CHARLES ROSS/STAR AXIS

GIUSEPPE GABELLONE

MILLIE CHEN

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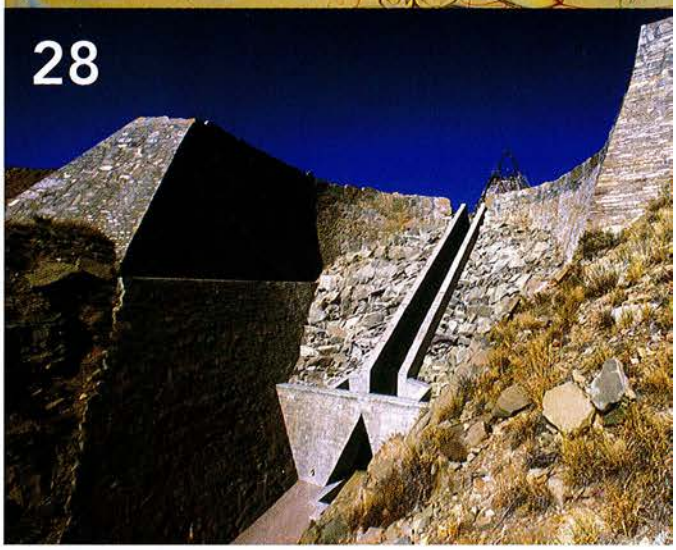

ON THE COVER: David Altmejd, detail of *The Lovers*, 2004, plaster, resin, paint, fake hair, jewelry, glitter, wood, 45 x 90 x 54 inches (photo: David Altmejd © 2004; courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

COVER INSET: Charles Ross, view of Lower Star Tunnel, *Star Axis*, 1971–in progress, Chupinas Mesa, New Mexico, outside dimensions: eleven stories by 1/10th mile (photo: Charles Ross © 2005)

THIS PAGE: Above: Charles Ross, view of *Star Axis* from below, looking north, *Star Axis*, 1971–in progress, Chupinas Mesa, New Mexico, outside dimensions: eleven stories by 1/10th mile (photo: Charles Ross © 2005) / Top: Lorenzo De Los Angeles, *Spider Plants*, 2002, colored pencil, acrylic on paper, 22.5 x 30 inches (courtesy of the artist)

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Senses of proximity: Millie Chen's immersive environments

BY SANDRA FIRMIN

Contemporary artists now freely incorporate odors, tastes, and noises into their works, unsettling sight's dominance in the processes of making and experiencing art. These strategies subvert longstanding hierarchies of Western thought that, from Aristotle to Freud and beyond, privilege what is visible over other sensory modes of perception.

Harking back to European avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism, innovative contemporary practices rely on sensual materials and organic substances that call on the haptic and olfactory more than on the visual. Over the last twenty years, this move to the visceral and interactive can arguably be seen as a consequence of globalization and the proliferation of counter-narratives from within and without the United States and Europe, which are grounded in alternative approaches to aesthetics, embodiment, and knowledge. It also owes to feminist psychoanalytic theory and postcolonial discourse, which have contributed to a revolution in the production and reception of the visual arts in the second half of the twentieth century.

For the past fifteen years, Millie Chen has developed and produced individual and collaborative projects deeply engaged in these sensorial politics. Her performances and installations have often focused on the entwinement of the senses of proximity with personal and collective memories, cultural narratives, and tourism.

A collaboration between Chen and New York artist Tomie Arai, *Kitchen*, 1997, parodies the period room that, popularized in Western societies in the nineteenth century, is a mainstay of the encyclopedic museum. The artists decorated the room with chintzy *chinoiserie* wallpaper and stocked the cupboards with prepackaged goods often found in the "World" section—and "Oriental" subsection—of grocery stores, including tea containers, specialty sauces, noodles, and rice. If *Kitchen* mimics stereotypes of a homogenous Asian identity and its manifestation in the home, it also humorously engages the gendered dimension of Orientalism by a sleight of hand. As all product labels, regardless of the product itself, feature sexualized Asian women, the artists slyly overlaid everyday photographs of themselves at work and play onto the labels and the wallpaper.

As institutional peeks into earlier eras, pedagogical period rooms attempt to replicate domestic interiors. Such rooms only provide a gloss on how a subgroup, defined in this case by a mock ethnicity, lived in a particular architectural setting. Devoid of any human presence, they represent an attempt to convey human life through purely visual means. These rooms lack other essential sensorial information, such as odors common to a kitchen, drawing room, study, or bedroom. They also fail to interpret and mediate such an important cultural currency as etiquette. Nowhere are visitors informed as to which smells and noises would be deemed acceptable and offensive. This history of sensibilities offers proof that the senses are not an

Above: Millie Chen and Tomie Arai, *Kitchen*, 1997, interior installation view: wood, paint, wallpaper, food products, furniture, appliances, 400 square feet (courtesy of the artists; photo: Millie Chen)

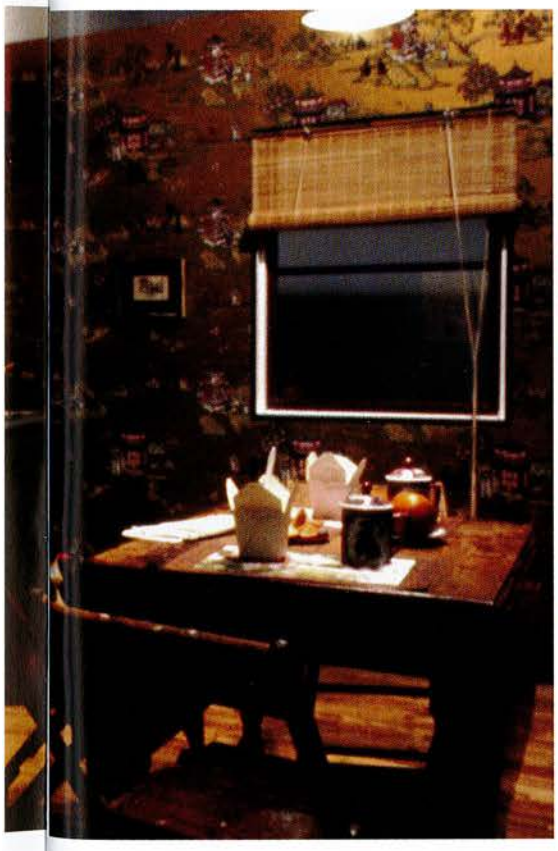
Opposite: Millie Chen and Tomie Arai, *Kitchen*, 1997, detail of interior of installation: the artists as part of the chinoiserie wallpaper (courtesy of the artists; photo: Millie Chen)

immutable means to apprehend the world, but cultural variables.

During most gallery hours, *Kitchen* presented a static caricature of a traditional Asian home that visitors could investigate like a cabinet of curiosities. Come lunch hour however, it became a living map of the culinary geography and commodity markets of lower Manhattan. Shown at Art in General, centrally located in Chinatown, the installation was truly site-specific as the home décor and products were procured from nearby grocers and novelty stores, including the takeout lunch that Chen and Arai ordered on regularly-scheduled days when they invited visitors to join in on their meals. *Kitchen* then ceased to be a satiric repository of clichés. It was transformed into an animated social space, reflecting the intersection of histories, interests, and lives of the artists, their friends, and the strangers who sat down with them.

An earlier installation, *Hungry Ghost Rubric*, 1996, also subverted the model of the period room, lining the walls of Oakville Galleries at Gairloch Gardens, a former Arts and Craft residence's empty dining and music rooms, with an intricate pattern reminiscent of *chinoiserie*. Born in the fourteenth century along the silk route, this European decorative style imagined China as an impenetrable land of Confucian calm, majestic landscapes, and bejeweled animals. The conjunction of memory and fantasy is quite literally traced on the walls of this installation, where a stylized lashing tongue and wisps of hair are inscribed directly into the surface. Smelling of *dang gui*, a pungent medicinal herb taken during menstruation, these marks suggest an ethereal presence lurking in the architecture. Transgressing the compartmentalization of domestic interiors, the odor rekindled ancient and present day fears of the foreign symbolized by the feminine and the Orient.

A hint of *chinoiserie* is also at the core of *call*, 2001, an installation that envelops viewers in darkness, haunted by an empyreal Arabic call/song/chant sung by vocalist Maryem Hassam Tollar. A glow at the end of a cavernous corridor



Millie Chen and Evelyn Von Michalofski, *Seven Scents*, 2003, site-specific public space performance: costumes, seven deck chairs, seven atomizers (scent contents various), seven CD players with headphones (soundtracks various), 20 x 4 x 3 feet (courtesy of DisplayCult)

compels the curious to approach. This, in turn, causes the music to fade to inaudibility, preventing the synchronization of image and sound, and thwarting the listener's need for resolution and mastery over the scenario. The desire induced by this sound installation is partly defined by the impossibility of its fulfillment. This state of subliminal longing and the lure of the exotic are threads running throughout Chen's work.

Uniting sound and scent, *The Seven Scents*, 2003, a collaboration with Evelyn Von Michalofski, interrogates how the tourist industry prepackages fictional cultures while highlighting the importance of travel's liminal spaces. Chen and Von Michalofski believe emphatically in these depots and transit zones as sites for introspection and latent revelations.

Riffing off epic, colonial seafaring adventures and fantasies of escape, the performance-installation features seven luxury liner deck chairs, each printed with one of the seven seas, positioned towards Lake Ontario's waterfront in Toronto. Like spa therapists or fastidious Singapore Girls stewardesses, Chen and Von Michalofski attended to passersby, encouraging them to select a destination and relax while listening to one of seven soundtracks recorded in bus terminals, ferry docks, parking garages, airports, highways, an elevator, and hotel lobby. Tourist destinations are often intricate constructions marketed as unspoiled by the historical forces of industry and technology. Such fantasies belie the reality of most locations where congested cities adjoin resorts with damaged ecosystems. *The Seven Scents* highlights the unseemly realities of travel, where time spent getting somewhere often exceeds the time spent at any given site.

Each traveler was also provided perfume testers saturated with a base-note of salty sea and infused with a concoction of industrial smells. While at odds with romanticized travel, this sensorial brew compounded the sites, sounds, and smells of the harbor, itself a tourist hot spot, with the proffered stimuli, heightening awareness of the processes by which the sensations of place and time are synthesized and absorbed by the body.

Historical forces mediate all expressions of sense experience, but vision by far has been the sense organ most disciplined. The lack of attention given to the other senses has the beneficial outcome of allowing them to work subversively in the interstices of cultural production to connect viewers more immediately to artworks through their own personal memories. This experience, in turn, forges new possibilities for aesthetic delectation and social inquiry. AP

Sandra Firmin is Curator of the University at Buffalo Art Gallery where she has organized solo exhibitions of Patricia Cronin and Janaina Tschäpe. Upcoming projects include retrospectives of Kim Jones and Allan D'Arcangelo.

Millie Chen lives in Ridgeway, Ontario, and teaches at the University of Buffalo. Her works can be experienced in a number of group exhibitions in 2005: *Consuming Passions: Food in Art* at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario; *4 Souls, 2 Worlds* at York Quay Gallery, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto; *Group of Seven Revisited* at Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge, Ontario; and *Beyond/In Western New York* at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Buffalo Arts Studio, Buffalo. Upcoming projects include *The Great Wall—The Endless Line*, Great Wall of China, Mutianyu, China, in 2006, and solo exhibitions at the Centre d'art contemporain de Basse-Normandie, Hérouville-Saint-Clair and the Centre culturel canadien, Paris, France, in 2007.