

# A TAPESTRY OF RICH AND ROYAL HUE

Zoë Gray, 2015

In: *The Soul in Limbo*, Roma Publications

In his masterpiece of accessible archaeology, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, demonstrates with succinct brilliance the way in which people have always expressed ideas through materials. Whether writing about prehistoric flint ax heads, clay cattle from ancient Egypt, or a saltcellar from the time of the Viking conquest, he unravels their apparent mysteries to teach us about the social, geographical, and economic context of their making.(1)

How will archaeologists of the future understand the works of Jennifer Tee? Unlike many contemporary artists, who chose to work in ephemeral materials or in an increasingly dematerialized sphere altogether, Tee often works with materials that will last. Will readers of the work in the years to come be able to unravel the many colorful threads with which she weaves her stories? Even today, are we – contemporary readers – able to do so? And indeed do we want to? After all, if you unpick a story, the risk is that you undo the work itself. As cautious archaeologists, then, let us consider one wall-based work that acts as a sort of Rosetta Stone to her practice and enables us to decode the hieroglyphics of Tee's visual language.

As befits an archaeological exploration, the work in question, *Tulip Palepai: Navigating the River of the World* (2014-2016), is already underground. Well, the work is still under construction. However, it is destined to be underground or, more precisely, to be a mural for the metro underneath Amsterdam's Centraal Station. As part of a major commission that includes work for eight stops on the new North-South metro line, Tee was asked to imagine the station as a "gateway to the world." (2) Musing on how to create an image that went beyond typical representations of Amsterdam, Tee struck upon an idea that is at once decorative and political, personal and universal. She decided to work with the most Dutch symbol of all: the tulip. Her choice of this potentially clichéd flower reveals a great deal about her process of selecting subjects and materials. For her, the origins and symbolism of a material are as important as its physical properties or aesthetic qualities. In this case, she chose a flower that seems inherently Dutch, but which in fact originates in medieval Persia. The word "tulip" comes from Turkish and it was the sultans of the Ottoman Empire who favored the flower in their gardens from the

sixteenth century, where European travelers first saw them and began to import tulips to Western Europe.

In the seventeenth century, the tulip became associated with the Dutch Golden Age, and was favored by Dutch horticulturalists, merchants, and artists alike. Unlike other flowers known in Europe at the time, it had an unusually intense petal color. Certain bulbs infected with a virus that created striped petals became known as Rembrandt tulips. (3) These status symbols were the most sought after tulips on the market, which exploded during the period known as Tulip mania (1634-1637), when bulbs became so expensive that they were treated as a form of currency, like an early futures market. It is no coincidence that Tee chooses a flower connected with the first recorded economic bubble while making a work for the "post-crisis" situation in the Netherlands today.

Considering the abstract nature of Dutch, well, nature – itself a construction in many parts of this waterlogged nation – Tee thought of the tulip fields' transformation in springtime into grids of color, and the way this has inspired earlier generations of Dutch artists: think, for example, of Piet Mondrian's geometric compositions. She decided to create a pattern using lines of tulip petals, as repeated organic (and thus non-identical) units of color. Tee sourced her material during initial trips to the Keukenhof (the most famous tulip garden in the Netherlands) and then worked with the specialists at Hortus Bulborum Foundation in Lisse, selecting different tulips for their shapes, colors, and histories. Then she dried the petals, transforming three-dimensional flowers into flat units with which to construct a mosaic-like motif of tiles, or – if we are to look at them with the eyes of our digital era – like petal pixels.(4)

For this particular commission, Tee wanted to create a two-dimensional wall piece that was also sculptural and had a strong sense of materiality. She decided to create a "tapestry." Since 2009 she has been making woven and knitted floor-pieces, which function as sculptures and (increasingly often) also as a stage for specially created choreographies. (5) These textile pieces have been influenced by paintings such as Judy Chicago's *Pasadena Lifesavers* (1969-1970), the grid-forms of Agnes Martin, and the diagonal stripes of Frank Stella's shaped canvases. Martin and Stella were influenced in turn by Navajo weaving and American quilts, and brought together in their compositions "primitive" patterns with the rigors of Minimalist painting. In Tee's extension of this process of appropriation, these references – whose anonymous and usually female makers were overshadowed by the Western painters of Modernism – are translated or looped through different media: from tapestry to painting to tapestry as sculpture/stage. They re-emerge as abstract yet spiritual forms that speak to both the mind and the body. Tee refers to these pieces as "crystalline," and indeed the gradations of colour in the hand-dyed wool from which they are knitted suggest

the volume and angles of an oversized crystal. The artist has previously spoken of her interest in matter that is somehow between states, as in when water freezes to form ice crystals. (6) Her knitted works succeed in crystallizing energy and movement in a static visual form.

When imagining the work for the metro station, energy and movement were also at the forefront of Tee's thinking. "The average museumgoer spends an average of just four seconds looking at a work of art," she writes. "For the average traveler passing through Amsterdam's Centraal Station [...] four seconds might as well be an eternity." She continues, "But what if an artwork, while rewarding careful examination by patient viewers, could also give passersby an afterimage that lingered in the mind [...] and could be carried off like a seed to take root and blossom in another place? Or, in the case of a commuter, a living work that, like a travel companion, both reassured with its stable presence and challenged by subtly changing and offering new insights each time it was encountered." (7)

To create a suitably constant yet challenging work, Tee drew on her experience of making woven work, but also looked to older traditions of tapestry for inspiration. The Bayeux Tapestry, for example, dates back to the fifteenth century, stretches some seventy meters, and recounts the Norman conquest of England in a way that we might now describe as cinematographic: at once narrative and symbolic. Electing to tell a different story of travel, trade, and immigration in her tapestry, Tee drew from traditional Indonesian weavings. First, she made *Tampans Tulip* (2014), a series of collages from pressed tulip petals that recall the small woven cloths (*Tampans*) made in southern Sumatra. These collages, works in their own right, also served as studies for her mural design. For the latter, she drew inspiration from larger Sumatran weavings called Palepai (Ship) cloths. Southern Sumatra grew wealthy from the pepper trade. Its people were seafarers who came into contact with a wide variety of cultures. (8) Used in rites such as weddings and funerals, decorating the space but also acting as material witnesses to such ceremonies, their predominant motif is that of a ship, in reference to the seafaring community the weavings come from, and to the spiritual voyage of the soul to the afterlife.

"When I discovered the Sumatran Ship Cloths, I was instantly attracted to them," writes Tee, "the elongated shape, the illusion of symmetry, the geometry of the images, and the balance between closely observed details and the overall composition. Aesthetically, these Ship Cloths have beautiful lines and patterns, but they are also [...] spiritual in nature. Their iconography – the long, dignified, barge-like vessel navigating the river of the world, the naïve humans or rows of souls lining the decks along with animals, the houses, the eccentric trees – is quite moving, an amalgam of residual 'cultural memories' on a collective journey from, to, and through this world and the next." (9)

In her projects – as in her material choices – Tee is guided by spiritual echoes, political resonances, and by elements of her own family history. Her maternal grandfather was a tulip trader and her own father came from Indonesia to the Netherlands after World War II, traveling by boat. Her process of researching and making is therefore also often a process of learning about her own history. However, the works she makes are never directly autobiographical. Instead, they reveal how her own history intersects with History, how her personal narrative is interwoven with a universal tale. Thinking about Amsterdam as a city dominated by water, whose riches were largely built up through trade with colonies such as Indonesia, Tee decided to create her own version of a Palepai cloth. Her design – which incorporates two nine-meter-long walls – is a fusion of seemingly “tribal” patterns, info-graphics, and symbols of her own devising. The concentric half-rings of Amsterdam’s canals become the prow and stern of a ship. One form, evoking the tree of life motif often used in Palepai cloths, could also be read as a simplified metro map.

For Tee, different temporalities of reading are contained – or encouraged – by the different layers within the work. “From a distance, one sees the spectacle of the lines, but it offers enough texture to invite closer inspection, upon which one realizes just what the tapestry is composed of, and the details reveal both its local, handmade nature and the mythology of its images.” (10) Not only will readings of the work change over time, but also the piece itself will transform. The tapestry described above is in fact a tapestry only in Tee’s imagination. While the work comprises the interlocking of different strands or threads of color, it is actually a collage of tulip leaves stuck onto glass panels and covered with a transparent coating.(11)

As is often the case in her work, with the technique Tee has developed for this mural, she is going against the natural properties of a material to misuse it in a creative manner, with unexpected, poetic results. We can see this strategy at work in many of her previous projects, and indeed it is something that one encounters in other artists of her generation. (12)

In recent years, there has been a reawakening of interest in craft among contemporary artists (and curators). As I have argued in previous essays and exhibitions, this can be seen as illustrative or indicative of wider shifts in society. (13) In an era when we (in Western Europe at least) are increasingly distanced from the processes of production of most of the products and produce we consume, there seems to be a widely-felt need to reconnect to the sources of things, to understand how they are made, and to look at slower models of making. I believe that this has also fed into contemporary art practice, where there is a concurrent tendency of reskilling going on.

Despite (or perhaps thanks to) conceptual art's legacy – which convinced us that an artwork need not be made in order to exist – and following several decades of outsourcing of production to industrial or artisanal experts, artists today are openly admitting to their interest in mastering technical skills. (14) Tee is a case in point and has traveled far and wide in search of not only the perfect materials for her artworks, but also for the localized and specialized knowledge of how to work with those materials. However, what gives her work its unusual twist, its originality and sense of humor, is the way that she then misuses this knowledge, distorts these techniques, or pushes her materials to work in ways in which they were never intended.

So how will archaeologists of the future understand this work of Jennifer Tee? Will they tell future readers the story of a stubbornly rebellious craftswoman? Will they make the connection between Tulips, Mondrian, and Sumatran weavings? Will they extrapolate from this design to decode the politics of multiculturalism in the Netherlands in 2015? Or will they instead tell the story of an ambitious public art commission and what that might say about the cultural politics of our era? We cannot tell. For now, I conclude the following in my reading of this work in progress: With this mural, Tee is taking a bold step forward in her work, while also seeming to have come full circle in her practice, looping back to the immersive environments that she made early on in her career. While the artist herself is not directly visible in the works – as she was in earlier projects – her own sensitivity, biography, and interest in cultural hybridity remain clearly tangible. Like hieroglyphics, the piece tells a story in a highly stylized visual language, a story where the images cannot be detached from the material of their making.

- (1) Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, London: Penguin (2010).
- (2) The ambitious development also includes commissions from artists such as David Claerbout, Amalia Pica, and Dewar & Gicquel. It is due for completion in 2016.
- (3) These “cracked” tulips were actually painted by other artists, such as Judith Leyster (1609-1660).
- (4) In parallel to the development of this piece, Tee also created a series of windows featuring pressed flowers and resembling stained glass. Titled *Poppies and Roses* (2014), it took place at St. Werburgh's Primary School in Bristol and was commissioned by Arnolfini Gallery and Primary Capital Programme, Bristol.
- (5) The first work in what has become an evolving series was the crimson *Crystalline Floorpiece / Red* (2009), exhibited in The Knight's Tour at De Hallen, Haarlem. Other *Crystalline Floorpieces* appeared in installations such as *Star-Crossed* (2010) in *NETHER LAND*, curated by Witte de With for the World Expo in Shanghai; *Gridding Sentences* (2011), shown at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; *Star-Crossed 2* (2012) in *Beyond Imagination*, also at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; and *RUGS & BONES* (2013), in *Six Possibilities for a*

*Sculpture* at La Loge, Brussels, which I curated.

- (6) Jennifer Tee in conversation with Annick Kleizen, during *Six Possibilities for a Sculpture* at La Loge, Brussels. May 25, 2013(unpublished).
- (7) Artist's project description, unpublished, unpaginated, 2014.
- (8) Neil MacGregor, in his aforementioned *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, describes how shards of broken ceramics found on a beach in Tanzania revealed how people on the East African coast had been in contact with China, Indonesia, India, and the Gulf as early as 1000 AD, thanks to winds and currents of the Indian Ocean. The fragments "demonstrate that the Indian Ocean is in effect an enormous lake across which cultures have been communicating for millennia, where traders bring not only things but ideas, and the communities around whose shores are every bit as connected as those around the Mediterranean." Op. cit. note 1, p.xx.
- (9) Artist's project description, unpublished, unpaginated, 2014.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) While designing her project for Amsterdam, Tee worked on a commission for Cambridge that is also a tiled wall-piece featuring floral iconography. In the Cambridge University Herbarium, she discovered plants collected by Charles Darwin during the Voyage of the Beagle and incorporated images of these in her design, together with native English flowers. The piece – titled "*Bits of the world blow towards him and come apart on the wind*" (2014), after a poem by Darwin's great-great-grand-daughter – decorates and delineates an inherently awkward architectural space, which Tee imagined as a Chinese folding screen.
- (12) I am thinking, for example, of the aforementioned duo Dewar & Gicquel, but also Caroline Achaintre (whose work I showed together with Tee's in *Six Possibilities for a Sculpture*), Claudia Wieser, or Wilfrid Almendra, to name just a few.
- (13) See *Making is Thinking*, digital catalog from the eponymous exhibition at Witte de With in 2011 (available online at [www.wdw.nl](http://www.wdw.nl)). The touring show *Manufacture* (Centre PasquArt, Biel/Bienne, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton and Parc Saint Léger, Pougues-les-Eaux, 2011-12), explored the dynamics between industrial and artisanal fabrication in contemporary art.
- (14) For further exploration of this topic, see my essay "Sculpture Sessions" in Dewar & Gicquel: *Crêpe Suzette*, Bristol: Spike Island, 2012.