

## The Many Faces of **Lindy Lee**



FOR LINDY LEE PUTTING INK TO PAPER IS A MATTER OF COMPLETELY EMPTING HERSELF AND LETTING THE SURROUNDING UNIVERSE TAKE OVER. **EDWARD COLLESS** DISCOVERS HER ZEN LOGIC. PHOTOGRAPHY BY **HEIDRUN LOHR**.

Last year **Lindy Lee** trekked for a month through Tibet, staying in isolated Buddhist monasteries on mountain routes, and ending up at the base camp of Mount Everest. This wasn't an adventure holiday, but a spiritual pilgrimage. For Buddhists, Everest (or Qomolungma in Tibetan) is the Mother of the Universe. "Of course it was awesome, sublime, thrilling beyond description," Lee quietly recalls in an enviable reverie, "and then there was the food: yak tea, yak meat, yak milk, yak cheese, rancid yak butter." She gags: "Also beyond description. I'll be happy enough never having to eat anything issuing from a damned yak again!"

A deeply thoughtful Zen Buddhist who regularly disappears into week-long remote, silent and vegetarian retreats in the bush, Lindy Lee can also surprise you by speaking excitedly about a malt whisky she encountered on a recent trip to Scotland, or about the lust for a drive-thru hamburger. As far as one can generalise about an artist whose richly layered and subtle work has been prominent in the Australian scene for two decades, one could say that Lee's artistic theme has been this sort of negotiation between her intuitions of a shadowy, spiritual realm and the all too human experiences of love and loss that take her there. Lee's art takes form at the interface of non-material forces and corporeal matter, of mind and flesh.

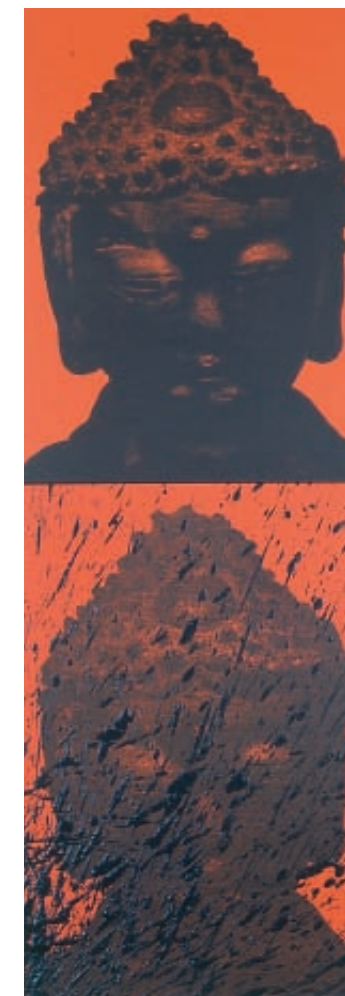
Through the 1980s, Lee became well known for her dark and densely textured photocopy prints of faces, whose somnolent eyes peered out of a melancholic gloom as if they were the eyes of ghosts pleading to come back into the world and yearning for earthly form again. Those portraits were details from relatively famous European paintings produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, masterpieces that contributed to the grand narrative of Western art canonised in modern cultural history. The postmodernism of the 1980s emerged with an attitude of scepticism toward that history, and the value of its masterpieces. Lee's imagery indicated a highly individual, and personal, take on this kind of scepticism.

Using illustrations from art history text books, Lee reproduced these images as black and white photocopies, but did so by running the print repeatedly, in a circuit or loop, through the photocopy machine. With every successive scan the image was overprinted, becoming darker and less legible as the toner accumulated and smothered the paper. Slight misregistrations of the superimposed copies – inevitable but minor accidents with the feeding mechanism – made the figure in the image resonate and flicker dimly as if being seen through gently shifting veils. Often hovering at the border of each image was the faintly visible edge of the actual page or spine of the book from which the image was taken, emphasising the imagery's appropriation from history but also sinking these faces into the archived obscurity of unsolved missing persons files.

To anyone with even a modest acquaintance with European art, Lee's portraits looked vaguely familiar – derived from paintings one seemed to know but couldn't quite identify. The condensed, yet fragile, sediments of the photocopier's carbon that obscured as they simultaneously delineated the face, became metaphoric for the uncertain archaeological motion of a displaced cultural memory. These plaintive ghosts from an Old World hang forever at both a temporal and geographic distance from us. Looking at Lee's appropriated portraits we lose and partially recover images from the past, but images of a cultural tradition that was never really our own. Perhaps we are condemned to see them this way – those original works of art – as remote and speechless icons, because we are their false descendants. Just as the artist considers herself a false descendent of European art, producing false copies of that art as her own.

"As Australians," Lee observes, "we have been bad copies of Europe." Bad copies can be seen as diminished versions of the original from which they're taken: pallid, ersatz, provincial. The Australian modernists had lamented the tyranny of distance: Australian culture was an exiles' culture, cringing before the authority of Europe or, later, the USA and forever falling short of the example and standard they set. But while, undeniably, there's a tone of mourning in Lee's portrayal of these forsaken images, there is no cultural cringe. For the postmodernists in the 1980s, Australian culture's second-hand character was to be celebrated. Ours was a travesty of an original Old World culture and its Old Masters. A literally antipodean and upside-down culture. Not just a culture of images, but an imaginary culture. A drag act. The false copy could be described as impoverished if you saw only its failed resemblance to the original. Lee's art has always instead stressed – in a positive way – the copy's deviation from its artistic original.

In one respect, the portrait gallery of dispossessed European art that Lindy Lee produced throughout the 1980s and early 1990s could be seen as a mode of self-portraiture. It was as if she was depicting her own gaze toward an horizon of artistic ancestors she wished to



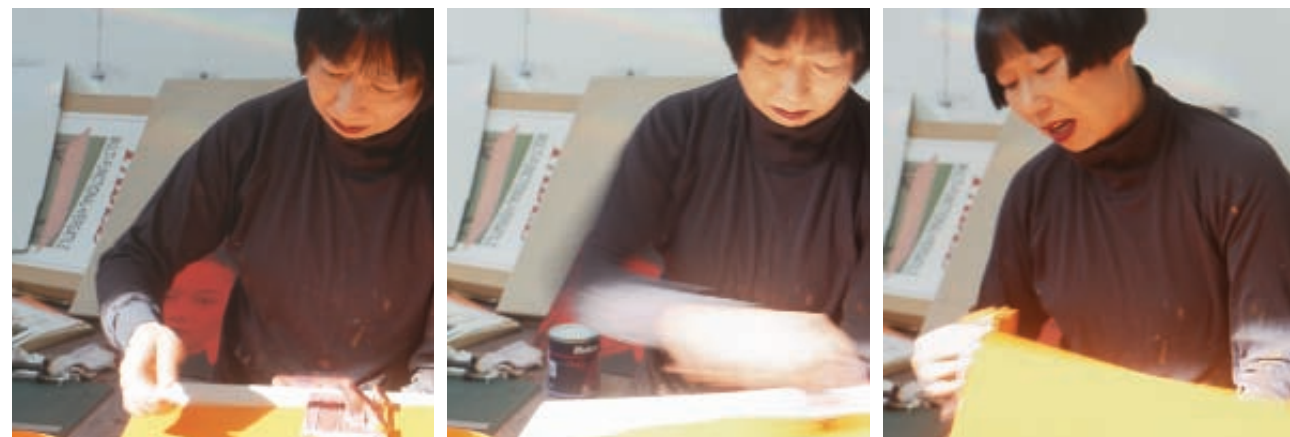
Lindy Lee, *Buddha-gold*, 2002. Inkjet print, oil, acrylic and wax on board, 2 panels, 81 x 28 cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ROSLYN OXLEY GALLERY.

Lee's art takes form at the interface of non-material forces and corporeal matter, of mind and flesh.



Lindy Lee, *Ten Worlds, Ten Directions*, 2002. Inkjet print, oil, acrylic and wax on board, 20 panels, 162 x 142.5cm. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY.

"I meditate, empty the self, let go of the self completely and then fling the ink."



communicate and, perhaps, identify with. What was being reflected back, however, wasn't just a portrait of the artist in her studio. "Over the past 10 years," continues Lee, "in addition to being falsely European, I came to realise I've been a false copy of a Chinese person. My parents came to Australia from China in the late 1940s, raising their family during the infamous White Australia Policy. We were proudly Chinese at home, but outside we had to conform to what White Australia wanted from its immigrants: an assimilation that erased our identities. I felt like a White Australian although I didn't look like one; whereas at a Chinese club with my family, for instance, I looked like everyone there but didn't feel like them."

The ancestors that Lee became interested in, and has remained dedicated to, are now figures from her Chinese family. For a recent show at Sydney's Artspace, Lee installed about a hundred freestanding concertina books of prints: the A3 size leaves of each book carrying a series of single close-up monochrome images of family members, faces of the living and deceased. Each book contained about 18 panels, and if extended fully would be about four metres in length. These poignant photographic genealogies could have had the sentimental aura that any family photo album naturally has; but the scale and repetition of the faces, zig-zagging across the gallery space and occupying it like a silent crowd or an audience, produced a very different effect. Although the faces are now produced with a computer and come off an ink-jet printer, each one is intricately filtered – deliberately, but also arbitrarily, increasing or decreasing contrast, grain, brightness, and so on – in Photoshop by Lee's digital designer, her husband Rob Scott-Mitchell. "There is something in each face," says Lee, "it is one single moment in that person's existence. That face is caught in an instant but what is going on in that instant – what is passing through it – is immense, and I'm trying to indicate that immensity in the repetitions."

Lee's resort to the repetition of these photographic images has an obvious precedent in Andy Warhol's silk-screened serial portraits, each one carrying small differences from accidents in the screening process. But Warhol's repetitive reproduction of PR celebrity shots comically imitated the numbing, devaluing effect of publicity. The multitude of identical faces in Lee's work intends – however paradoxical it may sound – to redeem value and recover the unique, individual identity of the face and its familial relation with the artist. Infinite duplication produces a singular moment: this is the sort of paradox that Zen logic notoriously delights in, and, for Lee there is a particularly Zen aspect of Buddhist cosmology that crystallises in her portrait galleries. Known as the Net of Indra, this doctrine describes the universe as an infinite net. "At the intersections, the knots, of this net," Lee explains, "is a little jewel... perfect in itself and perfectly reflecting the light of every other jewel in the universe. This jewel is symbolic of all phenomena. We can't exist at an individual level without everything else existing at the same time. The format of my work is both infinitely large, and comes down to one panel."

What would be on that one panel? Everything, of course. Paradoxically, again, the portrait photo in Lee's hands is both a specific icon and also a universalising, abstract mark, equivalent to the formless splats of ink and hot wax that she periodically flings across her work. These splats, as she calls them, appeared while attempting, in 1996 in Beijing, to study Chinese calligraphy. She found the immense history behind each calligraphic mark to be stifling: much like staring into the faces of the European Old Masters. "I was trying to get away from history," she reflects, "so I meditate, empty the self, let go of the self completely and then fling the ink." But if the self has disappeared, then who or what throws the ink? "Everything that exists in the universe at that moment," answers Lee. "That's what makes the mark, and that's what the mark is. And I am just part of that." ■

...Lee's artistic theme has been this sort of negotiation between her intuitions of a shadowy, spiritual realm and the all too human experiences of love and loss that take her there.

*The Secret Life of the Golden Flower* is showing at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery 20 November to 20 December 2003. Lindy Lee is also represented by Sutton Gallery in Melbourne.