

ART SPIEL

Fine Arts Blog

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Cecile Chong – The Layers Beneath

In her layered paintings and installations [Cecile Chong](#) brings to life notions of “otherness”, how cultural filters make us see each other. Her departure point derives organically from her experiences since early childhood. Here she shares some of these experiences, the genesis of her diverse body of work, and her upcoming projects.



Cecile Chong, *DNA Matching*, 2018
Encaustic and mixed media on wood
11 x 8 inches, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: You were born in Ecuador, studied in NY, where you currently live. What brought you to art along the way?

Cecile Chong: I was born in Ecuador to Chinese parents, lived in Macau with my grandmother from age 10 to 15, returned to Ecuador for high school, and came to NY to study art at age 19. Around the age of 4, I became interested in art when I was introduced to paper dolls. In Ecuador they are called “cucas” and are sold by the sheet. I began cutting the preprinted paper dolls and clothing but soon started making my own. I spent hours each day focused on drawing, coloring, outlining and cutting them. I now see those “cucas” as an early influence in my art practice, especially with regard to my collage work and paintings.

While living in Macau I realized that I would get really excited on Thursdays in anticipation of my Chinese calligraphy class at school. My grandmother also taught me how to do bead

work and I loved it. Growing up I also crocheted, embroidered and felt that I always needed to be making something. Around this time I also wrote a composition for school that said I would be an artist when I grew up. When I came to NY and attended Queens College for my BA in studio art, I was very interested in abstraction and was looking to color and shapes for meaning. After living in New York for a few years I began to look into my cultural background in connection to global history, patterns of migration, and personal narratives.



*Cecile Chong, Special Delivery, 2015, Encaustic and mixed media on wood
20 inches – diameter, photo courtesy of the artist*

AS: There are a lot of cross-cultural influences in your life and work. What is your reflection on that?

Cecile Chong: Up until coming to NYC my life had been one long cross-cultural encounter after another. At times it was more intense and layered than others. In Macau I attended a Catholic school while living with my Buddhist grandmother. I lived there when it was a Portuguese colony and we would spend three months each year visiting family in

Mainland China, who lived under the communist regime during Mao's Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four ordeal.

I have also been consistently dealing with the process of language learning, remembering, and forgetting. My first language was Spanish. I later learned Cantonese while living in Macau and also learned to speak Hakka (a Chinese dialect) at home with my grandparents. There was no second language learning program at school in Macau – I sat in class imitating the Chinese characters that I saw on the blackboard, pretending that they were figures in a storyboard. Five years later when I returned to Ecuador, I was fluent in Cantonese and Hakka but had completely forgotten my Spanish. I was then enrolled in an American high school where all the subjects were taught in English. These were some intense years of language learning. Unfortunately nowadays my Cantonese and Hakka are very rusty but no matter what language I was speaking at the time, the visual language of art and images provided an anchor in my thought process.

Over the years my practice has evolved to a point where I spend most of my time considering questions and challenging notions of “otherness” and intercultural connectivity. I do this by creating contemporary artifacts that engage cross-cultural narratives and layered imagery. I am also interested in our relationship to culture and our environment – how we are all more similar than different.

Many of my recent works take me back to my childhood and moments of realization and empowerment. For example, during my early childhood in Ecuador there were only about 500 Chinese people living in the capital and seeing an Asian person was a rare occasion. My first day of kindergarten was quite eventful. I spent the entire day with my classmates staring and pointed at me shouting “China, China!” When I finally got home, I ran to the bathroom, locked the door and climbed up to look at my reflection on the mirror. I was relieved to see a pair of eyes, a nose and a mouth and I still did not see any difference between me and the rest of the children in school. Then why were my classmates pointing at me so strangely? That was my first confrontation with “otherness.” My reflection in the mirror told me that I was not different from the rest even though they thought I was. Being set apart, I realized that while a sense of belonging to a culture can be internal, one is often seen as an outsider through the cultural lens of others.

I created *Solarium* in 2010 and *Pleased to Meet Me* in 2014, based on that experience. *Solarium* is a room size installation with three different colored mylar walls (red, blue, yellow) measuring 9 x 12 x 12 ft. It was a site-specific installation, part of *Mirror Mirror off the Wall* – a solo exhibition at Corridor Gallery. *Solarium* made references to ideas of

nature versus nurture and the way we perceived each other has to do with our own cultural filters. Using the same ideas, I also created *Pleased to Meet Me*. It was installed in the DUMBO Arts Festival, at Taller Puertorriqueño in Philadelphia, and at the Emerson Gallery Berlin in Germany.



Cecile Chong, *Pleased to Meet Me* at Taller Puertorriqueño & DUMBO Arts Festival, Reflective mylar and color vinyl, 13 x 24 ft , photos by Taller Puertorriqueño & the artist

AS: Let’s talk about your site specific installations. For instance, your recent installation at FiveMyles Plus Space, *In Between Daylight*. What’s the genesis and process?

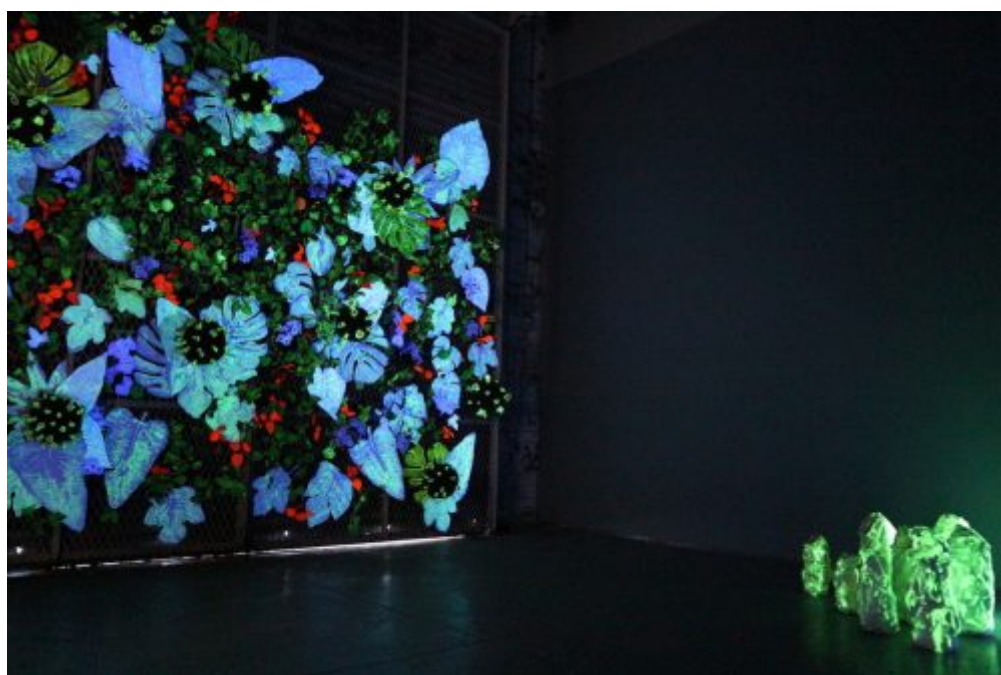
Cecile Chong: The large steel gate at [FiveMyles Plus Space](#) spoke to me the most. It said “Do not pass” and when I faced the gate and a room with no light, I thought about making the installation fluorescent to offer hope in darkness.

Last year during my Winter Residency at Wave Hill I created a wall installation *On the Nature of Winter* with dried flowers I collected from the compost pile at the garden. In the summer, while I was an artist in residence at the Joan Mitchel Center in New Orleans, I followed my scavenger instinct by making *Placeholder*, a larger wall installation, made of flowers and leaves I had collected during my walks in the city. The piece at FiveMyles became an extension of those experiences.

While in New Orleans I was in awe of the huge leaves and palms. I was lamenting their ephemerality and wanted to preserve their shape. I ended up press-printing them on foam sheets with fluorescent paint and also brought back a few dried leaves and small palms with me to New York – they were too beautiful to throw away even though I knew that they were getting dry. Eventually I would have to throw them away. I continued the process while visiting my mom in Ecuador, collecting a lot of fig leaves and Adam’s rib leaves that I also press-printed on foam.

When I realized that I was not going to be able to bring back any real leaves with me due to airport security and agricultural regulations, I thought a lot about political and geographical borders and about the treatment of immigrants under the current presidency. The subject of immigration is so on top of mind these days that I wanted to address what immigrants and refugees may experience while crossing dangerous political and geographical borders in forests, jungles, and bodies of water across the world. I hoped to bring light to what people experience and the alluring feeling of what might be on the other side of the fence.

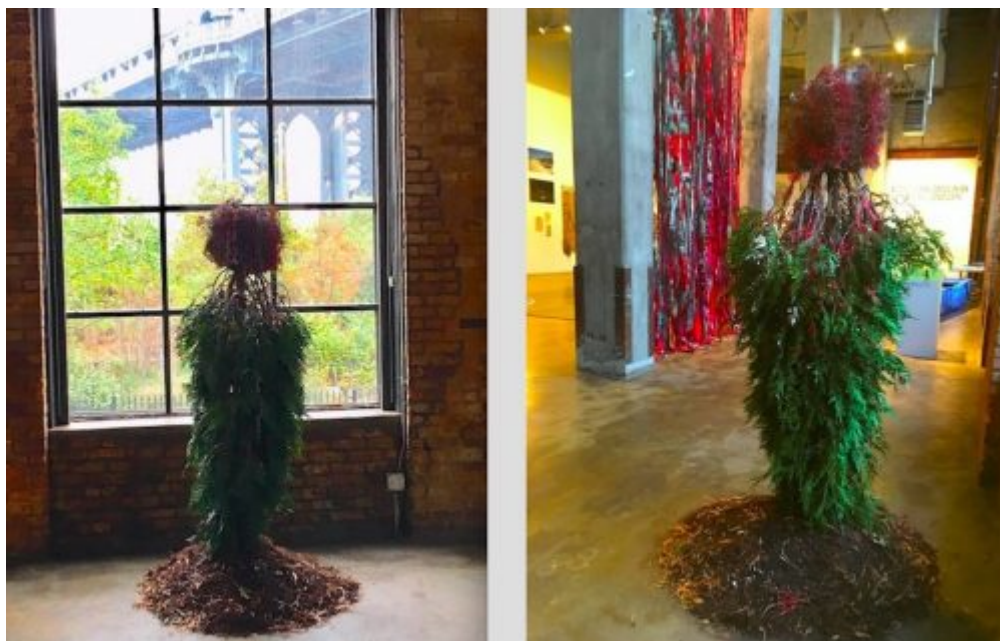
In the past I’ve used glow-in-the-dark elements to emphasize ideas of perception and identity in my work. It goes back to the concept of how cultural filters make us see each under a different light. To add to the somewhat disorienting environment, I included a sound collage with sound collected from nature in upstate New York, New Orleans, and Ecuador (and my cat). I also placed a family of “guagua“ sculptures on the ground to represent outsiders, travelers trying to get in (or out).



Cecile Chong, . *In Between Daylight*, 2018, Mixed Media & sound collage 11 x 13 x 14 ft, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: And Veritas Inverso at Smack Mellon (2017)?

Cecile Chong: *Veritas Inverso* was part of a group exhibition at Smack Mellon titled UPROOT curated by Gabriel de Guzman. I took the title of the exhibition literally and wanted to communicate how we, as natural beings, feel about our environment due to current presidential administration. *Veritas Inverso* means truth upside down. I wanted to refer to our feeling of being disconnected from our roots, from our human principles and dignity. I took a pine tree, turned it upside down, and poured encaustic over the roots using the colors of the American flag. *Veritas Inverso* perhaps is the most literal piece that I have created.



Cecile Chong, *Veritas Inverso*, 2017, Encaustic, Western Arborvitae and soil
6 x 4 x 4 ft, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: I first saw *Chicken Little* in person at the Painting Center (2018). You described it as: “An installation depicting a crumbling sky, a reference to the dangers of fearmongering.” Can you elaborate on that?

Cecile Chong: *Chicken Little* is a wall installation that can be reconfigured. I first installed it in *Strange Flowers* curated by Elisabeth Condon at Westbeth Gallery in 2017 and in *Cultivating Your Own Garden* curated by Patricia Spergel at the Painting Center in 2018. I used encaustic, construction foam and fauna. Originally, I intended to make the piece as a

broken blue-and-white plate, but as it developed, it was obviously becoming more like a broken sky. The story of *Chicken Little, the Sky is Falling*, came to mind.

The piece depicts how fear mongering leads to self-destruction. In the story a little chicken was hit by an acorn on the head, and he interpreted the incident that the sky must be falling. Feeling panic, the chicken frantically informed his friends, a hen and a duck. The wolf then takes advantage of their fear and convinced them to go to his den for protection. The story goes that they never came back out. Although the chicken had good intentions on sharing news by announcing the danger that was around, ultimately, it's about heartache and destruction. I feel that our leaders are using fear to manipulate people and unfortunately their intentions are not good.



Cecile Chong, *Chicken Little*, 2018, Encaustic and mixed media
12 x 9 x 5 ft, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: Let's take a look at your encaustic paintings. You juxtaposed appropriated images from found images to create narratives. Can you tell me more about it?

Cecile Chong: After making abstract work for many years and painting with oil and acrylic, around 2006 I began to paint with encaustic. I was drawn to the material for its translucent, transparent, and adhesive qualities. My paintings have 25 to 30 layers of encaustic. Between each layer I add a different material such as rice paper, pigment from India and Morocco, volcanic ash, metallic leaf, circuit board components, and images from different books. I juxtapose appropriated and original images representing Eastern and Western cultures and aesthetics, blending these elements to create cross-cultural

narratives that address the process of cultural encounter, assimilation and individual identity.

The figures I use convey a good deal of emotion, but they intentionally lack the dimension of color. I reserve the use of color for their environment. I see this as a metaphor for the idea that nature and environment are the source of much of the cultural context that “shows through” in the individual. More than just serving as background, I try to use the colors of the environment in which my characters live to convey a sense of outward well-being while suggesting an underlying tension; there may be more layers beneath. Also by showing the characters as line figures I want them to be seen potentially as placeholders into which the viewers can project themselves. Most people also assume that I identify myself with the Asian adult in the narratives, but I see myself more as the western child looking to learn about my ancestors’ culture and history as an outsider.

AS: In your paintings from previous years you utilized found objects like ping pong paddles or unusual board shapes like long boards, but in your recent paintings you seem to utilize a more standard wood. Is that accurate and how do you chose your format?

Cecile Chong: I am very drawn to material and many times I will start with a material that I stubbornly want to fit into my work if it speaks to me. Sometimes it takes me months and years until I find ways to include certain materials and they become signifiers representing a culture, place, identity.

I usually go back and forth with materials I include as “canvass” for my paintings. Years ago I found a wood paddle in a thrift shop. After I created a painting on it, I felt like I was holding a Chinese fan or mirror with a painted scene. Since then I have continued to look for wood objects that I can paint on, that also have cultural significance, such as long boards and skate boards which remind me of Asian scrolls. Last year a friend gifted me six vintage ping pong paddles and it was a treat to paint on them.

Maybe because as a child I had quite a severe case of asthma, to the point that even laughing too hard could trigger an episode, so I didn’t get to do any sports or use sports equipment growing up. Luckily it went away after I returned to live in Quito when I was in my teens – I think the dry Andean air really helped. Nowadays I enjoy laughing a lot and I get a lot of pleasure working on and handling these sports objects in the studio.



Cecile Chong, *Thousand Words*, 2017, Encaustic and mixed media on vintage ping pong paddle, 10 x 6 inches, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: Tell me about your recent *EL DORADO – The New Forty Niners* at the Lewis Latimer House Museum in Queens (May12 to Oct 14, 2018).

Cecile Chong: *EL DORADO – The New Forty Niners* is a public art installation traveling through the five boroughs of NYC. It pays tribute to the 49% of NYC households that speak a language other than English. The installation consists of 100 colored "guagua" sculptures, 49 painted gold, all 8 to 24 inches tall, and arranged at ground level. "Guagua" is a native Quichua word from South America, meaning baby or child. My "guagua" sculptures are thumb-like, swaddled figures, serving as universal symbols of humanity. Materials that I currently use include plastic bottles, plaster, encaustic, fiberglass reinforced resin and paint. The installation is presented as a contemporary archeological site accompanied by location-specific community programs.

The myth of the lost treasure of *EL DORADO* dates back to the Spanish conquistadores in South America. In this updated version, *EL DORADO* is discovered in each borough of

NYC. The piece acknowledges the contribution of immigrants to this city. It also highlights the immigrant-rich identity of NYC and pays tribute to its diversity.

Working with NYC Parks, this project started in June 2017 and will be ending in December of 2021. It will be installed in one NYC borough per year. From June to December 2017, *EL DORADO* was installed in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, with a community program (El Grito Cultural Festival) that was sponsored by the Dedalus Foundation. From April to October of this year, the piece was installed at the Lewis Latimer House in Flushing, Queens. Accompanied by community program (art and literacy workshops) made possible with a grant from Queens Council for the Arts.

After Sunset Park, I decided I would make an effort to adopt and include site-specific references and materials in each subsequent site. In Queens, the piece has luminous elements, the sculptures faces painted with florescent colors to honor Lewis Latimer's life's work with lighting technology.



Cecile Chong, EL DORADO – The New Forty Niners, 2018, At the Lewis Latimer House Museum in Flushing Queens, Encaustic, plastic bottles, plaster, fiberglass reinforced resin, paint, 16 ft – diameter, photo courtesy of the artist



Cecile Chong, *EL DORADO – The New Forty Niners*, 2018, At the Lewis Latimer House Museum in Flushing Queens, Encaustic, plastic bottles, plaster, fiberglass reinforced resin, paint, 16 ft – diameter, photo courtesy of the artist

AS: What are you working on these days? **Cecile Chong:** I am finalizing a site for *EL DORADO* in the Bronx for 2019 and in general I see the potential of *Chicken Little* becoming a much larger piece, while looking into creating my work in more durable material like clay or glass.

I am also looking forward to exhibiting at Kenise Barnes Fine Art in January, and to my research residency at the Bronx Museum AIM at 80 White Street, a community hub in Tribeca. I will be there from January to June, 2019. I plan to research the historical and contemporary visual culture of Manhattan Chinatown. I am very excited for this opportunity and I can't wait to see what interesting material I will find to work with.



Cecile at her EFA studio. Photo by Ezra Tyler

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