UQ Art Museum showcases 30 years of Lindy Lee

Lindy Lee’s ‘Fire and water’ 2006. Synthetic polymer paint and wax on board, archival inks on photorag paper.

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A new exhibition at The University of Queensland Art Museum will examine artist Lindy Lee’s contribution to Australian art over the past three decades in the first major survey of her work.

Exhibition curator UQ Art Museum Associate Director Michele Helmrich said the exhibition, Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom, provided a rare opportunity to study Lee’s work in depth.

“Lee’s work developed almost in tandem with shifts in Australia’s psyche: the postmodern cultural debates of the 1980s, the turn to Asia and multiculturalism in the 1990s, and an increasing openness to ideas such as those offered by Buddhism,” Ms Helmrich said.

“Despite the transformative moments that punctuate Lee’s works, currents of continuity can also be observed: repetition and the grid; obsessive approaches to image making;
darkness and light; form and the formless (in Buddhist terms, emptiness); and images that unfold endlessly."

Ms Helmrich said the exhibition explored Lee’s acclaimed early photocopy work and work that evolved following her embrace of Zen Buddhism and her Chinese heritage. “Born in Brisbane in 1954, Lee remembers the pain of racism, of hating being Chinese when she was young, and of being encouraged to assimilate,” Ms Helmrich said. “Referring to her works with photocopied images, she recalls, ‘I loved the flawed copy, because it was a representation of what I was; I felt split and divided, and it was supremely painful.’

“As Lee comments, throughout her work has been a ‘need to honour and redeem that which is lost and that which is exiled from us’. “The darkness and pathos of the early works has perhaps evolved into a sense of light and transcendence. Nevertheless, a deep current underpins the work.”

Lee said being an artist had not been a choice as much as an ongoing need or desire to find belonging and completeness. “The defining experience of my life is one of being fractured, which is a direct result of being Chinese-Australian,” Lee said.

“Everything I do is related to my longing to heal the split.”

“Throughout my childhood, my family would go every week to the Chinese Club in Brisbane.

“I always felt out of place, awkward. Almost everyone there had come from China or Hong Kong, so they had a direct relationship with being ‘Chinese’. I ‘looked’ like everyone else but felt inauthentic, fraudulent.

“When I went to school, I would feel ‘Australian’, but that meant being ‘white’, so I definitely didn’t fit in there either.

“Even now, I feel this split very acutely but, curiously, most strongly when I’m in China.

“There, my body proclaims my ancestry and race and yet this body has been steeped for a lifetime in Western cultural values.

“I think the fundamental and persistent question in my work is not ‘who’ am I, but ‘what’ am I – what is real?”

*Lindy Lee: The Dark of Absolute Freedom* comprises 48 works, including many held by the UQ Art Museum and several from public and private collections.

The exhibition runs from 20 September 2014 to 22 February 2015.