

PRACTICAL MAGIC

Tessa Giblin, 2013
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Jennifer Tee is an artist whose sculptures and drawings are full of abstract symbolism. Walking around an installation, you can become quite mesmerised by the forms, the intricately woven threads, the patterns emerging that have both a graphic image and a material presence – so mesmerised in fact that you might find yourself suddenly too close to an urn, or your foot flicking the edge of a hand-made rug. There's a subtle thrill and pleasure that emerges from this too-close encounter, and it's not just caused by the weird excitement that very vulnerable, irreplaceable objects can elicit in us. It is compounded by the shifty and unexplained double purpose that her objects and sculptures could be intended for. Jennifer Tee's work implies the idea of the vessel in a destabilising way: they are pregnant carriers of meaning and association making it impossible to rest on a purely formal experience.

The rugs that she is producing for *Practical Magic* are beautiful. They are hand-dyed, hand-woven, and hand-sewn according to precisely conceived plans, in various hues of green, blue and purple. They are grouped into a configuration that creates images in both the positive and negative space – the rug itself and the floor around it. And each of them has the graphic sense of a spider's web shifting in the wind – a perfect geometric form that's been pulled out of shape, creating a tilted perspective that confuses the eye, and confuses your sense of equilibrium as you negotiate the space. But the pregnant part of the work is this: what if they are not just floor decoration or generally part of the décor – what if these things have a purpose, a use that is only truly known to those who use them? What if they have been blessed? What if they have been cursed? What if they are designed to lead you in a certain navigation of the room, and that your will is not free at all? Perhaps they are spaces for meditation. But what if there are others, elsewhere, that commune with these ones?

In other places of spiritual encounter we more easily recognise the structures and symbols that encroach on our sense of submission or tolerance – we can opt in or out, avoid lines of symbolism too potent or revel in something we feel excited, comforted, or infused by. But within the realm of contemporary art and the work of Jennifer Tee, that recognisable symbolism becomes a little sticky. Throughout the room, on tables, on the floor, and adorning other sculptures are a series of ceramic totems. They look like flower forms, such as fox-glove or red-hot poker, while also resembling the bodily interior – DNA strands, brains, intestines, or cells wrapped around bone. These squat cones of coiled

ceramic threads are clumsy and elegant, fragile and stumpy. They are wreathed with hand-carved titles – sensuous interiority, self-hood melt-down – and feel a bit like monuments to grave ideas, concepts that have died or existed in this place at some previous time. They are like markers of energy, tombstones placed atop a spot of terrific importance. Like chakra stones that mark the radiation of energy within the earth or the body, Tee implies that these objects have become the conduits of a type of force. It is a conflation you can find throughout her practice, where her interest in different belief systems and attitudes will tussle with the autonomy of the sculptural object. The idea of an artwork as being something with fixed meaning gives way to a more porous concept of art, where ideas become just as layered as the set of associations around them. The coupled pieces – *Occult Geometry* and *Practical Magic* – are pregnant with more than just ideas. They harbour small porcelain cavities, which might or might not be filled with sands, spices or other ground, corporeal matter. Sprayed with colour, the air-brushed ceramics are glazed in a spectrum of softened pastels, while the baseline letters are pressed into the base like heavy black plaques. So then what are these pregnant markers, these spontaneously made things?

You could look for help into the milky blue surface of the three glazed demi-balls. Or you could wait for the light to hit the brass shield at the perfect moment and reveal a mystic truth. But the crucial integrity of Jennifer Tee's ongoing body of work, is that although it is informed by all sorts of esoteric ideas, cultural artefacts from her wide wanderings and the theosophical underpinnings of charged matter, it is also a very poignant exploration of the fundamental contradictions we are all composed of – the rational and irrational, knowing and not-knowing, believer or sceptic, spirit and matter. Her forms are both geometric and spontaneous, industrially made and hand-made, practical and magical.

Locating these contradictions and bringing them into harmony is quite a balancing act, and this is also the central expression of her exhibition. At the centre of *Practical Magic* is a tentatively balanced sculpture. Two of the ceramic cones, spirit~matter and subtle planes protrude from the end of a long, balanced length of bamboo, anchored in a halo of white neon light at each end. It points in opposite directions, locating you in the exhibition only to split you in two. Completely white, set within in a land of multi-coloured pattern, the sculpture is a helpful device, in its own, wobbly way: it is the compass of the exhibition, providing a conduit for untamed energy, and a split-directional embrace.