



DAUGHTERS
OF THE
DRAGON



DAUGHTERS OF THE DRAGON

CURATED BY RACHAEL KIANG

TIANLI ZU
MIMI TONG
CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN

GALLERY LANE COVE + CREATIVE STUDIOS
30 JANUARY - 27 FEBRUARY 2020



PUBLIC PROGRAM

Saturday 8th February, 11:00am - 12:00pm

*Panel Discussion with the Artists
+ Performance Art*

FREE

Gallery Lane Cove + Creative Studios

Saturday 15th February, 2:00pm-4:00pm

*Paper Cutting Workshop
with Dr Tianli Zu*

\$15

Gallery Lane Cove + Creative Studios

Cover image:

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan, *Loop 循環*, 2020

Dye on silk, braid trim, cotton, red light bulb, looped audio (2:37)

Detail of painting, 5m x 0.9m. From the series *Triune*. Image courtesy of the artist

Background image:

Tianli Zu, *Shen Long 神龍*, 2019-20

Mulberry paper, hand cut, painted with Chinese ink

Site-specific installation with 3-channel animation projection, dimensions variable

Music composed by Andrew Zhou. Image courtesy of the artist

DAUGHTERS OF THE DRAGON: 龍的女傳人

The Dragon is one of the most instantly recognized symbols of Chinese identity and culture. This auspicious mythical creature represents wisdom, power, wealth and a harbinger of good fortune, hence its close association with Lunar New Year, the most important of Chinese festivals. According to folklore, the Chinese people descended from the first emperor who is part dragon, a notion that can be traced back to the discourse of Chinese classical documents. Records have indicated relations between dragon and the Huaxia ethnicity and in the late Qing dynasty, a new trend of identification with the dragon emerged¹. In contemporary times, a song with the title *Descendants of the Dragon* written and first sung by Hou Dejian in the 1980s became wildly popular and subsequently expresses, as it still does today, Chinese national identity². Whilst these descendants generally refer to the dominant ethnic Han Chinese, it has over the last few decades, come to encompass the collective Chinese identity, including the other 55 minority groups, through an interaction of literature, song, performance and mass media.³

Signifying a very masculine, “yang” energy, the Dragon has been co-opted for the exhibition *Daughters of the Dragon* to articulate a distinctively female Chinese–Australian perspective. What does it mean to be descendants of the dragon in a land far away from Middle Kingdom? How do artists in the show reconcile their Chinese cultural identity and heritage with Australian values and traditions? Tianli Zu, Mimi Tong and Rainbow Chan each negotiate the space and time of culture in different ways, informed no doubt by their place of birth or age at which they emigrated.

Daughters of the Dragon takes an intergenerational approach to the questions of cultural memory and integration through the lenses of Chinese New Year and the motif of the benevolent, celestial dragon. It purposefully brings to the fore the feminine and the female to counter the sometimes double bind situation of invisibility – gender and race. Many traditions are steeped in patriarchy and though fundamentally different, Chinese and Australian cultures are bound by the common framework of patriarchal power. In affirming an identity as female, Chinese and Australian, tensions of cultural difference can be transformed through the focus on benevolence and kindness. Indeed, harmony, kinship, respect and care for the community and society are core Chinese values that are applicable in local and global contexts when tackling issues of transnational import such as gender equality, food security and climate change.

1 “The Chinese Identity in Question: “Descendants of the Dragon” and “The Wolf Totem”, Xu Xinjian, in *Dans Revue de littérature comparée* 2011/1 (n°337), pages 93 – 105.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *bid.*

First generation Australian Tianli Zu responded to the exhibition theme in the most direct manner. In reinterpreting the Dragon myth, she has retained many of its traditional elements with surprising contemporary twists, including addressing climate emergency as a powerful magical being, *Shen Long* (spiritual dragon) controls the weather and can appease floods. Tianli's choice of artwork media and method mirrors the effortless blend of her ethnic culture (Chinese style papercuts) and Contemporary western forms of creativity (animation, video projection and soundscape). Yet in her message and delivery, she preserves a curtain of subtlety about her personal experiences of being Chinese and Australian.

In contrast, second generation Australian Mimi Tong expresses her cultural identity through an abstract rendition of Chinese calligraphy's gesture and the co-existence of classical Chinese and native Australian flora. The forms and techniques of her two distinct works are contemporary in the vein of Western art. The calligraphy inspired large-scale site-specific installation resembles a three-dimensional drawing in space, executed as a solo effort. Whilst this creative process is very much an individual journey, the circular triptych work of floral wood panels is collaborative in nature. The work's content speaks of harmony between the two cultures whereas the process of involving her two children is a nod to intergenerational relationships, the Chinese value of kinship and care as well as the passing down of traditions to future generations.

Rainbow Chan who emigrated to Australia as a young child embraces the heritage of her original homeland with a three-part work based on her current research on Weitou village women's oral history and social rituals. Instead of a lingering nostalgia, she communicates passion and curiosity about her ancestral ties to the Weitou people of Hong Kong while acknowledging the inevitable tensions between past and future, the East and West. Her multidisciplinary methodology combines video, soundscape and Chinese text characters with vivid qualities.

Together, these artists present the picture of possibilities for female descendants of the dragon in contemporary Australia – one that is socially engaged and connected to its land, environment and continuing to embrace what it is and means to be Chinese.

Curator
Rachael Kiang
江雪婷

TIANLI ZU 祖天麗

b. 1963, Beijing

Tianli Zu is an award winning Chinese–Australian multimedia artist. Her varied practice explores the complex relationships between light and shadow. With a Master of Fine Arts and a Doctor of Philosophy, Dr Zu is an Adjunct Associate Professor at Western Sydney University with over 30 years' experience as a practising artist.

Zu's work has been shown at art museums, art institutions, regional galleries and public spaces, nationally and internationally, including Vivid Sydney at Chatswood, Chinese New Year Zodiac Lantern exhibition (Sydney, Shenzhen), AGNSW, Powerhouse Museum, Centre Pompidou (Paris), Adelaide Festival Centre (South Australia), State Library of Australia (Canberra), Sydney Aquarium, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, University of Sydney and National Art Museum of China (Beijing).

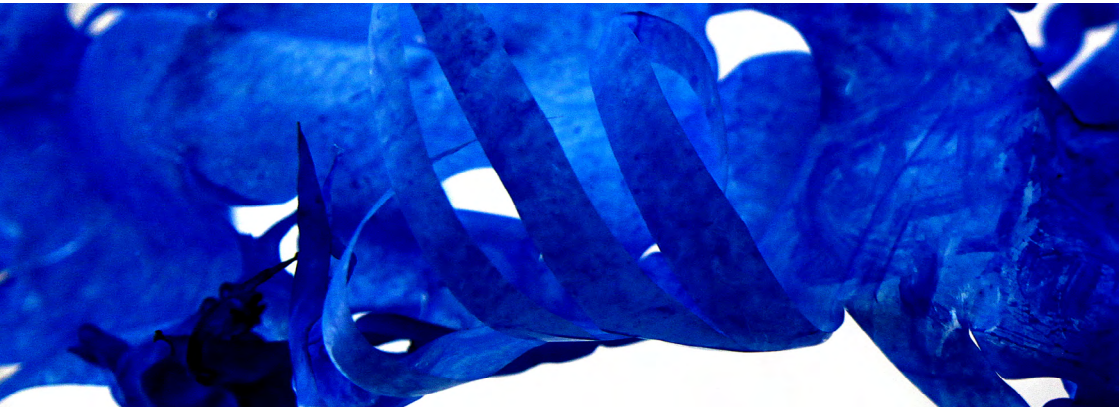
Zu creates large-scale papercuts by hand and uses cinematic animation projections that weave through history and the present. She utilises interdisciplinary process of intuitive papercuts, animation and cinematic projection to employ art engaging with complex social phenomena culturally, philosophically and psychologically.

Tianli Zu, *Shen Long* 神龍, 2019-20

Mulberry paper, hand cut, painted with Chinese ink

Site-specific installation with 3-channel animation projection, dimensions variable

Music composed by Andrew Zhou. Image courtesy of the artist



Shen-Long 神龍 is a large-scale site-specific installation of hand-cut outs and animation projections with music by Andrew Zhou.

According to ancient Chinese folklore, Shen-Long (spiritual dragon) is a powerful magical creature in the universe. Resplendent with a blue body, it controls the wind, rainfall and clouds. The Chinese dragon, unlike the Western dragon is a life-giver not a life-destroyer. It seeds growth and symbolises kindness and wisdom.

In ancient times, Shen-Long helped the Emperor overcome disasters, such as storms and famine. During the Great Flood, the dragon drew rivers with his tail to channel the flood to the ocean.

I recreate this myth to address one of the most important issues – the climate emergency – of our time.

Suspended from ceiling, the mysterious Shen-Long appears partially in the empty space surrounded by hand-cut water-series. Water represents eternity. Audiences feel Shen-Long's existence by observing the movement of the ocean. The goddess Nüwa gives birth to Shen-Long. She has a human face and snake body representing the coexistence of the spiritual and real world.

The sound track 'Enduring' is a suite of six pieces – (I) In its own time (II) Last firm light (III) Thunderstorm (IV) Nature in its myriad forms (V) Silk threads (VI) The hollow places.





Tianli Zu, *Shen Long* 神龍, 2019-20

Mulberry paper, hand cut, painted with Chinese ink

Site-specific installation with 3-channel animation projection, dimensions variable

Music composed by Andrew Zhou

Image courtesy of the artist





MIMI TONG 唐美美

b. 1978, Sydney

Mimi Tong is a mid-career artist working across drawing and installation. She is a sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney and UNSW Art & Design. Exhibitions include: *In Time*, Galerie Pompom, Sydney (2018); *Vintage Enamelware*, ArtMoves, Transport for NSW (2017); *www // Julian Dashper & Girlfriends*, Glovebox, Auckland (2017); *Formation (Winter)*, Breezeblock, Sydney (2014). She has also exhibited at St Paul St Gallery, Auckland (2011); Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne (2011), Grantpirrie, Sydney (2010); UTS Gallery, Sydney (2009), Lismore Regional Gallery, Lismore (2008) and Artspace, Sydney (2007, 2005 & 2000). Residencies include: Australia Council Skills & Arts Development Helsinki Residency (2013); IASKA SPACED (2009/10); Asialink OCAT, Shenzhen China (2009) and Red Gate Gallery, Beijing, China (2007).



Mimi Tong, *Drawing Form*, 2011
Bamboo yarn, steel pins, approximately 5x5x5 m
Image courtesy of the artist

Script 文字 is a site specific three dimensional drawing informed by the gesture of Chinese calligraphy and geometric abstraction. Made from ink dyed bamboo cotton yarn knitted into a series of chain links, the material line traces the planes of the walls and pulls the void into view. The tensioned line drawing imbues a dynamic rhythm engaging the viewer to move, never seeing the entire form in a single vantage point.

The reference to calligraphy is secondary to the performative gesture of creating the work in-situ. In stating this, it reveals two things: as first generation ABC (Australian born Chinese), it is common to possess limited fluency of the mother tongue let alone the literacy of reading and writing thousands of Chinese characters. Secondly: that as an adult one merely scratches the surface of appreciation, through translation in 'reading' Chinese calligraphy, where image and text are philosophically entwined. *Script* is a hand-made drawing that embodies the calligraphic line, reconstituted from unknown origins into a new form.

Inspired by botanical symbols in Chinese art history, *Sydney Lunar Flora* 悉尼年花 is a collaborative triptych with my children that celebrates the spring summertime flora in Sydney.

Walking around my local neighbourhood, I observe the native red bottlebrush and crimson kangaroo paw for its sculptural elegance, their striking silhouette can be spotted from a distance. My children Isabel (aged 6) and Lucas (aged 4) are drawn to the flowers in bloom that have made their way onto the ground – magenta bougainvillea, lilac jacaranda and white and yellow frangipani. Isabel assumes the role of street florist, as we (slowly) walk she forages and arranges her bouquet. The path dotted with fallen flowers on the ground takes on the appearance of an incidental painting.

The loud and brash sights and sounds associated with the Lunar New Year holiday are distilled in the rich palette that includes classical Chinese flowers – the red peony and peach blossom, enduring symbols of auspicious beauty and prosperity. On reflecting the cultural traditions that I have chosen to pass on to my children, the desire to create a portrait of this place, at this time is a natural act of confluence.

Mimi Tong, *Sydney Lunar Flora (Daughter & Son collaboration)* 悉尼年花, 2019 - 20
3 round birch ply panels, 100 cm-120 cm diameter, each 22 cm deep
Image courtesy of the artist



CHUN YIN RAINBOW CHAN

陳雋然

b. 1990, Hong Kong

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan is an interdisciplinary artist of Hong Kong descent, living on Gadigal Land, Sydney. Chan creates immersive installations comprising of experimental music, video, and sculpture, which draw upon her background in popular music and the diasporic experience. Chan is currently researching women's oral history, folk songs and disappearing languages with a focus on her ancestral ties to Weitou people, the first settlers of Hong Kong. With only 18000 speakers left worldwide, many of whom are elderly, Weitou language is on the brink of extinction. By recontextualising Weitou women's folksongs through a diasporic lens, Chan aims to continue this oral tradition and challenge contemporary gender politics more broadly.

Chan has performed at the Sydney Opera House, Vivid, MONA FOMA, Gallery of Modern Art, Melbourne Music Week, Iceland Airwaves, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, and Tai Kwun. She has exhibited with Firstdraft, Liquid Architecture, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and I-Project Space, Beijing. Chan was FBI Radio's most played artist in 2016, and her single "Let Me" won the FBI SMAC Award for Best Song, 2017. Her sophomore album "Pillar" is nominated for the Australian Music Prize, 2019.

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan, *Loop* 循環, 2020
Dye on silk, braid trim, cotton, red light bulb, looped audio (2:37)
Detail of painting, 5m x 0.9m. From the series *Triune*
Image courtesy of the artist



Triune 相傳 is a three-part installation work comprising media, dough sculptures and a five metre silk painting, which aims to illuminate the diverse experiences of Cantonese culture through a feminist perspective. This work is part of Chan's larger body of research on village women's oral history and social rituals, titled *The Bridal Lament* (哭嫁歌). *Triune* builds upon the concepts of female labour, mistranslation and the copy, which are central to Chan's work. The inspiration for this body of work is a traditional Weitou celebration song, titled New Year Song (新年歌).

Suspended from a circular frame, the lantern-shaped silk painting depicts the folksong's lyrics through playful illustrations and calligraphy. The painting's cyclical nature invites the audience to walk around it numerous times, representing an ongoing process of learning which the artist wishes to promote. However, the clarity of figures and words succumb to various distortions, engendered by the unpredictable nature of dye upon silk. Uneven and warped, these enigmatic shapes suggest not only the tendency for human memories to be skewed, but also the reality of traditional cultures and languages being lost in the face of globalisation. Accompanying the painting is a club-ready, Sino-futuristic version of the folk melody, building on Chan's practice as an electronic producer and pop vocalist. Whilst the act of modernising folk music can be problematic,



Chun Yin Rainbow Chan, *Rubble* 瓦礫, 2020
Unglazed salt dough. Dimensions variable. From the series *Triune*
Image courtesy of the artist

Chan hopes to use the inherent tensions between past and future as a provocation for others, and as celebration of her heritage more personally. Through clashing visual and sonic signifiers, Chan reconfigures various Weitou traditions as a symbol of liminality.

The three-channel video work presents three generations of Weitou women and the gesture of kneading as a symbol of care. On one screen, we see footage of elderly women in the Lung Yeuk Tau, a village in Hong Kong's New Territories, kneading dough to make traditional Weitou desserts. On another screen, we see the hands of Chan's mother preparing glutinous rice flour for sweet dumplings. On the last screen, Chan is kneading dough to create the typographic sculptures in Triune. Drawing on her own nostalgic memories of making sweet dumplings with her mother and sisters throughout her childhood, this video work wishes to illuminate the invisible female labour in patriarchal societies. Littered through the installation space are piles of typographic sculptures, based on the lyrics of New Year Song. Like the distortions of the silk painting's calligraphy, the dough sculptures are intentionally misshapen, bent and jumbled up. Their three dimensional form attempts to shift one's focus away from writing to doing, as was the norm in women's oral traditions. Resembling piles of colourful rubble, the sculptures are a poignant comment on disappearing cultures.



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Chun Yin Rainbow Chan, *Loop*, 2020
Dye on silk, braid trim, cotton, red light bulb, looped audio (2:37)
Detail of painting, 5m x 0.9m. From the series *Triune*
Image courtesy of the artist.



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