

## ***scratching the walls of memory***

**BY ZOE BUTT**

Carefully embroidered, inked, studded and bejeweled, Tiffany Chung's maps rest as silent organic growths on the wall in her solo exhibition, *scratching the walls of memory*, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. These colorful enlarged abstractions are microscopic plant worlds that weave line and texture with thread and glistening gems, evoking the haphazard growth of fungal kingdoms. In these imaginative reiterations of the past, the political motivations behind the use of cartographic tools are examined and suggested as rootless, for not only is the biological nature of the fungi without a system that anchors its growth in the soil, it is also a growth that thrives in decay and feeds off other organisms. This is a deliberate structural metaphor manipulated by Chung in her artistic transformation of the chronicles of history, where the human kingdom creates its own kind of growths that consume memory into layers of data abstractions.

In *scratching the walls of memory* cultural and political domains of contest and conflict are re-determined. The site of an inhumane exodus near Preah Vihear temple on the disputed border between Thailand and Cambodia is memorialized. Zones of war, such as the A-bomb grid in Hiroshima, or the non-aligned industrial city of Kaesong (in what is now the North Korea) are obsessively jeweled. The formation of national coalitions that have aided political maneuvers, such as the NATO alliance during the Cold War, is marked and tagged like an old-fashioned war strategy board. Oil deals and transportation routes as political trade-offs appear like architectural blueprints with landscape design. All of these sites and relationships and more are pictured as a chaos that survives the predatorial behavior of human life.

For Tiffany Chung, maps are more than instruments of measurement. They are aesthetic objects held as trophies, the evidential documents dividing societies. They are subjectifications of power that fail to articulate the ramifications of these geographical and political demarcations of land on a human level. The roots of society, their cultural memories and values, are rarely considered in these charts that delineate control. Accompanying the artist's coded craze on canvas and vellum is a sculptural installation containing the once hidden messages of war-torn survivors. Engraved within the educational tools of chalk, blackboard and satchel - be they psychological torments of loss, the trauma of living in exile or the unexplained absence of loved ones - Chung champions a re-evaluated history class. These messages are from the victims of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, divided by walls visible and invisible, mental and physical. As her maps line the gallery we are mesmerized, perhaps deceived by their decorative nature, but these artistic fungal growths seek to reveal the people who suffer and persist through the reality of these diagrammatical enigmas.

Cartography begins with an agenda. A map must provide compromise between portraying items of interest in the right place for the scale used, with the need to annotate the map with text or symbol (which again takes up space on the item causing another element to be displaced). A cartographer must thus constantly make judgments - conceptually and aesthetically. The commissioning of maps is loaded with intent and often involving life risking tasks in their realization. In the 1600s, cartographers (who were often mathematicians and astronomers) took to the unknown seas to chart the universe, bringing about unique collaborations between Eastern and Western imperial courts, demonstrating constructive political relationships.<sup>1</sup> A fascinating tale of endurance in the late 1800s involves an Indian man, Nain Singh, who was hired by the British to chart the trade route from Nepal to the Himalayas. He measured the journey with a length of iron shackled to his ankles. His efforts made millions for the British and their "Great Trigonometric Survey" of the British Indian Empire.<sup>2</sup> Such maps supporting the development of science and trade were crucial for the national agenda that commissioned them,

seeking to assert or defend their borders of power and influence. No less, for Tiffany Chung, the maps of the 20<sup>th</sup> century equally demonstrate ulterior motive and are of central focus in this exhibition. This is the era of her family's memories and experiences. It is also the most tumultuous period of violence and political aggression in world history.

As a Vietnamese artist whose country was a controversial theater for the Cold War powers to battle out their desire for the end of the Communist Bloc, it is revealing that Chung's previous pop aesthetic in her practice has become politicized with a much darker layer of historical intrigue. Chung's landscapes are now void of figures, for her *cosplayer* characters once posed in candy-color propaganda/advertisement style photographs and installations in *Enokiberry Tree in Wonderland* 2008 and *Play* 2008 (where young Saigon youth battled out their confused love of Japanese subculture in an urban grid simultaneously desiring change and traditional continuum). This stylistic and subjective transition began formulation in 2007 when Chung started research on urban planning in major cities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Tokyo, Dubai, Berlin, LA, Bangkok and Seoul amongst others, examining how the suburban sprawl was becoming satellite cities for these enlarging metropolises (evident in *Go Vap* 2007). Throughout this process, she became aware of how little the public were involved in the creation of their cities; of how foreign investment in infrastructure pre-determined quality and design and most fundamentally, querying the construction of cities in relation to historical conflict or political motive. We can see Chung moving through this transition in *Find yourself here* 2009, an installation where the street signposts of a modern metropolis stand haphazard in front of *Land of Ahhhs* 2009, a video loop of freeways and overpasses in LA, evincing a Baudrillard landscape of sign and symbol in a human void. Other art masterminds that have referred the map, such as Kathy Prendergast's line drawings that depict the physical landscape as the inner domain of the human body; or Oyvindh Fahlstrom's comic hand-drawn charts that morph psychological idiosyncrasies with physical boundary through text and image; or the conceptual architectural informed wonders of Carlos Garaicoa where ancient cities are modeled in miniature – though their hand equally transforms the meaning of the map, the chart, the graph, in *scratching the walls of memory* Chung delves deeper into the psychological states of urban life, through a cynical obsequiousness with particular 20<sup>th</sup> century maps and their complex involvement in politicizing ideas of border control, zones of neutrality and coalition.

Chung's punctured canvas creations and layered ink works on vellum are detailed and coded constructions. In *The Pushback of Cambodian Refugees Memorial Park - Preah Vihear* 2010, Chung refers to *The Sketch Maps of The Kel Pass (1907-08)*. Preah Vihear is a spectacular Buddhist temple, begun in the 9<sup>th</sup> century by the Khmer Empire and resting in disputed territory between Thailand and Cambodia. It was only in 1870 that the Kingdom of Siam (as Thailand was then known) began to think about boundaries as a line demarcating sovereignty. The only South East Asian country not to be colonized, Thailand's borders were still drawn by its neighbors colonial determined agendas.<sup>3</sup> In 1904, Thailand and French Indochina jointly commissioned a map that outlined their shared border with Preah Vihear situated within French Indochina (present day Cambodia). Since 1959, due to disputes on acceptance of previous drawn maps, the ownership of this temple has been a volatile political issue for both countries. In this work on canvas, Chung illustrates an incident of 1979, where Thai soldiers pushed thousands of Cambodian refugees, over the escarpment where this temple rests. These refugees not only struggled with the unassisted climb, but they landed in a minefield left by the Khmer Rouge during their rule of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> In Chung's work, embroidered jagged lines in brown indicate the escarpment; a solid black line an ox-cart road; red cross-hatch stitches mark the border of Thailand and Cambodia, while the small black dots that appear like baubles, represent the thousands of Cambodian dead. Intriguingly, *crossing the boundary at the pass of Kel 1908 – Preah Vihear* 2010, also charts this same area, within the same period, and yet the border is markedly different (a deliberate focus of Chung who is particularly drawn to the differences in border lines in territorial disputes). Small metal rings have been punched through the surface, suggestive of homes surrounded by bombs and mines. Chung's choice of material cynically plays with surface, challenging the way we

aestheticize objects that shine and glitter. Enduring the painful process of piercing these sharp metal objects through the canvas, puncturing her skin like a wound, is a physical and psychological gesture towards the victims of these conflicts. Fake rhinestones have been randomly inserted between these dwellings, as the fungi proliferates under the sun, feeding off the detritus, glimmers of a yearning hope, as she recalls her mother standing and waiting patiently in a fog cloud for her father to return.

During the Vietnam War, Chung's father was a helicopter pilot for the South Vietnamese Air Force. His helicopter went down during a reconnaissance mission in Laos and the Northern Vietnamese army captured him. A ritual of radio listening became a daily obsession for her mother in the secret hope to discover him alive. She was rewarded one day by his barely audible voice on Northern Communist radio. Chung's mother subsequently traveled to Thach Han River by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), near the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, each time she heard of an exchange of prisoners of war between North and South Vietnam. It would be 14 years before she was reunited with him again.

In *DMZ - 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel* 2010, Chung's abstraction reveals a high mountainous region with spidery orange lines, patterned like a wave imprint in the sand. Imagining the return solo journey across such difficult terrain would have been heartbreaking. Again we see small metal circles punctured through the canvas occupying the DMZ, representative of the barbed wire fences that are commonly found in refugee internment camps, border crossings and demilitarized zones across the world. The 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel is a circle of latitude, 17 degrees north of the equator. It was also a border created by foreign political powers that divided Vietnam with a DMZ. Such lines that mark zones, operating as neutral territory between differing ideologies, dividing land and memory according to a human science of length and width is also found at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel.

In 1945, after the USA dropped nuclear nightmares of fire in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (represented in Chung's works *Hiroshima* and *Nagasaki* 2010), the Japanese surrendered their 35-year occupation of the Korean peninsula. Korea was divided in half at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The Americans controlled the South, while the Soviet Union controlled the North. The Korean War (1950-53) ensued, as contest of control over how to reunify Korea became a bitter civil conflict. To this day, North and South Korea are technically still at war, as the Korean War Armistice Agreement of 1953 was never ratified. *Kaesong Armistice Conference Site 1951* (Korea's old capital – dubbed as “propaganda town” of present day North Korea) 2010 is one of the sparsest compositions of all Chung's maps. A series of embroidered black and blue lines, respectively roads and rivers, eject from Seoul (capital of South Korea) in the bottom right towards a dense circle of metal grommets in the upper left. This disc is Kaesong, the former capital and glory of the Koryo Dynasty (918 - 1392 A.D). Kaesong remains one of the only open trade routes between north and south of the country. It is also touristically labeled the DPRK's center for propaganda. As the first point of entry for the world to understand North Korea, Kaesong has become a place with a crucial national voice responsible for displaying the power and might of the country. In these three maps that outline three different cities, three different strategies of war have been played out. Within each of them a community continues to rebuild, forget and remember.

Under Chung's labor, these imaginative cartographies are not static remembrances. As a young child Chung recalls hearing song lyrics (ballads from pre-1975) about mothers and wives of soldiers sitting alone at home, patching their sons' and husbands' torn army uniforms or piecing together the remnants of army parachutes as blankets and tents as satchels, anxiously waiting for their loved ones to return.

While the transferal of these charts from paper to canvas/vellum could be stereotypically considered domestic objects and the practice of a female hand that is largely decorative in nature, for Chung the act of enduring the waiting, the anxiety, the unknowing, symbolizes persistence, diligence and resilience. Such mark and weave in times of conflict can be found in the war rugs of Afghanistan which

started with Soviet occupation in 1979 or the quilts made during the American Civil War of the 1860s. By transforming political strategy into fanciful mimicry colorfully replete with baubles, jewels and gems (that equally adorn our own transformation of ourselves through the clothes we wear), Chung attempts to provide a bridge for the walls of history, be they visible or invisible, to be prompted in our contemporary psyche.

In 2002, amidst renovations of an old building at the Fukuromachi Elementary School for a Peace Museum in Hiroshima hidden scrawled messages were found behind blackboards, buried within layers and layers of paint. This school, built originally in 1937, was the closest site to ground zero of the A-bomb dropped by the Americans in 1945. It was used as a temporary shelter for victims, its blackened walls becoming a desperate message board searching for those who were missing. Discovering the tale of the Fukuromachi Elementary School Peace Museum,<sup>5</sup> Chung states, "Watching this story unfold I thought a lot about physical and intangible walls that divide people and nations. I thought about my mother waiting at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, surrounded by walls of early morning fog, about my father not being allowed to cross the bridge and reunite with her then and there. On each side of any wall, whether visible or invisible, there is a silent space of historical and personal memories. I wanted to bring forth that hidden and quiet space of feeling forgotten. As time passes, history and its data of statistics are told through books, memorial walls and packaged holiday tours. But perhaps most of those who were affected by the traumatic conflicts of our 20<sup>th</sup> century have lost their voices, with many of their stories gone untold. Having seen and experienced such death and destruction these people are like walking ghosts."<sup>6</sup> Spurred by the idea that these messages remained concealed for decades, its messages potent with pain and loss, crying for those not seen, not found, the tale of the Fukuromachi Elementary School Peace Museum catalyzed Chung's exhibition, *scratching the walls of memory*, propelling her need to examine the relationship between sign, signifier and signified; between site, map and memory.

*scratching the walls of memory* pivots around an installation of the same name, which sits to the rear and center of the gallery space. A wooden chair and table, the elementary school variety common during the Cold War era in Europe, USA and also Vietnam, has been placed in front of small chalkboards that are haphazardly placed on the wall. Hung between these writing slates are hand-made cloth satchel bags, carefully stitched and embroidered. On both objects are engraved and hand-stitched messages from those who lived the creation and destruction of various political walls and boundaries. Regarding the divide between North and South Korea we read, "No mail, telephone calls or email exchanges are allowed between ordinary citizens from the two sides;" of the Berlin Wall: "there was a wedding in Berlin yesterday . . . the mother of the bride stood on the other side of the wall, in East Berlin, crying;" from the allied forces of the NATO alliance during the Cold War: "there was a bright flash in the eastern dawn sky. Less than an hour later, there was a huge thud of a shock wave, almost like an earthquake;" "her mother was sewing masks for my mother and her 3 siblings. There was nothing else she could protect them with so that was the only thing she could do;" of the numerous boat refugees who fled South Vietnam in 1975: "later, she had a pirate's baby. She was 15 ... this one boat, these 31 disfigured or lost lives, are but one episode in a continuing story;" or of the Hibakusha (the Japanese term for victims of the A-bomb): "I couldn't move. I couldn't find my shadow. I looked up. I saw the cloud, the mushroom cloud growing in the sky. It was very bright. It had so much heat inside. It caught the light and it showed every color of the rainbow. Reflecting on the past, it is strange, but I could say that it was beautiful."<sup>7</sup>

These are the little histories, the anecdotes of official narratives that are not inscribed within national rhetoric. These are the statistics that struggle to be mapped for their immensity, their quantity is immeasurable. Benedict Anderson states, "Interlinked with one another . . . the census, the map and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain. The "warp" of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything

under the state's real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth. The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. It was bounded, determinate, and therefore – in principle, countable . . . For the colonial state did not merely aspire to create, under its control, a human landscape of perfect visibility; the condition of this “visibility” was that everyone, everything, had (as it were) a serial number. This style of imagining did not come out of thin air. It was the product of the technologies of navigation, astronomy, horology, surveying, photography and print, to say nothing of the deep driving power of capitalism”<sup>8</sup> For Chung, her fascination with the transformation of urban spaces is anchored in an examination of intent, process and affect. Living the reality of this “visibility” preconditions the citizenry into units of labor and subsequently they not only fail to question the changes around them, but they turn their own memories and experiences into inconsequential data. As a visitor to this near surreal history class, we are seated in front of a past that is not officially cataloged, determined or counted. *scratching the walls of memory* is a room in the museum of the future where its canonical obsession with authenticity has given sway to a rhizomic and multi-layered visualization of history, where artifact and archive merge with the intangible and ephemeral. In Chung's cartographic wonders, it is not only the systems of order that are depicted as rootless, but also more poignantly she questions humankind's respect for its own cultural memories, its own anchors of consciousness.

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- 1 “Matteo Ricci, Li Zhizao, and Zhang Wentao: World Map of 1602 - a collaboration between the European scholars of the Jesuit mission and the Chinese scholars of the imperial court. Vivid descriptions of the continents, praise of the Chinese emperor, lunar charts, and scientific tables documenting the movement of the planets adorn the map, a unique representation of East-West relations in the early 17th-century.” <https://www.lib.umn.edu/bell/riccimap>
  - 2 In many regions of the British Empire, surveys seemed impossible. Some of the Indian border countries, in particular Tibet, would not allow westerners to enter their country, let alone a British surveying team. They thus, in the mid 1860s, began training natives from India who lived on these borders to be surveyors in order for them to explore the region. This raised less suspicion as they were able to travel as traders or an lama (holy man). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pundit\\_\(explorer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pundit_(explorer))
  - 3 Benedict Anderson. “Census, Map, Museum” in *Imagined Communities*. Verso, London/New York, 2006, pp. 171-74.
  - 4 Cambodia broke into civil war in 1970, culminating in the control of the country by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. Thousands of refugees fled to Thailand and other neighboring countries such as Vietnam. In 1979, the Thai government collected the Cambodian refugees scattered across their country, sending them to Preah Vihear where the American, French and Australian Consulates were permitted to select 1,200 for resettlement. The remaining people were pushed over the escarpment. It is disputed that over 42,000 people were sent back to Cambodia this way. It came to international attention due to an American eye-witness. See: <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/cambodia/TIPEHBGTR37CFJGAC>
  - 5 NHK TV Documentaries, *Please Yuko, Tell me where you are, from your mom* and *Please Tell Me - Hiroshima, The Recalling Messages of the Atomic Bomb*.
  - 6 Email between the artist and Zoe Butt on 25 September, 2010.
  - 7 In Vietnam, public libraries and universities hold little visual or textual material on international history, culture and the arts post 1975. Suffering a trade embargo with allies of the USA from 1954 to 1995, Vietnam lacks a great many comparative texts of world history. It is no surprise that the Internet is now a crucial research tool (though often censored). Chung found these quotes for her work online at various sites such as:  
 On the voices of Hibakushi: <http://www.inicom.com/hibakusha/>  
 On the boat refugee experience from Vietnam: [http://boatpeople75.tripod.com/The\\_Dead\\_Did\\_Exist.html](http://boatpeople75.tripod.com/The_Dead_Did_Exist.html)  
 On the divide between North and South Korea: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/world/asia/27korea.html>  
 On the Berlin Wall: <http://history1900s.about.com/od/coldwa1/a/berlinwall.htm>;  
 Memories of the Cold War: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6906777.stm>
  - 8 Benedict Anderson. “Census, Map, Museum” in *Imagined Communities*. Verso, London/New York, 2006, pp. 184-85.