

***The Grand Tour* Gayle Chong Kwan**

Published by ArtSway, Hampshire, UK 2009

For images go to artists website at: <http://gaylechongkwan.com/>

Text by Camilla Brown

The series title of Gayle Chong Kwan's body of work, *The Grand Tour*, refers to a phenomenon that began as early as the 1660s when rich upper-class men travelled to cities such as Paris and Rome, and across the Swiss Alps to educate themselves. Sent with tutors, they were keen to learn about art and culture on the European continent, often returning to the UK with a variety of strange and wonderful artefacts. Chong Kwan's reference to this tradition is as much contemporary as historical, for the idea of modern tourism had its origins in The Grand Tour. Her interest in tourism, its aspirational architecture and its ecological and sociological impact, began with a residency and working visit back to her father's roots on the island of Mauritius. Her artistic practice became informed by the stark contrasts she found between wealth and poverty, and the ways in which she observed how aspects of tourism could alienate the indigenous population, theatricalise the island's landscape, and devastate the environment.

Although individual series of works within *The Grand Tour* have a very different sensibility to each other in terms of subject matter, appearance and process, a number of common threads weave themselves around and across the work. Until quite recently my experience of Chong Kwan's work had been second-hand, through reproduction in magazines and on the Internet. However, since seeing her series *Cockaigne* (2006) and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (2007) wrapped around billboards outside tube stations in London, I have realised just how site-specific it is. Chong Kwan has always combined photography and sculpture and, in the tradition of installation art, the work evolves with the final means of presentation very much at its heart. Her aim, I believe, is to immerse the viewer by breaking down barriers between them and the magical worlds that she creates.

This has antecedents back to the point when photography as a chemical process was being developed but had yet to be born. Louis Daguerre (1787 - 1851), who was to originate the Daguerreotype, began his career painting panoramas. In the 1800s, in cities such as Paris and London circular sky-lit buildings were used by artists to paint 360-degree panoramic views of the city skylines, allowing for the viewer to be placed in the centre of these views. Daguerre became frustrated with the lack of simulated realism in these paintings and began to work with his colleague Charles Marie Bouton (1781 - 1853) to invent the diorama using movement, light and sound, and often a Camera Obscura to help paint the scenes. These early dioramas had a very theatrical dimension to them and were also multi-sensory, with the inclusion of light and music to transport the viewer to the place they were looking at. Using all of these techniques Daguerre would create credible mixes of fantasy and reality in renditions of what were considered exotic places at the time - such as Canterbury Cathedral or the Swiss Alps.

The idea behind these dioramas was to develop a 'total vision'. However, the effect of this, was that it altered the way the viewer saw the work, allowing them the opportunity to interact with and walk around the painting. As they became more animated and

automated they moved into the field of the spectacle, with the experience of visiting a panorama becoming more akin to going to an amusement park (also a 19th Century innovation) than to a museum. This provides a link to contemporary installation art - a concept that could be applied to Chong Kwan's work in *The Grand Tour*. In some of *The Grand Tour* this multisensory presentation is more obvious than in others. For *Veduta Romantica* (2007) the work was placed around the walls of the gallery space engulfing and surrounding the viewer. The twelve works in the series were installed in two horizontal rows, one above the other, with the lower row featuring the closer 'micro' aspects of the landscape, whilst the upper row revealed the horizon and sky. This deliberately made the viewer visually move between close-up and faraway, between planes of focus and blurring; shifting the perspective and bodily proximity of the viewer to the panoramic landscape evident in the work. Similarly, in *Terroir and the Pathetic Fallacy* (2009), Chong Kwan creates multiple photographic perspectives on a single structural form, a hybrid of folly and obelisk in combination with a sound work. Some of the scenes in Chong Kwan's initial adoption of the diorama technique were also accompanied by other sensory elements, such as bagpipes being played or smoke effects and even objects placed in front of the scenes. An earlier installation in *The Grand Tour, Atlantis* (2008), saw Chong Kwan explore a particularly theatrical domain.

In *Atlantis* Chong Kwan aims to transport the viewer to her version of the legendary mythical city under the sea. The first part of this piece was shown in a brightly lit ground floor gallery that the visitor had to walk through, coming directly into the space from the street. The walls were covered with mirrors reflecting the light from the large window at the front of the gallery. The work featured a series of small sculptures delicately carved from plastic bottles that Chong Kwan placed in a series of concentric circles that appeared to be a miniaturised replica of the fabled Atlantis. Each individual sculpture had its own character and architecture. The material used - recycled semi-transparent plastic milk bottles - had an uncanny luminosity when combined with the light in the room. Walking into this space one could not help but be aware of the fragility of the work and the need to tread carefully. Placed precisely on the floor, but evidently not secured, it seemed even more precarious. The small scale of the sculptures made any visitor feel huge.

This scale changed suddenly when the visitor walked downstairs to the second part of the exhibition, where they were dwarfed by a series of large photographs. Shown in a series of interconnected underground rooms in the basement, the photographs were placed on the wall with only a small gap between the ceiling and the floor. The rooms were kept quite dark except for basic - although effective - lights that were placed at ground level so that when visitors walked around the space their shadows loomed large on the walls. The photographs were coloured with a murky, greenish-blue tint and were dark enough so that the subject matter was, at first, hard to decipher. Examining the work, the apparent ruins of Atlantis could be found under the sea. The artist sought, in the work and its display, to recreate the experience of being under water.

The somewhat whimsical play with scale recurs often in Chong Kwari's work in *The Grand Tour*. In *Les Precieuses* (2008) the artist has taken, quite literally, street level photographs of discarded elements of food: orange peel; bread; apple cores; egg shell and banana skins. Showing these minutiae at large scale again echoes the effect of making the viewer feel small and the original object seem dominant. It is also almost a tender way to render the everyday monumental. Focussing on the object in colour and allowing the

background figures to appear blurred adds to the sense of beauty in the small discarded detritus.

Using these dried source materials, Chong Kwan then constructed a fantasy Parisian landscape, with the occasional recognisable tourist attraction, in *Paris Remains* (2008). In *Glocal Panorama* (2008), made in Italy, similarly bizarre landscapes are created from Left over food gathered from dustbins. *Veduta Romantica*, made during time spent at Bournville Village - a village built for workers by the Cadbury family - Chong Kwan constructed a dark and somewhat ominous landscape from chocolate. This use of food has long been a key element of Chong Kwan's work, which she traces back to the cultural importance of food and cooking for her Mauritian-Chinese relatives, along with her training as a chef. However, there is another factor that adds a multi-sensory element to her work. Chong Kwan speaks of having a form of synesthesia where she conflates particular tastes with visual perception and vice versa. When looking at work made from chocolate and rotting food it is hard not to think of smell and taste. In some cases this lends her work an almost repellent quality, as the food is seen to sweat, rot and decay in front of us.

There is a definite, dramatic, stage-like element to Chong Kwan's sculptures that is accentuated in the colours used but also the way in which the works are backlit. Chong Kwan cites Victorian children's theatre designs as an influence. Adopting a single point perspective Chong Kwan constructs elaborate scenes that radiate out across miniature stage sets which she creates using a variety of materials. However, the only way we can enter this private realm is through her photographs.

Although all her cityscapes are works of fiction, as with all good stories, therein lies a kernel of truth. Constructing cities of waste is perhaps a timely reminder of the consequences of ignoring the unpleasant side effects of our fascination with travel. This darker side of the tourist industry is so often overlooked. Although her work might appear extreme, it is amusing how life can imitate art. There is an island, just off the Maldives, called Thilafushi that is not on any tourist trail and there are no hotels or swimming pools. This is an island made entirely of waste plastics and metals from the surrounding tourist islands and it is growing at the alarming rate of one square metre a day. In Chong Kwan's work *Atlantis* she imagines that this mythologized secret city in the ocean - so commonly thought to be deep under the sea - is made from plastic. Perhaps this figment of the literary imagination has eventually become a somewhat terrifying reality - but rather than being under the sea it is on an island in the Indian Ocean.

© Camilla Brown

For images go to artists website at: <http://gaylechongkwan.com/>