LINDY LEE
Forging a new tradition
For Lindy Lee the recording and questioning of self has been a constant point of examination in her practice. As a Chinese-Australian artist, her work has been critical to visualising the experience of Chinese diaspora in a country that has historically whitewashed its multiculturalism. Anchoring her practice and dual identity is her Zen Buddhism, which has propelled her current engagement with the elemental through heat, metal and fire. Now mid-career, Lindy is taking this to epic proportions. In her latest work she is pushing concept and scale with the creation of some of her largest pieces yet. For an artist who has long been in dialogue with her dual transient identities, Lindy Lee is pushing past boundaries and forging her own mark as an international artist.
YOU HAVE A LONG HISTORY of family travelling to and from China and Australia. Where did your immediate family come from in China?

Guangdong province; my dad came out in 1946 and my mother in 1953. The situation was that my grandfather, my mother’s father, had come first, and prior to him my uncle had come. One member of the family was allowed to come during the White Australia Policy and if one person wanted to return he could appoint someone else to come. I was born in Australia in 1954, so I was growing up at the tail end of the White Australia policy.

So you would have been a teenager when the Whitlam Government came to power; and one of its first international events was to visit China. As a young Chinese woman in Australia what was your reaction?

It was fantastic. There was an exhibition I was involved with in 2008 – Beijing – but in the heart of Australia, which was the Embassy. A beautiful sort of closure happened and when the guards acknowledged my grandmother there was this really kind of unbelievable healing.

When exploring your Chinese-Australian identity and the experience of diaspora, is your practice internalised or have other artists or thinkers informed you?

Locl. I think it is mostly internalised. I could go on about cultural theories but it was not just trying to be honest to my own experience. It was always this very nagging thing, and I think the best art comes from this place anyway. William Yang said, “You learn to internalise self-hatred, you internalise racism”. That is a very powerful place to make work from because you are supposed to belong, but you don’t.

How did you come to embrace Buddhism and Zen philosophy?

Carl Jung said “Everything repressed returns as fate”. I spent pretty much all of my first few decades absolutely wanting to run away from the fact that I was Chinese.

So that is a way of reconnecting with your Chinese identity? Yes. There is a beautiful saying at the entrance of a lot of Zen gardens, “Do not come here unless you are prepared to meet yourself”. In meditation you have to make contact with the deepest parts of yourself and even the parts that you have exiled.

Have you ever felt compelled to learn Mandarin?

I’ve studied Mandarin 101 about a thousand times and I never quite got past the ‘ni hao’. No, it is curious. I am absolutely driven to connect with my ancestry but I am not driven to learn the language. It is a hell of a commitment and it is a very difficult language to learn, and somehow I have managed to do without.

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How did you come to embrace Buddhism and Zen philosophy?

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Success is pleasant, but it is also a trap, and lack of success is unpleasant but it is a trap to think that is what you are. You have to just get on with that task, you have to be present and turn up to your own life.
Australia in a broad sense was in transition. Australia still regarded itself as monocultural, but the reality that the fabric of Australia was multicultural was beginning to take form. There is also a kind of examination of the choices I guess my parents made to actually make a home, with something lost and a nostalgia and longing. A lot of the landscape paintings of the Sung and Tung dynasties are in the shadow of our existence, as our family wasn’t very able to thoroughly acknowledge or embrace that either. It was assimilation at the time; the reality was that we weren’t encouraged to learn my parents’ tongue and it is a generational thing. Juxtaposing the images and burning the holes through them was a kind of recognition of the turmoil and lack of belonging: that sentiment can very strongly through my family.

In your early practice you were photocopying works, today you work with metal and fire. Repetition is a consistent theme throughout your practice. What is its importance to your process? That is a really good question. I don’t think anyone has asked me that question in relation to the expanse of my history as an artist. When I first started to photocopy there were a number of themes, I didn’t even realise it was about the bad copy but it was. That repetition was about trying to be inside each moment. And repetition has been a really important quality in my work since the very beginning. Now when I am burning holes or drawing circles, with my kind of Zen training that moment is eternity, this very moment. So for me it is about that pitch into anxiety – meeting with this moment because in Buddhism eternity isn’t anywhere else but here, there is only this moment of now.

So that marks making recognises your presence in the moment. You even with the lyric phrases it’s exactly the same – this is the absolute record of the instant moment.

There is a vertical movement as you burn into the work, which is reminiscent of techniques in Chinese calligraphy. Is there a conscious engagement with Chinese traditions? There is a conscious engagement in the sense that the mark, the gesture, is really important in calligraphy. I love the stories of how a great calligraphy master can actually read the frame of mind of the person that made that mark. It is similar to Zen. You have that tradition of hitting a bell before you go and greet your Zen teacher, and your Zen teacher can read your state of mind by the strike of the bell, whether you are winning or whether you are absolutely present. So your degree of presence can be read. This calligraphy for me as a philosophy of embodiment is very important.

In your mark-making you’ve burned holes into paper and silk when you collaborated with Alexie lemus, and now metal. What appeals to you about using fire and heat?

At an artist everything has been continually sensitive. No matter how intellectual one can become it is totally in your gut. For years I would be drawn to certain materials, and I would spend fire your trying to figure out what that connection was, and it’s really being very compelled. So at one point 10 years ago I just had the real compulsion to want to work with fire. So I went to Beijing and looked up a school for two months, it was the middle of winter and I started burning the crap out of paper.

To keep warm? (Laughter) Yeah it was freezing. Beijing gets very cold. But then I started to read and listen to a lot of podcasts as you do, I have to go into those periods of asceticism to do this kind of work. What I love is the way in which Buddhism discusses emotions in terms of the elements. Okay, I’m going to get really cheesy and Buddhist here. In terms of fire there is a metaphor called the “fire of delusion”, so delusion in Buddhism is the amount of spin that we perpetually comfort ourselves with. Good spin, bad spin, it’s all just spin. So the metaphor is that we have different kinds of fire: we have bush fires, gas fires, paper fires – it has to do with the fuel – delusion is also a fuel. So in order to meet your delusion and burn them away you have to meet them equally. The burning was my way of complete meditation for two months, a commitment to burn away as much as the delusion of self as possible.

Working with metal and fire, you are engaging with the material and immaterial. Does it mirror your own material and immaterial connections to your Australian identity?

Yes, that is all-important, the relationship between the material and immaterial, they bring upon each other. When the fire meets the metal it is written with fire, they are married together, you can’t extricate them, it’s impossible with the burning that occurs. There is this vitality that comes about just through the fire. In terms of Chinese heritage and the immaterial, for me, spirit is the invisible things that make us in any given record, and part of that is for me whatever it is to be Chinese. And that is a really strong pull, I speak to other Chinese-Australians and you can’t escape it.

You are at an exciting stage now in mid-career, how do you weather the highs and lows? It is back to the question of authenticity, you have to stay true to that which is essential to you. Through suffering and pain of difference some two little questions is burned, nailed into your soul and you are compelled to answer and address that. In terms of the highs and lows, there is good spin and bad spin, there is success and not success – they are the same thing. Success is more pleasant, but it is also a trap too, and lack of success is unpleasant but it is a trap to think that is what you are. You have to just get on with that task, you have to be present and turn up to your own life.
With your practice growing from small-scale works to large public works, how has this challenged you?

I love it, even if a project doesn’t get off the ground. I have had three decades now of gallery practice but somehow, especially with my collaboration with Urban Art Projects (UAP), I just feel freer, larger, huger, possibilities to just think bigger. It sounds like a cliché but you’re invited, literally, to think bigger.

In this thinking bigger, and working with craftsmen to create the large-scale works, does it interrupt the gestural process in your work? Is the artist’s hand still present?

In terms of the flinging of the bronze, that was a process, when I started to work with UAP I said I really wanted to do it myself, which is fun. Although I have a number of people working with me, I actually pretty much hand-place every dot for every hole. I have people, but I direct them, and I also do it. I am giving them advice on the rhythm of those dots and the sequence of those dots. That for me is some creative reason for it. It is actually the placing of it, the repetition in each dot. ‘The Life of Stars’, there were over 30,000 holes, which were hand-placed.

When creating the ‘Fire Works’ did that push you in having to negotiate with a team of craftsmen to get what you were imagining?

It was wonderful because you have to be articulate and clear about what you want. There is no point of being shy about it. Also, in my experience so far, I have never had to do much negotiation. Whatever I have needed to do, they let me do.

You initially connected to your Chinese heritage through exploring ancient Chinese tradition. Now you have travelled to China with Chinese clients commissioning large public works. What does having these works made in China mean for you and your experience of diaspora?

There is sometimes poetry in that – a young girl who just wanted to be anything but Chinese, and then eventually having to embrace that part of her and going back to China. It has been through stages. I've been going there since 1978, so that is a long time. When I first went there I couldn't have felt more alien and it was very communist. China has changed a lot over these last 40 years so increasingly I feel more comfortable about being there. I also feel more comfortable about being different from the regular Chinese. It is okay; I am never going to be completely and authentically Chinese and that’s fine.

Your art has juggled that transient state, between your Chinese and Australian contexts but today what perspective do you have of your dual identity?

I am more engaged with questions of cosmos. The thing about identity can be a trap, because you are never just the one thing. Within each of us there are multiplicity, there is a whole tribe of us. In certain contexts it is fiercely Chinese and in others it’s not, and that is fine. One’s identity is never one thing; it is many things and being okay with that.

Situating your Chinese works in China – is that some kind of symbolic action for you?

It’s beautiful, I think that ‘Life of Stars’ is one of the most significant works I have ever made, and that it is in China is a wonderful thing. The Life of Stars has Buddhism and Daoist philosophies, that work is riddled with that for me. And to have that in China it is a wonderful thing.


The Life of Stars, 2015, stainless steel, height 6m, photographed by Charlie Xia

Black Dew Drops, 2015, cast bronze patinaed, 190 x 200 x 150cm and 150 x 80 x 100cm, photographer Roger DSouza

Being swallowed by the milky way, 2008, pencil and graphite on paper, 200 x 130cm

The Life of Stars

Courtesy the artist; UAP, Brisbane; Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

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