

Formless, but not without form.

Breaking, after more than twenty years, with the bright lights and glamorous spectacle of the Taiwanese film industry, in which she had achieved pre-eminence as an actor, from that moment onward Loretta Yang gave up a lifestyle she felt too superficial, and embarked upon a new art form in order to engage with the highly challenging material of glass.

In the light of so singular and unexpected a decision, she showed a keen instinct for what her life should be, and what it was that so excited her into action. The spiritual quest in which she engaged became a commitment to the understanding of a material, and a new body of creative work.

Everything that arises and ends as the result of cause and effect can be compared with the landscapes one sees in dreams, with magicians' tricks, with bubbles in a stream and with the unreality of shadows.

The Diamond Sutra

For Loretta Yang, as for the Chinese Buddhist tradition, this world is no more than a fleeting and transitory state of impermanence. The world of the senses is a mere illusion. If we are doomed to disappearance, borne inevitably upon the stream of time, art is in her eyes however a means of rooting life in the present so as to live deeply in the serene state of contemplation.

Making images of the Buddha is not, for me, merely an artistic activity. To make them, to create, is above all a form of contemplation, of meditation, of searching and understanding that frees me from the anxieties and uneasiness that prevent me from calmness of spirit, from being at peace with myself.

The ultimate truth of Buddhism, a way of comprehending the shifting and impermanent nature of things, is rooted in enlightened awareness of emptiness. This vacuity is not a blank void, a merely empty space, but much rather the very nature of that space itself, at the heart of which everything exists in a state of pure potential: as phenomena and as well as awareness. Emptiness is the domain of everything possible, it is the condition of all things, a *'formless form, but which is not without form'* Loretta Yang tells us.

The arrow of time draws formlessness into form. All states of transparency are like the manifestations of emergent form: striving to appear, only to disappear. A condition of time, a condition of form that takes material form according to a temporal process that glass renders tangible in fixing and solidifying. Glass, a material that is at the same time both a liquid and a solid, traps the fleeting, ephemeral moment and displays the fluidity that Starobinski invokes:

As for glass or transparent stones, their solidity does not contradict their fluidity: solid transparency is a stilled fluidity, the molten substance is assumed into a hard mass.

What appears within a block of glass is at the same time both present and in the process of disappearing. In this moment of silent and undreamed-of equilibrium,

ideal for meditation, simple apparitions of exterior form, figures and poetic texts seem on the point of dissolving, like dream images, like memories that we struggle to recall just one more time.

Passing through the glass medium and encountering an obstacle, light indicates the trace that a moment in time has left in space.

And so Loretta's Buddha figures seem to us to show themselves in the very moment of their disappearing, as if they had been caught in the flux of time in the very instant that the artist, in her meditative trance, had given them physical form. The Buddha figures are in reality mental images projected into material form according to the rule of time – like bubbles that arise, inflate, deflate themselves, or burst...

One is struck by the similarity between these blocks of transparent glass, in which the Buddhas and poetic texts are immersed and suspended, and blocks of ice.

This recalls the anecdote told by Rabelais in his *Quart Livre* (1552), the fourth book of his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* series, where he imagines Pantagruel upon a sea full of icebergs which, when they melted, released the words and cries of a battle that had unfolded there many years beforehand, words and cries that had been frozen into the ice. The word, pure and flawless in time: is this not inscribed in the glass blocks of Loretta in the form of their texts, floating in transparency?

Glass is to Time what bronze and marble were to space, it puts flesh on duration.

No material other than glass is more able to reveal to us, at one and the same time, both interior and exterior space. It is in passing through the transparent obstacle that we make the transition from the real to the imaginary, from physical to mental space. By virtue of the transparent quality of glass, Loretta brings to light the essential emptiness to which she gives bodily form, in which she positions fleeting and transitory images that are both poetic and philosophical. Of all the qualities of materials, only the transparency of glass can make visible the void, the primordial Chaos, the space of all potentialities. One can take the measure here of the full significance of a creative process that lead the artist to choose this material precisely for its qualities, at the same time both physical and symbolic.

The demands of mastery and control of means are, in Loretta's *œuvre*, in line with her desired ends: to be as close as possible to the essential nature of things, and of living beings.

I count on these images, these Buddha figures, which are without doubt truly 'present', in order to understand and to perceive the emptiness within me, and to accept the wisdom: "emptiness is everything".

For those who seek to arrive at intimate feeling, intuition or reverie, the way is narrow and confined. Artistic means are often insufficient at the point where it is necessary to depend upon technical innovation within a chosen material to realise the work of art. Their respective possibilities of such means will be in accordance with the stakes involved. Not virtuosity for its own sake, but distinctive and necessary means guided by expressive purpose.

It is for this reason that Loretta was drawn to master the double technique of lost-wax and hot glass casting: the Buddha figures are first realised through lost-wax casting, and sand-etched, before being immersed in molten glass where they are incorporated and frozen forever. The material evidence, and the synergy of technical and intellectual processes, is very striking. How is it that we can get this close to the sensation of witnessing an apparition, so fugitive a thing? What other means could possibly be more appropriate?

Search as we may, we find here a complete act of creation, fully involving both technical and philosophical thinking in equal measure. The elegance and refinement of its method underpins the subtlety and nuance of its subject. To work in a material means also, through a kind of self-projection, to sublimate one's own body, one's own awareness: this was the meaning that the alchemists gave to their quest for knowledge, in both Eastern and in the Western traditions. With Loretta, they too could have said:

May the moment come when I shall achieve enlightenment, and my body, my soul, my spirit will become as crystal. Pure. Transparent. Perfect.

In Western culture, 'glassmakers' are often criticised for being too bogged down in their technique – reproached for being too much like artisans and thus far removed from the pure ideals of concept, for being weighed down by their material. It is forgotten just how much, on the contrary, working with the material brings us closer to the idea – to what extent it is precisely this encounter with a resistant material that gives rise to the work of art. It is by acquiring such ability that the artist achieves uniqueness in the work: as the original and distinctive testimony of an existential experience that is lived at the same time both in the 'laboratory' and in the 'oratory' – in the workshop and in the life of discourse.

The work of Loretta Yang bears witness, beyond her rootedness in a thousand years of the Far Eastern tradition to which she can lay claim, to the evocative capacity that objects have to pass on, through their very material, the meaning and the profundity of an intuition, of an inner experience.

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