

## **Mediating the Object World: The Gentle Taxonomy of Chih-Chien Wang\***

Chih-Chien Wang practices an artful taxonomy in which seemingly mundane objects – the artefacts found in any household – take on strange particularity in space and time. They are also palpable integers of the self, in that they shed light not only on how this artist lives, but how he thinks about the objects that he lives with. The images themselves are like concrete poetry of the soul; haiku of the imagination. In concert, they suggest a improvisatory cartography of the immediate horizon of the lived world. It is as though the artist is summoning artefacts, and not just fragments shored against his ruins, as it were, but methodically collecting and ordering them, and with a subversive taxonomy in mind.

The images themselves always achieve self-presence somewhere between opacity and transparency. The palette is breathtakingly domestic: from the transparent plastic of storage containers to the green and yellow sheen of organic things like melons and pineapples and banana skins. Sometimes, its clarity reaches outside the ordinary into the hallucinatory. The green of the pineapple stalk emerges from a nest of water bottles like a weird species of household flora or fauna. It almost seems alive – an alien arrival from another planet. Familiar and strange at one and the same time. Uncanny, even. The textural achieves rare resonance here on a par with the prevailing uncanniness. So, too, the ordering of the target objects, however intentional, however random. The process of taxonomy, of hierarchical or non-hierarchical categorization, in terms of simple placement is at work here, and in a very playful, even funky way. It seems meant to build up a rich palaver of the lived environment, and becomes a simple and eloquent testimonial to how we order ourselves in and are in turn ordered by the micro-environments we live within and negotiate daily.

The patterns that emerge are akin to electrical webs in the neural cortex that texture the spatiality and entrap the temporal in the photographic image like an insect in amber. The skein of meanings in each image require us to disentangle their spare syntax for ourselves, drawing on the labour of our own seeing itself, which mirrors the artist's in both obvious and unprecedented ways. In revealing the uncanny that is latent in the most unprepossessing of objects, he shows them to be highly eloquent artefacts. This domestic idiom of apparent simplicity is his alone. The artist points to the resilient innocence of the optic when innocence was long since thought lost, indeed, deemed beyond recovery.

The temporal resides in the act of seeing, choosing, photographing and in the patterning of the artefacts that emerges like some secret treasure of vision and visuality. The artist's own subjectivity is evident in small but telling details: the choice of object, its colour, its contours, its disposition relative to other objects and backdrops, and its final self-presence which is very often considerable.

In mapping the minutiae of the domestic milieu, whether his own or that of a neighbour, the artist betrays what is immanent therein and, in so doing, powerfully mediates it. His choices as to things like placement and juxtaposition installs a vibrant poetics of lived place and his own emplacement that any sensitive viewer can discern and enjoy. He has said: "I walk through objects." If this sounds like he walks through them as some would like to walk through walls, it is metaphorically true. The objects that he marshals in his photographs are mediated and harnessed as a result. He successfully moves through and beyond them. The contents of the object world, subject to his gentle but persistent taxonomy, are shown to be highly malleable, even if they never lose their resolute materiality.

It is as though he wants to isolate the objects that are an impediment to his own spatial freedom, strip them of normative meanings, study them and learn how they control him in order that he might control them. This artist wants to tear the objectival veil away in order that he might glimpse and conquer the system of significations that underlies it. Of course, this means assuming a self-reflexive stance towards his own practice of art making.

In all his work to this date, Chih-Chien Wang is effectively researching his own lived experience, whether it be the body or the detritus of the object world. He behaves like a scientist in the lab, trying to ferret out meaning from often mute and closed objects. He captures the flow of his own experience in the making with a documentary filmmaker's resolve – and zeal. In fact, before emigrating to Canada in 2002, he was filming television documentaries in Taiwan. Certainly, that experience and resultant expertise were important for the development of his photographic art. In his current production, we can see that his background in documentary filmmaking has served him well.

If this artist abstracts the process of making from the choice and positioning of the objects in his photographs and the photographs themselves, he frees up imaginal space to move around in at will, and documents his own consciousness of time in his work. It is as though his optic is the camera that would diagram the flux that is own consciousness of time and invests it in his photographs as first-order data and gestalt. This dynamic diagramming begins with the simple artefacts discussed earlier, their spatial positioning and juxtapositioning, and ends with the photographic image itself. This latter, an artefact poised between documentary and art.

His work incarnates the temporal. They are portraits in and of time. They are evidence not just of his own presence in time, his own internal-time-consciousness, but of the fact that time in these images is a stream, if not a linear succession, of variable, repetitive moments that comprise the self in process, in flux, in making. He isolates these iterable moments, and invests them with a peculiar gravity. He makes them resonate. He makes them sing.

Of course, the perception of time is irremediably wed to the experience of place or setting and this is a truth of Chih-Chien Wang's remarkable work. M. M. Bakhtin's development of the 'chronotope' along the lines that spatial and temporal dimensions in works of literature (and, arguably, photographic images) are inseparable is very useful.

As Bakhtin said:

"In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; like-wise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope." (1)

It seems clear that Chih-Chien Wang incarnates chronotopes in his photographic works in terms of intricate and well-tempered temporal relations within the space of the image, whether it be a melon next to a Folgers instant coffee tin or a banana skin and sprig as finial atop an unopened package of toilet paper rolls. The chronotope, as Bakhtin argues, is the "primary means for materializing time in space." (2)

We feel the thickening of time as almost epidermal in this work the longer we spend with it. The temporal life is both ground and horizon for the experiencing of it. The overwhelming sense of duration and physical concreteness lead us to the threshold. Against the background of the temporal, through the employment of the chronotope, these images take on an almost timeless afterglow. Chih-Chien Wang builds up the scaffolding for a worthy architecture of the visible out of these iterable moments, out of process, poetry and his own subjectivity. He aligns himself with what is most transient in order to demonstrate the transparency of his own process – the temporality of his own inner life.

Chih-Chien Wang approaches the object world like a blind person who has regained the power of sight. His gift is his ability to convey this to the viewer, to invest the seeing of objects and things with a sense of startled wonder without resorting to the elaborately staged or overtly theatrical. His is a spartan sensibility and a poet's textured vocabulary. He has said: "I have always taken pleasure in simply using the camera to see the world." He is a simple, selfless stoic of the seen.

## Endnotes

1. Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

2. Ibid, p. 250.

\* This essay was originally published in **Gallery 44's** exhibition catalogue *Chih-Chien Wang* (2009).