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MELISSA CHIU – a career in Asian contemporary art.

Melissa Chiu has taken a career path that reflects what she herself has referred to as one of the most significant global cultural shifts over the last twenty years - “a reorientation of the axis of influence from the historical colonial vestige of Britain and post-war America towards the Asia-Pacific region”¹. Having begun as the founding director of a small, non-profit exhibition space for Asian-Australian art in Sydney, she is now the Director of the Asia Society Museum in New York and Vice-President of the Society’s Global Arts Program. She said that being an Australian was a major reason why the Asia Society employed her, perceiving Australia to be in a unique position in relation to Asia and a springboard from which to participate in this reorientation. From her beginning as a writer and curator, she has supported cross-cultural awareness and has consistently argued for recognition of a cultural diversity that contradicts traditional identities constructed along binary opposites of East and West.

In July this year, Melissa Chiu returned to Sydney to launch two books at Gallery 4A, the exhibition space of the Asian-Australia Arts Centre, the association for which she was founding director in 1997. The first of the books, *Breakout – Chinese Art outside China*,² is based on her doctoral thesis³ and focuses on Chinese artists who migrated to Australia, the United States and France in the 1990s. What she referred to as their ‘transexperience’ produced a complex, hybrid and experimental art that has now gained international recognition. Her second publication, *Chinese Contemporary Art – 7 Things You Should Know*⁴ was based on a series of lectures she gave in response to a desire amongst Americans to enter an art scene that is seen as complex and difficult. Museums have been presenting Chinese contemporary art for fifteen years but it was

¹ Melissa Chiu, *Asian-Australian artists: Recent Cultural Shifts in Australia*, Apexart conference paper, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, July 2001 and <http://www.apexart.org/conference/Chiu.htm> accessed 22/07/08.

² Melissa Chiu, *Breakout – Chinese art outside China*, Charta, 2007

³ Melissa Chiu, *Transexperience and Chinese experimental art, 1990 – 2000*, doctoral thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2003, Australasian Digital Thesis Program, <http://adt.caul.edu.au/homesearch/find/?recordid=182322&format=main>

⁴ Melissa Chiu, *Chinese contemporary art – 7 things you should know*, AW Asia, 2008.

the growth of China as an economic and political world power that has fueled interest in its contemporary culture and produced the heated art market of the past three years. Media reports of auction results and the participation of Chinese artists in major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale led first to European and American collectors actively acquiring Chinese contemporary art and then more recently the emergence of a domestic art market in China.

Melissa Chiu has been at the forefront of both the recognition of works by Chinese diaspora artists and the appreciation of Asian contemporary art. Although there had been significant initiatives in Australia such as the *Mao Goes Pop* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1993), these were few and far between and interest in Asian contemporary art for a long time remained minimal. Asialink, a non-academic center in Melbourne University supported by the Myer Foundation, promoted, and continues to promote cultural exchanges with Asia. ARX, the artists' regional exchange series of exhibitions, and even more significantly, the Asia-Pacific Triennial held in the Queensland Art Gallery, were large scale events that brought Asian artists to Australia and opened a whole new area of dialogue in the unpromising environment of the Howard Government. On the other hand, Melissa Chiu felt that the import/export model of exhibitions - importing Asian and exporting Australian art - excluded Asian-Australian artists. The impact of globalised art where artists move across and combine cultures had not yet been recognised and the hybrid art forms that were developing were being treated with suspicion as not truly representative of their countries of origin.

Providing a space for Asian-Australian artists was Melissa Chiu's chief motivation in being founding director of Gallery 4A, part of the Asian-Australian Arts Association. Gallery 4A was intended to be a multidisciplinary space with literature and performing arts but it was project-driven and responded particularly to initiatives from visual artists. The majority of board members were visual artists, such as Lindy Lee and John Young, and art exhibitions were ongoing, unlike performance events that were one-off. Being a non-profit organization allowed for greater artistic experimentation, she believed, but financial stability remained the biggest challenge as the cost of Sydney real estate was draining their resources. Eventually, both the Australia Council and Arts NSW provided support for specific projects, giving 4A credibility in the Australian art scene and a little more financial flexibility. Just prior to the Olympic Games in

2000, the Asian-Australian Arts Association won the Sydney City Council's competitive tender for the use of the Corporation building in Hay Street, which has now become their centre.

In 2000 Melissa Chiu met Vishaka Desai, then the museum director for the New York Asia Society, when Desai was in Australia accompanying one of the Society's touring exhibitions. Desai had been responsible for many of the first Asian contemporary art exhibitions in the United States, including *Traditions and Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* curated by Apinan Poshyananda in 1996. In the foreword to the exhibition, Desai wrote that Western countries had failed to understand that twentieth-century Asian art was as 'authentic' as pre-modern or 'traditional' art. In Asian art and culture the relationship with tradition is complex. Melissa Chiu has referred to it as a 'parallel world', where the pre-modern often co-exists with the modern and the post-modern. Desai was seeking to fill a newly-endowed position in the Asia Society's museum and, given Melissa Chiu's work with 4A and the opinions she has expressed in academic and curatorial writings, they clearly shared similar perspectives. In 2001 Melissa Chiu became the first curator in America specifically for contemporary Asian art and, in 2004, when Desai was appointed president of the Asia Society, she succeeded Desai as director of the museum. Melissa Chiu feels this was a clear signal the Society had shifted its focus from traditional Asian art and wished to build on its contemporary collection.

The Asia Society was founded by John D. Rockefeller III in 1956 to foster American understanding of Asia. The Society is based in New York but has established another ten centers. In her role as Vice-President of the Society's Global Arts Program, Melissa Chiu is involved in developing the two latest centers in Houston, Texas, and Hong Kong, as well as organising the exhibition programs for them. The Society sponsors music, dance, films, lectures, conferences and publications in addition to art exhibitions, but its art collection is limited to traditional art, most of it donated in 1978 by Rockefeller and his wife. Melissa Chiu's work at the Asia Society is to establish an acquisitions policy and develop the contemporary art collection in conjunction with a committee. Some remarkable collectors and philanthropists with specific interests in Asia are on the committee, including Jack Wadsworth, the honorary chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia Limited and a trustee and vice chairman of the Asia Society, and the Belgian industrialist, Guy Ullens. Ullens opened the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, the first to be granted permission to do so in the environment of intense

international interest prior to the Beijing Olympics. The Asia Society's endowment goal for the collection is US\$10 million, trustees Harold and Ruth Newman having begun with a donation of US\$1 million of gifted works selected in consultation with the museum curators.⁵ According to Melissa Chiu, the majority of museum collections are built by the donations of private individuals and such dedicated gifts.

Although Melissa Chiu is associated with the contemporary art of China and Chinese Australians, her curatorial experience has been pan-Asian. She notes that it is only because there are so few Chinese specialists that she has come to fill that role. The Asia Society's exhibition program alternates between the traditional and the contemporary and shows work from countries extending from Hawaii to Iran. One of the first shows she curated for the Asia Society was with Pacific Islands artists titled *Paradise Now?* She has worked with Shirin Neshat, the Iranian-born, New York-based artist, and Dinh Q. Le from Vietnam, amongst others. Apart from her work with the Asia Society, she is also in a position to influence public opinion and museum policy generally in America. She has lectured in a number of universities and served on a number of committees and boards, amongst them the American Association of Museum Directors which determines the guidelines and policies for museums across America.

From her position at the Asia Society, Melissa Chiu has gained an overview of developments in Asian contemporary art. The first generation of Asian curators, ones such as Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand and Fumio Nanjo from Japan, are now being followed by a younger generation. Melissa Chiu believes the curators and writers, Gao Shi Ming in China, Eugene Tan in Singapore and Fumihiko Sumitomo at the Museum of Tokyo have new ideas about where Asia is going.

She considers there is a difference between the modern and the contemporary in Asian art. Modernism was a process of coming to terms with the West and Western Modernism, each Asian country experiencing local variations, while she associates contemporaneity, with the experimental art that first appeared in Japan and Korea. In her doctoral thesis she defined experimental art as that which evolved largely independent from, and often in conflict with,

⁵ *Asia Society Will Build a Contemporary Art Collection*, New York Times, September 5, 2007, Arts/News.

government institutions, becoming an alternative art movement. Another phenomenon is that of the globalised and nomadic artist and art with both local and global references, but according to Melissa Chiu, works that are completely hybrid without any local grounding are less likely to be internationally successful. The Thai artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija, has three homes, in New York, Berlin and Shanghai, and yet he maintains a strong connection to his home country as seen in his participation in the *Land Project* in Chaingmai. She says that artists are most interesting to curators and cultural critics when they relate to their local environment but express their ideas in an international language of universal values.

Another change she considers important is the way Asian art worlds engage with each other and with the West. In the past this was a bilateral relationship, each country individually seeking to show their own artists in Western institutions; but now there is intra-regional dialogue. The most obvious examples of this regional exchange are the Asian Biennales, but Asian museums are also showing and collecting the art of their neighbours, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia being the first of these. Where the market is concerned, in the last five years art has become a commodity in the atmosphere of a general increased economic prosperity. Melissa Chiu speaks of Asia having its own art worlds with sophisticated art scenes in Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing and Singapore. She considers that like China, Southeast Asia is undergoing a boom, for where it was Indonesian collectors buying Chinese contemporary art in the past, it is now Chinese collectors buying Indonesian art. Yet there are still problems to overcome, foremost amongst these being the lack of infrastructure and government support for important art outside the market. According to Melissa Chiu, "... the museums need to be built and the collections assembled so that the works can be held in posterity for the public good."⁶ The modern and contemporary visual heritage of Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia are being lost for want of institutional and public support.

Melissa Chiu's career path is a reflection of changing attitudes and curatorial practice as a result of globalisation in the visual arts. Her perspective on cross-cultural art was forged in Australia, a Eurocentric society in an Asian environment, and now has a platform in the larger, powerful art world of America.

⁶ Interview, July 23, 2008.