

INSIDE EVERY MYTH THERE'S A STORY OR TWO AND A SPELL OF LOVE MAY BE LURKING TOO AND THESE PAGES TELL SOME OF IT ALL BUT NOT EVERYTHING

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In: *Local Myths / Love Spells*, Eastside projects

Floating on Flight WW 1012Y at about 11:15 am on 24 September 2010, I put down my book and look at the clouds below. This is perhaps the best place to begin writing about an artist who has travelled widely to make works. Most important for this story will be her stays in the Hudson Valley (in the United States), then around Jingdezhen and in Shanghai (in China, or as some prefer to call it, the Middle Kingdom) and finally in Birmingham (in England or, as some prefer to call it, the United Kingdom), where I am about to land. I have been – I am – along for part of this ride. And of the places I have not visited with Jennifer Tee, I have gathered some yarns.(1)

The first location is Knitty City, a store in a known metropolis owned by one Pearl Chang. In 2007, Jennifer Tee, newly arrived for a residency at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, chanced by this store while on a cab-ride in New York's Upper West Side and vowed to return. Inside the store, Tee found countless wools treated with natural dyes and supplied from all over the Americas and Eurasia. When woven, she observed, the hand-died fibers created vibrant but uneven colour patterns, which made for unpredictable viewing. These were yarns within which yarns could indeed be read. And this was the kind of psychological effect she often looks for in a material. At the time, she was also looking for some local artisans to collaborate with on new work. While not wanting to predetermine too much of what the residency would yield (though she had a sense to continue developing floor works that she had began exploring), she did come ready to collaborate with local talents. Pearl Chang recommended two women: Amanda Gale and Sahara Briscoe. Gale would weave the first floor piece, which would be shown in a contemporary sculpture exhibition at Museum De Hallen in Haarlem. It was revolutionary red and took the crystalline shape of an earlier carpet that Tee had designed with Richard Niessen called *Inside the Mind a Resting Place*. Sahara Briscoe would weave two works to be exhibited, alongside a mobile partly weighed down by birds made of Brooklyn Red Clay, at the end of the residency. These second weavings

turned out a deeper claret colour, simulating the shade of blood when it is between its solid (coagulated) and its liquid state.

It is worth pausing briefly to think about this intermediary place, between states, that may be called Limbo, which has no geographical location but which Tee returns to time and again, partly as a place to understand the soul. The shape of the crystal has, of late, recurred in her work so I am tempted to name this as the concrete rendition of her evolving idea of the "soul in limbo," a term borrowed from titles of early work. But it would be a mistake to arrive at this easy solution to something that is not a problem to be solved. I have heard from Tee that she is drawn to crystals because it is in such forms that minerals exist between liquid and ethereal states and their shape is such that they may be subdivided infinitely. The crystal is not a solid thing to hold onto, but a space of meditation. And meditation should not be understood, in this story at least, as a purely mental activity, unless we understand the mind as a muscle or an organ like the heart, liver, kidneys or ovaries.

Shanghai is the city where the woven crystal forms emerged as spaces of this more physical form of meditation. Five new hexagonal weavings were designed by Jennifer Tee in Amsterdam and woven by Sahara Briscoe in Brooklyn (this time featuring all the colours of the rainbow). (2) This time, the five new hexas – as we came to call the new hexagonal weavings – were made for five dancers: Liu Yanan, Zhou Yun, Yang Jing, Liu Ran and nunu kong; the latter is a Shanghai-based choreographer who Jennifer met on a preparatory visit in March.(3) These new hexas would hover somewhere between sculpture and stage; and while they were the objects of meditation in one sense – the places where this meditation-in-movement that we call dance took place – the other sources of contemplation for the dancers were twelve ceramic vessels of distinct shapes, with the following twelve names: "secret selves," "replacing," "healing" and "inner process" (for the wood fired vessels), "recovered memory" (for the water jug), "a great miss," "infinite worlds" and "spiritual retreat" (for the jars) "transcend & escape," "hair, heart, liver, ovary," "ancestral sacrifice" and "star crossed" (for the urns and funerary vases).(4) Star-Crossed also became the name of the entire installation of vessels and hexas, which alluded to its status as a constellation – an entity that would move and transform (with some hexas and all the vessels flying to faraway Eastside Projects in Birmingham, while the remaining hexas went to De Paviljoens in Amsterdam).

While traveling we often forget to move. I've been trying to exercise more amidst a lot of recent travel, partly inspired by working with Jennifer Tee, who does her fair share of yoga. And after one morning's comic attempts to make my muscles behave more like clay – clay in that state before (I should insist) it's been fired,(5) the connections

between Tee's ceramic vessels and their names gain clarity: In thinking of each vessel as a statement, something that is reinforced by the individual names they have been given, we need not stop at the allusions to holistic healing and transcendence that Tee has spelled out on some vessels. Though these remain paramount, the clarity of the physical shapes already testifies to something that language aspires to. These are ancient forms that Tee has studied at the Shanghai Museum of Art, which – it should be noted – is shaped like a giant ceramic bowl. In China, ceramics are on a different order of art making. Visiting the museum, what struck me was that an entire floor is devoted to this craft. (And sitting in Berlin, as I write this, I cannot help to connect the c-word – which in my Art History classes was often somewhat obscured by “higher” stuff – with the word for power in German: Kraft). Certain forms have a mighty persistence and a walk through the museum in Shanghai brings this home. What is more, one begins to understand how china became synonymous with China somewhere in the early 1700s when European merchants were looking for the secrets of porcelain. It does not take too long to conclude that the popularity of porcelain as a mercantile export would have had everything to do with these transliterations, but the etymological tales could fill many a deep ceramic (and cerebral) bowl.(6)

In Chinese, the parallels between China and china are not so often asserted. The name for China, or more precisely the Middle Kingdom is [insert Chinese characters]. Pronounced roughly as Zhong Guo, it was used first by the emperors of Zhou Dynasty who ruled some two thousand seven hundred years ago. The name for ceramics, [insert Chinese characters], is perhaps even older. It shares a character with the name for porcelain [insert Chinese characters], but the two should not be confused. Still, a relation between Chinese toponyms and that persistent confusion of porcelain in particular and ceramics in general called china, can be found: If you look at the great majority of labels at the Shanghai Art Museum, they will lead you Northeast, to the town of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province. This city of some one and a half million inhabitants (which is still often referred as a town in memory of its thousand-year-old heritage as China's foremost centre of ceramic production) is located near the Gaolin Mountain. It is this piece of earth, which holds the secret of porcelain: a white clay called kaolin which becomes translucent and fine, when fired. Kaolin is a transliteration of Gaolin; in Chinese it's the same word. What is more, the people of the region share stories about how ceramic production contributed to the name by which their Middle Kingdom is elsewhere named. Here is a version recounted by Huan Hsu, a one-time resident of the region: The people of Jingdezhen love to tell their own story about porcelain/china. Jingdezhen got its name during the Song Dynasty, when the emperor Jingde designated it as the place for manufacturing imperial porcelain. Before then, Jingdezhen, which is located on the Southern bank of the

Chang River, was called "Chang Nan," or "South of the Chang." As the story goes, Jingdezhen porcelain was stamped with "Chang Nan" and foreign (European, mostly, I suppose) consumers started calling the wares by that name. Eventually, "Chang Nan" became pronounced "China." Whatever its truth-content, this makes for perhaps the best story.

If this meditation has focused so closely on famous names given to patches of earth (some fired, some fired upon, some escaping fire⁽⁷⁾), it is to locate them more firmly in our minds. They are key to Jennifer Tee's work and the weaving of stories and territories is part of her métier. But we cannot stop at Jingdezhen or at china or porcelain. If we follow Tee's travels in China, we'll have to stray a bit off the path beaten by folklore. It should be noted that, soon after researching Jingdezhen, Tee encountered Jackson Li, a master ceramist who is based physically (and perhaps also philosophically) somewhat outside the center of "ceramic city," in a place called San Bao. Beginning in 2005 Tee would travel to Jackson Li's San Bao Ceramic Art Institute and work with him and his colleague Min Shen to discover some of the secrets of porcelain. One such visit in the fall of 2008 yielded unusual porcelain forms: feathers of great size and weight, which also look like swords or like shields or both. Most if these are bone white but some are dipped in black for ominous oomph – something you rarely see with porcelain. These came together to hang from a hexagonal wooden construction, approximating giant dream catchers, somewhat.⁽⁸⁾ Other experimental forms followed, but that is perhaps for another story.

The art of making porcelain, and ceramics in general, is a great hit and miss game. You never know what you will get when you put the clay in the kiln and it often takes a master a few tries to get the desired results. Contrary to what we might expect, such advancement often tends towards ever-greater ease and effortlessness in form. This probably has something to do with the Taoist concept of Wu Wei – something that is better sounded than logically explained. The words that work are natural action or nothin' doin'.⁽⁹⁾ These go some ways towards understanding what is at stake; another way is to consider Tee's process.

Late last year, soon after we met, Tee changed tracks and decided to do something which at first had seemed too simple (and perhaps did not own up to the fantastic legends of porcelain which soak the soil of Jingdezhen). She switched from working with porcelain to working with earthenware. Instead of kaolin, her new collaborator at San Bao, Wu Shi Fu (Master Wu), brought more rugged clay from his native Yellow Mountains. Master Wu is an expert in the ancient coiling technique, which predates the potter's wheel: Thick threads of clay are coiled and stacked to make the most graceful ceramics. Wu Shi Fu combined his skills with the glazing expertise of Jackson Li to achieve the forms that

Tee had in mind and had drawn, after her visits to Shanghai's bowl-shaped museum. They worked throughout the Spring in San Bao and after some trials (and a few tribulations) they arrived at the twelve vessels of Star-Crossed.

More lessons in simplicity followed: In deciding how to display the newly finished vessels back in Shanghai, we first attempted to evoke their scatter in the pottery workshop. But such a scatter can never be reproduced in a gallery and look "natural." In the end, a straight line emerged – and it is perhaps this line which best accented the arabesques that the dancers drew with their bodies on the neighboring hexas. Some months later, the same trial and error yielded another straight line, this one running diagonally across the floor of Eastside Projects in Birmingham, where this meandering story must find a terminus of sorts.(10)

Arriving at Eastside Projects, I was shocked at how small it was, as the accounts circulating about the place greatly outweigh its physical scale. There is also an un-administrative ease in the air, which surely belies the loads of work that go into running this ambitious project, but these labours are not mine to relay. What I might observe, however, from my admittedly brief visit, is the sense of a particular story of contemporary art being told and added to with each exhibition. Here, Jennifer Tee's totem – a tall and slender right-angled marble column engraved with its own title, *Local Myths*, which has become the title of her exhibition - is telling.(11) It is also the work that will remain after the wide-ranging selections of her recent practice are shipped home (and it must be noted that Tee's exhibition contains more works than this sized space would conventionally hold). These curatorial choices point to a particular vision of art. It is not minimal, though the totem is. Indeed looking at documentation of recent shows, and experiencing Tee's exhibition, Eastside Projects rather tends towards a kind of teeming dynamism, a contagious energy, and the accumulation of physical remains. The focus here seems to be on community as something that is continually built by people using words and things in equal measure. This is the simplest way I can put it.

More complex qualifications about Eastside Project as a timely response to gentrification, on the one hand, and an antidote to overly administered artistic practice, on the other, already tempt my typing fingers. And more needs to be said about Jennifer Tee's protean practice, which continues to evolve and to challenge the strictures of contemporary writing about art. At the outset, convinced that the usual essay would not do, I considered writing a biography. It would be fascinating and nobody really dares to write about the lives of artists any more. And it may happen yet. For the time being, leaning proverbially on Tee's totem, I consider the taboos of criticality, some of which are already spelled out as the titles of her twelve ceramic vessels.

- 1 According to my dictionary, a yarn (n.) is both a twisted strand of wool, cotton or synthetic fiber, as well as a long involved tale, especially one that relates exciting or incredible events!
- 2 They were made to premiere in an exhibition called *Nether Land* that I co-curated (with Nicolaus Schafhausen) in June 2010 at the Dutch Culture Center. You might consider it an effort to confuse the official national myths sedimenting in Shanghai that Summer. The center was established as part of the World Expo, but situated outside the fair grounds in a fast-transforming neighbourhood called Jin'an (after the Temple), which counts a Starbucks-sipping hipster for every old-timer that practices Tai Chi at dusk and dawn. Its story may not be unlike that of Birmingham's Eastside.
- 3 Each performance was accompanied by one of two trumpet players: JQ Whitcomb or feng, who like nunu likes to keep the letters of his name small.
- 4 These may be seen throughout this book and the pocket on page ?? contains the most precise diagram of their shapes and names.
- 5 The bit in the *Book of Genesis*, which talks about Adam being made of clay, apparently plays on the Hebrew word for ground or earth: Adamah. This word, which also contains within it Dam, a word which means blood, is feminine. Somehow, this elegant melding of female and male and clay seems apropos Jennifer Tee's work, which attends to the feminine, but in somewhat unscripted ways.
- 6 Some say China came from the Persian word for the region, Cin, which Marco Polo imported to Venice. However, Marco Polo is elsewhere credited with the importation of the word Cathay; this alternate English word for the country can still be heard in the airline of that other China called Hong Kong. In 1915, Ezra Pound paraded it across the pages of his massive eponymous poem. Cathay comes from Khitan, which is derived from the Chinese, or the name of nomadic peoples that founded the Liao Dynasty and ruled Northern China for about two centuries beginning with the early tenth. This is now Kyrgyzstan.
- 7 Hsu has also told me that some inhabitants in Jingdezhen believe they escaped the Japanese bombings during the Sino-Japanese War because its many smoking kilns were mistaken for anti-aircraft guns.
- 8 In Tee's repertoire, the weighty porcelain dreamcatchers may be connected to her marble totems – one of which, *Local Myths*, has recently been erected at Eastside Projects. Everything here points to indigenous wisdoms. But while both forms derive from North American Native culture, Tee does not take possession of their original forms, but rather adapts them to new materials: Instead of the feathers of dreamcatchers we have porcelain; instead of the wood of totem poles we have marble. This reworking of mythical forms produces a palpable tension: By belying their original make-up, the contemporary artist may be staying true to the tensions that build with the contemporary uprooting of indigenous idioms.
- 9 The latter should not be confused with doing nothing, though very often, in Western philosophy it is.
- 10 I should perhaps emphasize a bit more strongly that the display of the vessels in Birmingham was not a straight transplant from Shanghai, though planting has

something to do with the difference. A new surprising element was added in the form of a flower bouquet that was at once tropical, luxurious and lugubrious inside Ancestral sacrifice. It is difficult not to project all sorts of continuities between Tee's gesture and the grand tradition of still life painting, which was pioneered in her native Netherlands right around the time that Dutch merchants were going in search of the secrets of fine china. The tension created by flowers on display in a gallery (contemporary art having been divested of decoration many decades ago) is immense. It grows even bigger when you begin to ponder the fact that these fresh things have been placed inside of a funerary vessel! This is the sort of dialectic that Tee delights in.

- 11 *Local Myths* is one of twelve such totems that Tee first made in De Bijlmer, the borough she calls home in Amsterdam.