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FUSE MAGAZINE

special issue

art and activism

art and community

art and identity

art and public

art and race

art and sexuality

art and technology

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FUSE MAGAZINE

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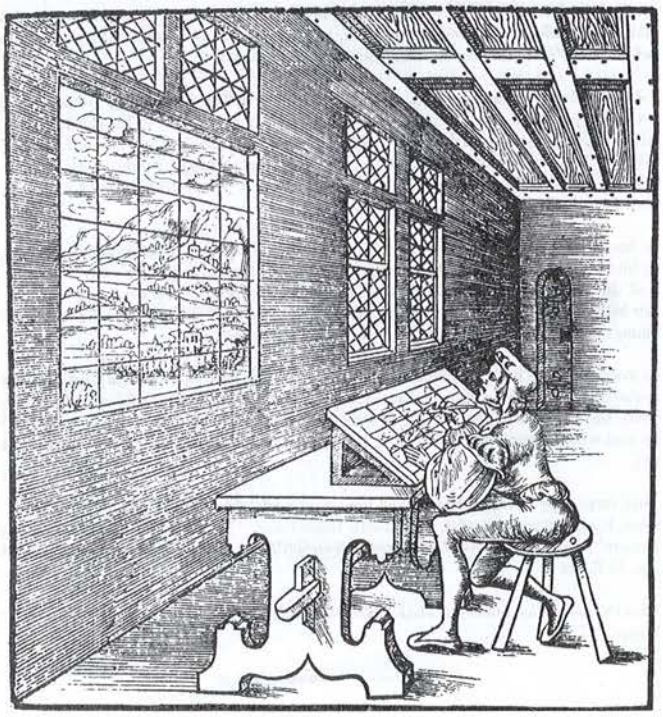
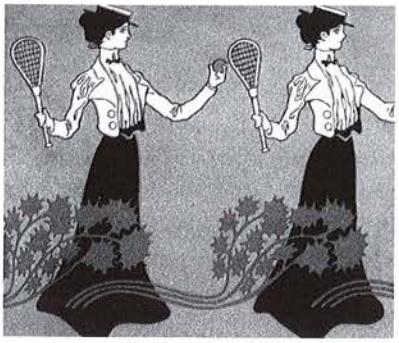


Cover image: Group of Laocoön and his sons, reconstructed by Filippo Magi; Vatican.



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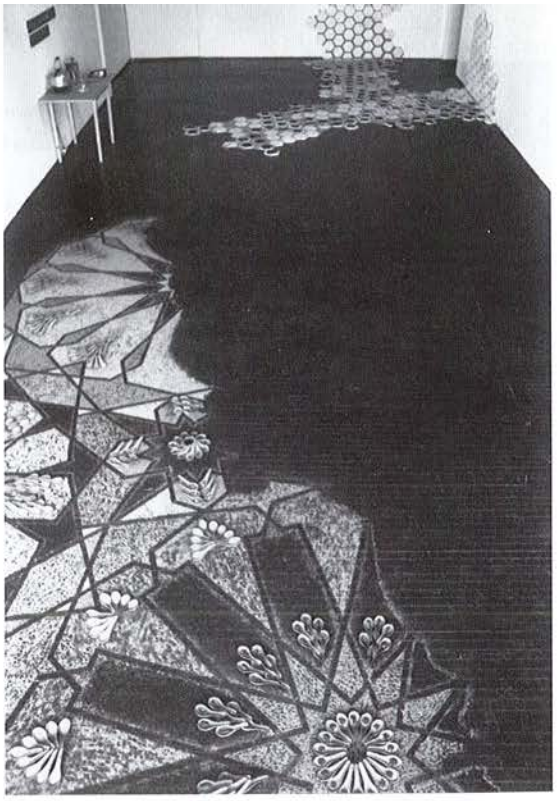
Re-orienting Asian

Millie Chen
Cook and Crave

YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto
April 26–May 20, 1995

REVIEW BY JAMELIE HASSAN



Installation view of *Cook* (background) and *Crave*, 1995.

For those of us who have at one time in our lives sweated out our imaginings labouring in the back kitchens of Canadian restaurants or at the stoves and counters of our home kitchens, Millie Chen's installations at YYZ are a memorable experience. In this exhibit the kitchen claims its legitimate place in the locations of culture, a site of instruction and production. Akin in place of birth and sentiment to Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee (*Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink, Man Woman*), Chen employs with humour and visual richness food's material culture—in particular, its production and consumption and the influence of food in the stir of memory that can hinge on the slightest scents.

Labour, sweat and the constitutive aspect of the body's regenerative possibilities are integral to the 1992 work *Cook*. The white clay bisked-fired tiles and their six-sided shape have strong cultural and biological associations. The cell of the body, the hive of the bee (the collective site of labour in nature), are all echoed by the shape and multiplication of the tiles. Further evidence of Millie Chen's explications around sweat, labour and the body's functions are found in the etched surface of the tiles where, among other details, the visitor finds the formula for sweat given in recipe-like or medical prescription form. Portions of the tiles are carved to create a hollow space containing the rich, dark brown liquid soya sauce. These luminous surfaces of soya are a tricky play on the dark brown glaze of Chinese hotpots. Other tiles contain only the residue of the soya. The process of evaporation and reconstitution (facilitated by the visitor who must pour water from a kettle at the "reconstitution station") is implicit throughout the exhibit.

The unexpected material of dried soya beans is the grout that tenuously holds the pattern together. Drawings etched into the clay tile subtly depict women's work in the arduous process of making soya beans into soya sauce. In his catalogue essay on Chen's work, Reginald Woolery points to the "heating, soaking, grinding and fermenting" techniques used to rid the soya bean of its bitter taste.[1] It is this material process of transformation that is so evident in *Cook*.

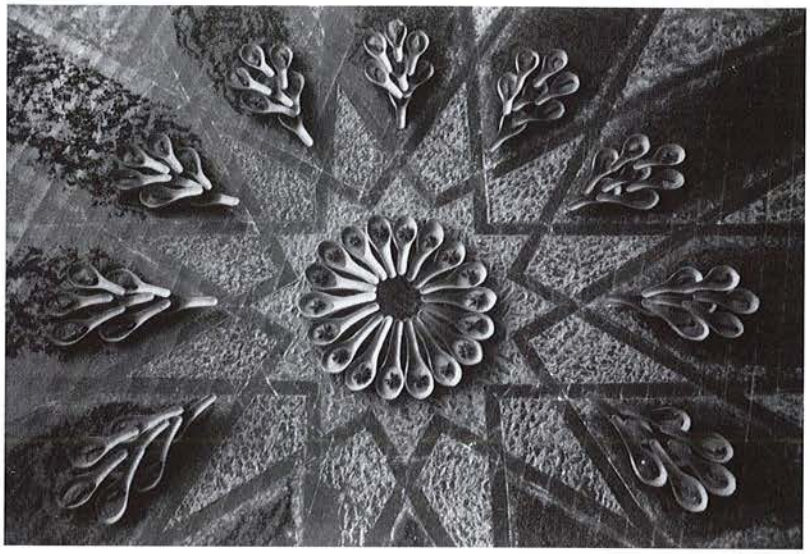
Memory 1: Banff, the summer of 1993, meeting Millie... soya competes with spice. In the hallways of the gallery, spice prevails, the door opens and soya overwhelms... I crouch on the floor of the gallery, sisters/cooks/artists, as Millie installs *Crave* late into the night. I help to place the details of spices, fragrant cinnamon sticks, dark clove on top of the red of paprika and the yellow of turmeric...

The structural foundation of *Crave* is the spiral, overlapping repeat motif made from 300 terra cotta spoons. These spoons are the Chinese soup spoons that accompany the soup bowl. Using this modest cultural reference, the Chinese spoon, hand-built like the tiles in *Cook*, rather than commercially produced, plays on puns. A household instrument that moves across cultures, it takes many shapes—the stirring spoon, the tasting spoon, the serving spoon. Here the work lifts the lid on ideas of function within the conservative ceramic tradition. The modest spoon in *Crave*, rather than the soup bowl, becomes the unlikely vessel for all the spicy ingredients.

Memory 2: Later that summer, the pervasive scent in Ghuangzhou, China, is the eventually repellent, cloying presence of soya sauce, unrecognizable at first because of the overwhelming density of the aroma.

Revisiting Millie Chen's installations *Cook* and *Crave* brings this memory forward, and along with it, the terrifying aspect of the markets of Ghuangzhou. I take some insights from an earlier Arab traveller. Ibn Battuta began his journey from Tangiers in 1326, determined to travel to the farthest point of Islamic influence in the world. Though his claims to having made

Detail of *Crave*, 1995, soup spoons and spices.



the greatest journey of his time (comparable only to Marco Polo) were often disputed, he did in fact reach his destination, Guangzhou, in 1346. Ibn Battuta saw himself as a member of a large, global community and possessed a consciousness of the social and political reality of his times. Yet, in his comments on food, he was unable to repress his horror at the Chinese taste for certain foods that were quite outside the dietary habits of the Arab and Muslim. Six centuries later, I share Battuta's reluctance but discover the appeals of a Buddhist diet.

In *Crave*, the cook is the traveller making journeys prescribed by the earlier markings of trade and commerce between the peoples of Asia: the spice, the silk and the incense routes. Among the forced travellers are victims and captives of war. The brutal commerce of the slave trade becomes part of the market's transactions. The bodies of men, women and children are transported: concubines and domestics, artisans and performers, farm and factory labourers, the sweat and blood of empires.

Memory 3: Canada, 1950s, the migrant's journey with overstuffed suitcases. Smuggling of spices and dried fruit. What evades the scrutiny of the customs officer's nose and eye is celebrated in the kitchen. The aromas of Asia permeate the child's dreams and her future journeys.

Crave's trajectory is geographical and speaks to the rich expanse that is Asia—a category that some say is too large. What is lovingly inscribed in *Crave* is Chen's embrace of the Arabic-Islamic influence and, by extension, her recognition that this influence is a part of Asia. This acknowledgment spills across the ebony surface of YYZ's floor, creating a pattern whose origins are Andalusian. A freehand rendering in colourful, fragrant spices traces out the shadow of a tiled surface from the famous walls of the Alhambra in Granada, "the only Islamic palace of that age to survive in all its ornamental delicacy"[2] and the last Muslim stronghold in Europe.

As Joseph Needham has argued in his monumental work, *Science and Civilization in China*, the transmission of knowledge, materials and techniques can be understood in terms of the geographically bound nations of Asia creating a continuous region of intercommunication.[3] Central to his thinking was the productivity of the belt of agrarian lands extending west to east from the Mediterranean basin to China. Despite the careful work of scholars such as Needham, the historical record of Asia as it is generally told today omits or negates the Arab influence. The place of the Arab remains today culturally marginal to the identity of Asia.[4] The Near East and Middle East remain spaces peripheral to the larger cultural identity of Asia, of being Asian. *Crave* instructs and reminds us, leading us by our noses into the fullness of Asia and the history of this intercommunicating zone.

Memory 4: The wise take their cue from the nose of a three- year-old child who precociously identifies cinnamon, cumin, coriander, chili, peppercorn, saffron. The child ritually removes the containers of spice from the cupboard. The two are surrounded by the aromatic assembly on the table. He gently uncovers the lids and lifts the jars to his nose. He smiles and his lips shape the words; more gentleness involved in the secret delivered to his grandfather and the pleasure that his knowing achieves.

Notes

1. Reginald Woolery, "Cook and Crave: Millie Chen," essay in exhibition catalogue *Clay Between My Fingers*, (Banff, Alberta: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1994), pp. 11-15.

2. Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

3. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

4. See, for example, the catalogue of the recent Asian Heritage Month Festival held in Toronto in May, where West Asia is limited to Iran.

Jamelie Hassan is a visual artist based in London, Ontario.