

Issue 17 – Hannah Lim

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with early career contemporary sculptors.

Hannah Lim's works develop from an exploration into her cultural identity. Examining the historical relationship between the 'East' and 'West' through furniture, objects and design, she focuses particularly on the trend of the Chinoiserie by attempting to reclaim and reimagine this practice in a more conscientious and culturally appropriate way. Lim produces furniture-like flatpack structures as well as more intricately detailed Snuff Bottles.

SOS: This is the seventeenth issue of SOS and our first issue of 2021. A frequent question has been about how artists have coped across the lockdowns of 2020, but in the spirit of looking ahead I wanted to ask you about your hopes and ambitions for the year to come. Is there anything you hope to accomplish this year?

HL: I've found that both the lockdowns encouraged me to expand and continually evaluate my practice, enabling me to take my work in a new direction. Whilst lockdown made physically presenting sculptural objects increasingly difficult, I started to find ways of digitally communicating my work in a more experimental and exciting way. I found myself really exploring how I could present my work through Instagram, connect with other artists from around the world and explore collaboration in a new context.

I think my aim for this coming year is to really utilise the opportunities I have to collaborate. I'm currently working on a joint show with Hugo Harris, inspired by our separate RSA scholarship trips to Florence, we're planning to build a series

of sculptures inspired by reliquaries, fonts, altarpieces and street shrines. The show is also a partial continuation of a project we began in lockdown, where we'd send sculptures we'd created in Blender to one another, adding and developing the structures; a digital sculptural conversation.

SOS: You have recently produced a great deal of very delicate small vessels. I'd like to ask you about the significance of the snuff box?

HL: The Snuff Bottle series evolved out of my inability to work on some of the bigger sculptures I had been planning to make for my degree show



'Medici Lion Snuff Bottle', 2020, polymer clay, and ink. 10 x 15 x 6 cm.



'Lift Off', 2020, collapsable frame, cardboard and acrylic. 3 x 4 x 3 m.

pre-lockdown. Creating a series of smaller sculptures, inspired by snuff bottles and Qing dynasty porcelain vessels, had been a plan of mine during my final year at Edinburgh but up until the lockdown I hadn't had time to actually work on this. The Snuff Bottles I create are all handmade using polymer clay, this is an oven bake clay that I had used quite often when I was growing up. It is colourful and hold its shape well, so I figured it would be ideal to create detailed intricate snuff bottles with.

My snuff bottles are far larger than traditional ones, often without a stopper and sometimes quite anthropomorphic. These bottles capture elements of my identity, particularly those associated with my Chinese heritage, sometimes stamped with my name sake chop,

decorated with clay copies of my grandmother's jade pendants and topped with Singapore's national flower - an orchid. Snuff bottles are intended to be personal, fitting inside of the owners palm. Their visual intricacy and texture are equally important; snuff bottles are meant to be held and such they should have a 'pleasant tactile quality'.

I think what so intrigues me about the snuff bottle is its ornamental, highly detailed exterior but also its functionality. Snuff bottles were originally created for the Emperor and the court but were later introduced to wider society, their ownership was regarded as a status symbol. The development in the materials that snuff bottles were produced in and the process through which they were painted and carved reflected also the presence of the West in China, particularly the Jesuits at court during the early 18th century.



'Digital plan for a new shelf sculpture', 2020

SOS: [Guest Question] For this weeks guest question I was inspired by your writings and reference to curator Okwui Enwezor. Thinking further about your small snuff boxes, I thought about how people find value in objects and the social life of things so this question with artist Sarah Sze felt relevant. "Are there artists working today whom you feel are asking similar questions or addressing key ideas that link art and social life?"

HL: For a while I've been following the work of painter Dominique Fung. In a press release for her recent exhibition, *Relics and Remains*, at Nicodim Gallery in Los Angeles, Dominique explains the relevance of the objects captured in her paintings and their relation to her Chinese/ Canadian heritage.

I read the article when I began creating my series of snuff bottles, something about Dominique's description of the relics she saw at home and on display in the Asian art section in galleries and

museums, as vessels that helped form her sense of Chinese heritage, felt particularly relevant to the sentiment behind my own snuff bottles. Having grown up in the UK I have often felt quite disconnected from my Singaporean Chinese heritage, I have come to use my practice as a way of seeking out and understanding my cultural identity. The snuff bottles and the re-working of the Chinoiserie style in my furniture-like sculptures, is all connected to this journey of cultural expression, exploration and education.

Dominique brings up the word *jook-sing*; 'a pejorative term for persons of Chinese descent who live overseas and identify more strongly with Western culture' comparing the word to herself and the objects she paints. This term resonated with me and my own work, my connection to my British family is much stronger than that to my Singaporean relatives I think this disconnection continually fuels my artistic journey, it encourages cultural exploration and it helps me to examine the history between the two cultures that constitute me.

SOS: You graduated last year from Edinburgh College of Art. A year that naturally was full of ruptures. How did you cope with this disruption in the build up to your degree show? And were you able to seek out any alternative platforms to share your work?

HL: I had been working on a series of sculptures for my degree show throughout my final year at Edinburgh. When we went into lockdown in March I was unable to work on anything I had planned. A large number of the objects I create are produced through laser cutting or are cut by hand. For each of the objects I laser cut, I produce a digital file, these files mean I can create copies of each object. During lockdown I became more familiar with the programme



'Family Portrait', 2020, cardboard, acrylic and foam clay. 1.6 x 1.7 x 1.5 m.

Blender, using the files I had originally created for laser cutting, I was able to build 3D digital replicas of each piece. With these objects now existing in a digital space I was able to combine and swap elements from different structures, alter scale, colour, material. I found I enjoyed being able to play freely with these digitalised objects; creating peculiar compositions that I might at some point be able to produce in real life. One of the objects I had created from a culmination of files, I am currently in the process of making physically for an upcoming show in Scotland.

In June I was also invited by curator Georgia Stephenson to participate in her PATIO Project supported by The Freelands Foundation. This gave me the opportunity to physically realise one of the pieces that I had planned on making as part of my degree show. Through this project I created a set of vibrant gates: The Forbidden Gates, that were shown on Georgia's patio for two weeks. The project was really helpful for launching me back into creating bigger works again, the gates have recently been shown as part of the Bowes Parris x Harlesden Highstreet show, After Hours and will also be shown as part of RSA New Contemporaries.



'The Forbidden Gates', 2020, MDF, Steel frame, brass, chain and fixings. 2 x 1.7 x 0.7 m.



'Lotus Snuff Bottle', 2020, polymer clay and ink. 10 x 14 x 6 cm.

SOS: Besides your practice what's filling your time right now? Are there any books / television / podcasts you'd recommend?

HL: I've recently been re-watching quite a few Studio Ghibli films. When I was younger I used to make little figurines from polymer clay of the characters from Totoro, Howl's Moving Castle and Spirited Away. I think since using the material again for my Snuff Bottles it's made me want to re-visit the films. I've always loved the attention to detail in the Studio Ghibli style of animation, I definitely think it's inspired the intricacy and detail in my own practice, especially in my snuff bottles.

Interviewer: Josh Wright

