with growing older. The works I'm making now are less confrontational than they used to be.

And where do the other challenges lie? But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

The challenge is always to be relevant – and to keep passionate. My passion currently is the changing relationship between China and Australia – a theme that very few people around me used to feel acutely. For example, when the Port of Darwin was recently

leased to the Chinese for 100 years I was concerned well before others around me were. There's a sense of isolation here – people aren't always aware of that kind of global perspective. The benefits of living in a place like this are mainly to tend to one's inner self. In Sydney the concerns are more widely understood and may contribute to the broader debate.

Benefits? The lack of not feeling rushed and hurried – I may be lacking things in terms of 'cultural plenty', but you simply can't take up everything that's on offer in a larger city anyway and the intellectual and emotional rewards of the slower pace is good here. Whenever you leave this place, you look forward to the return - you can fly off to take in all the cultural nourishment you need elsewhere, and then return to the garden. Maybe it's a sure sign of growing old, but I believe it's a privilege to have a garden. I am told that it is very Buddhist to count out the seconds while you water these living things – for me counting while watering is part of the pleasure of being still.

Do you think that galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?

The Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery is one of the larger regional art museums in Australia and plays a very important focal point to the community here. Its two sites are situated right on the edge of the CBD and it's enormously popular with the local community.

The art schools in Hobart and Launceston- the graduates and the contemporary art spaces and the phenomenon of MONA have changed things enormously. And the festivals associated with MONA are slowly moving up north – impacting the island as a whole.

I've also had the opportunity of watching the development of the influence of BRAG in Burnie. When I arrived the powers that be wanted to turn it into a disco, but within 11 months the audience engagement had increased by twenty-four percent - this cultural facility means something to each member of the community. In 2009, the Burnie Arts and Functions Centre launched the first subscription season for performing arts events. Since then, on a per capita basis the subscription season it's doing better than Devonport, Launceston and Hobart. On that evidence alone you can say that the arts matter a great deal to the people in Burnie.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

When? Not until 1982 – I'd always lived in large metropolitan cities up till then. When I arrived in Devonport I was shocked that movies were only shown two times a week – but six months later I noticed how I could see the stars in the night sky, and that whenever I spent time in Sydney my lungs would react against the smog and poisonous air. And another thing – in spite of small-town attitudes in the North West in the 1980s - I

realized immediately that there was a kindness I could never find in the city.

How does it feel now?

It's home for me... I have great friends here in Launceston and still love the friends I made on the coast. There are also people with big backgrounds and experiences who have moved to Tasmania to retire – they've chosen to embrace regional life while still engaging in smaller scale stimulating experiences.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

Although I'm no longer in many shows, I was frequently included in metropolitan and regional touring exhibitions throughout the 90s. The last show I curated visited ten Australian venues (2012-2014). I think people do sit up and notice in the cities about what's happening in the regions. I don't think we suffer from being overlooked – many here enjoy national and international reputations. Coming from 'small' does not mean being 'lesser.'

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

Not always – real estate used to be cheap – but food tends to be more expensive.

Do you think it's important to 'get out' from the regions and come back in again?

For younger artists it's very important, but that regional voice is also extremely valuable for the rest of Australia – not only does the artist benefit, it's also good for the big centres to see what's happening in the regions.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

Many regions share similar problems, but there are also unique circumstances – networking is really important in understanding where you are in terms of being placed within a bigger context – and also to find points of commonality. You can feel a huge sense of camaraderie between the regions – one where you are able to see similarities but also the differences. You can come to understand a lot more about being a regional artist by comparing your experiences with other regional artists... it can be very powerful. My experiences of being part of such inter-regional gatherings has often resulted in a powerful sense of an extended family; it's very important to spend time being with 'your own' – whether it's from the city or the regions or another country.

Do you think place still matters...or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc)?

I hold to the belief that the places you have come to – and the place where you end up living - matter a great deal – if you start ignoring *place* then you're really ignoring a huge part of your existence. You need to feel

fed by it and to feed it back in return. Social media has not eaten into my sense of place at all.

What is the role of your work?

To be provocative – to prompt people to wonder about what I’m saying. Hopefully it will add something to their own life experience. It’s about contextualising your life and a way of reacting to the things that matter to you –and hopefully what you experience will ring true for others.

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