

LET IT COME DOWN BENDING ENERGY IN LIMBO

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In: *File note Let It Come Down*, Camden Arts Centre

"Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be."

José Esteban Muñoz (1)

Entering an environment that Jennifer Tee has set up with her works, is to enter a stage of possibility. A state of limbo, as she would say, not as the transition between one place (or state of being) and another, or a borderline that delineates where one ends and another begins, but rather as the ambiguous transformative area in-between where things are not fixed, nor necessarily clear. (2) In her objects and images there is no such thing as duality. Dichotomy dissolves into *spirit matter*, one the continuation of the other. When I first saw the vibrantly coloured, hand woven, crystalline floor pieces that are simultaneously demarcated soft surfaces for occasional performances to happen, for me it clicked. She approaches *stages* as *phases*, in the way that chemistry understands it: a physically distinct form of matter in substance and surface. By stressing that matter can change its properties and form - by pressure or a change in temperature - she continuously attests to the impermanence and instability of any situation. *Things could be otherwise, too.*

I'm always struck by the energetic charge of the matter that she brings into being. Each of Tee's objects requires a huge amount of manual labour, and, however carefully planned and executed, they always carry an element of risk: the mixed pigments never predict their exact hue when fired; the irregular ceramics are experiments in solidifying clay, up to the point where it sometimes breaks into pieces; fragile tulip petals turn another shade when drying at a carefully controlled temperature, and then fade when exposed to light. Knitting, making ceramics, and weaving are too often glossed over as traditional or exoticised crafts, although that is mainly showing the perspective one is speaking from. Looking at the expenditure of energy that is compressed into the objects, they tell another story: these things are full of life.

It is never unambiguously clear if Tee picks her ingredients by a symbolical charge, or because of their material quality. These often seem to come hand in hand: as if a pigment like *blazing yellow* has the ability to blow fierce life into wool that is dyed with it. The tulip petals that she used for her large scale tapestry for a passage of the Amsterdam subway, *Tulip Palepai*; referencing Sumatran ship cloths, also attest to this. (3) They are layered with references, from intimately personal to historical, and symbolical ones: her mother's father was an exporter of bulbs and grower of tulips, the flowers that became a national symbol of The Netherlands, introduced there by way of Turkey; the most precious of the tulips were cultivated with a virus that breaks their colour; assembled into the pattern of ships and waves, the petals take on a textile, at times almost featherlike, quality. The types of tulips that she used have names like Divine, Timeless, Queen of Night, Absalon, Parrot Texas Flame and Goldfish, adding other echoes. With works like these, Tee opens up a dense and ambiguous field of references, aesthetics, rhythms, abstract patterns, pictorial motifs and material qualities, that acts as an in-between state in itself: it can never be interpreted in only one way. Unfixed, every other element transforms the reading over and over again.

As she tells me about the collage she is making in a pattern of streaming black tulip petals, and as she describes rugs on the floor with a woven open cell structure, ceramics with skeletal qualities, and dried serpentine clay forms, the *phase-like* quality comes back to my mind. What is so obvious, now hits me: the limbo, the in-between as Tee describes it, is nothing but life affirming. It projects into a future that could be. When things are no longer rigid and fixed, life becomes possible. And more than that: nothing is ever rigid and fixed when large amounts of energy or pressure affect it. Tapping these sources of energy and power, spiritual, emotional or physical, can be a way to resist that which oppresses. A surge of heat can melt or evaporate what seemed an immobile block before. *Let it come down.*

- (1) 'Utopian Performatives' in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, p.97 (New York: NYU Press, 2009)
- (2) In-between states, flux and limbo keep recurring in Jennifer Tee's works, evoked in titles like *Soul in Limbo*, *Un Autre Monde*, and *[feasting on the] E*V*O*L E*Y*E-LAND*S*-END*, but also, for example, in the series of jars or urns called Heart Ferment, that suggest a transformative process: Thought Forms, *Wild Patience*, *Practical Magic*.
- (3) Tee is drawn to in-between states in the pictorial references that she draws from as well. The Sumatran palepai, large textiles with pictorial motifs of ships, adorned ceremonial occasions that highlight transitory moments in life.