

THE FUTURE WORLDS

OF TIFFANY CHUNG



LISA HAVILAH

In Tiffany Chung's most recent work for the *Singapore Biennale*, we are confronted by a town of small boats and houseboats that almost total one hundred, suspended at eye level and floating on a vast and imaginary surface of water. These aren't houseboats from our memories but houseboats of the future, architecturally designed, with upper floating decks and clean lines, arranged on the water in such a way that its as if streets and laneways still exist. This is Chung's utopian model of an imagined floating world, an imagined future, an empty utopia, waiting for us to move in—an arc for a looming threat, so looming in fact that we actually may need to build the city we see before us. Tiffany Chung's 'floating town' is not just an imagining, but possibly a real option for our survival.

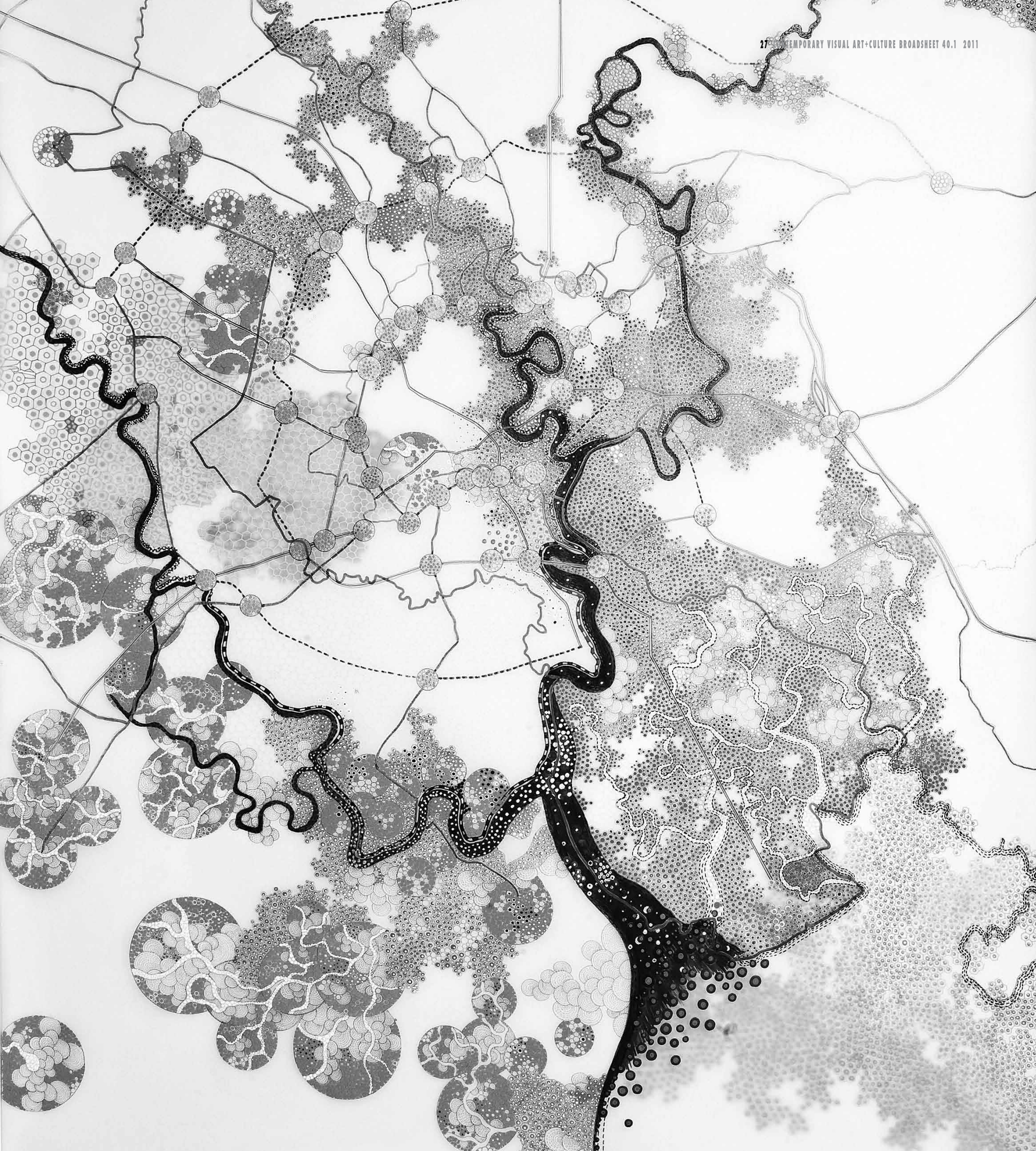
Tiffany Chung lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. Located on the banks of the Saigon River, Ho Chi Minh City is the largest city in Vietnam and home to nine million people. Ho Chi Minh City is currently identified as one of the top five cities in the world that will face the major impacts of global warming over the next twenty years. In a recent World Bank report it was indicated that if there was a one metre rise in sea levels as a result of climate change Vietnam would lose five per cent of its land, and eleven per cent of its population would be displaced.

Ho Chi Minh City over recent years has already experienced serious flooding. As the city continues to expand, many areas that previously were used to store water are now filled with concrete, historical canals are blocked with houses and agricultural land has been developed into suburbs. The impact of this development is that when the rains come the water cannot withdraw. Much of Ho Chi Minh City is lower than sea level, impacted upon by monsoonal weather and the tides of the Pacific Ocean. When there are regular tide flows with high amplitude (3.5-4metres), the tide penetrates into the interior city and floods large areas.

A country with fifteen major river systems and two international river basins—Red River in the north and the Mekong River in the south—the topography of Vietnam makes it one of the most hazard prone countries in the world. When Chung creates and imagines this future world, it not only comes from the reality of everyday life in Ho Chi Minh City but also has great resonance with her memories of growing up on the banks of one of the world's great river systems. Chung outlined some of these memories in *One Giant Great Flood* (2010), from a recent body of work for *The River Project* at Campbelltown Arts Centre.

This work is based on a personal narrative that for years I had completely forgotten. After the fall of Saigon many families had to move to very middle-of-nowhere places. My mother also had to do that because my father was in prison. We moved to the middle of the Mekong Delta and happened to be there during the historic flood of the Mekong River in 1978. As a very young child, the only memory I had of this was of an enormous broad sea of water. So growing up I could never seem to get rid of this image of rising water. However I forgot about this story until recently, when last year there was considerable media attention in Vietnam about China building eight hydropower dams in the upper reaches of the Mekong River and how that might affect the lower regions of the Mekong Delta. That's when I started to remember this story.¹

It is Chung's innate ability to combine the personal and the local with a global narrative that gives a richness to her work. It's the detail of her intricate embroidery and mark making against the scale of a massive flood plain, of the collapse of disciplines—contemporary art, architecture and urban planning—that





she is able to signal. Chung is completely engaged with the science of urban planning and environmental change. She responds to possible solutions and long term plans to make Ho Chi Minh City and other centres at high risk, resilient cities.

The development of resilient cities is innately political—requiring public money. For example, the beginning of a long term plan to manage Ho Chi Minh City's water levels and the implementation of a project to build dykes and drainage systems in 2009 cost US\$611m.² Chung's map and subsequent floating city work is a tool to create scenarios and contribute to minimising natural disasters in general, as things become more complicated and abnormal. The politics of managing and responding to disasters is being played out all over the world—the east coast of Australia's large floods and category 5 cyclone over the months of January and February have led to a controversial tax levy. It's the politics of contesting, of policy making and planning that Chung engages with. In Chung's works the politics of managing our environment are interweaved with personal and social narrative, importantly articulating our cultural relationship to places.

In Chung's previous major body of work *Scratching the Walls of Memory* (2010) was a series of intricately detailed cartologies of contested regions of the world, from the atomic blast zones of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the Iraqi State Railways (following the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty) and current pipelines. Using a pure white canvas as ground, Chung details barbed wire, red dots like blood circles, marks of unknown horror, a map without a key against a history that we think we know, but in its moment on the ground is a time unknown. These works are not only a physical mapping, but an emotional mapping. There is a very strong psychological element in Chung's work, which is highly personal but also absolutely objective. It engages with history, but also rejects it. These works emerged from cartography and the politics and power structures that are inherent in the processes of mapping, while stressing the personal, the individual and emotional through memory and subjectivity.

These contradictions also play out in Chung's use of materials. The pull between the masculinity of cartography and the feminine use of materials—intricate embroidery and drawing on a massive scale. Her works appear to be simply beautiful, delicate, revealing themselves as copies of old maps, embroidered with railways, roads and rivers, but they are all exceedingly touching and poetic records of pain, suffering and desperation. By punctuating them with sharp metal objects, she adds to their tactile effect, drawing the viewer into the horrendous realities of war. It is the combination of beauty and the realisation of what each small glittery piece represents that makes Chung's work deeply affecting. It is a natural progression then that Tiffany Chung, whose life is lived in Ho Chi Minh City, has moved towards thinking about what a future city in Vietnam might look like. But it is when you look at those intricately designed floating homes, when you get past the initial beauty of their design, as in her previous work, that the stark reality reveals itself. This is not an architectural design choice, but a solution to a problem that doesn't look like it's going to get solved any time soon. The most natural step is to design an arc or a city to save us from ourselves.³

Chung's floating city for the *Singapore Biennale* is identifiable as Vietnamese through the combination of contemporary international architectural aesthetic with the urban/suburban vernacular of traditional Vietnamese architecture, making it a story about a place and building tension between the historic and contemporary. This floating town also refers to the almost biblical concept of Arcology, an urban design movement that mobilises architectural design to address ecological challenges by designing sustainable built environments.⁴ Arcology is a term that was first used by the architect Paolo Soleri in 1969 when he published *Arcology: City and the Image of Man*.⁵ That same year, Soleri founded a school and urban laboratory called Arcosanti in central Arizona. The arcology concept proposes a highly integrated and compact, three-dimensional urban form that is the opposite of urban sprawl. Arcology theory holds that leanness is obtainable only via miniaturisation and supporting the complex interaction between multiple healthy systems. It's the notion of habitat that Chung's work adheres to, a cluster of social, economic and cultural relations, an environmental Sim City.

In its floating beauty Chung's work continues to remind us that we are not that far from solutions to anything. It encourages us to question our own memories and connection to them and provides an opportunity to think about what our shared futures will look like.

Notes

¹ Tiffany Chung, artist talk *The River Project*, 28 August 2010, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney. See *Broadsheet* 39.4: 284-88

² Tran Bich Lien, 'Meeting in Innovative Strategies towards Flood Resilient Cities in the Asia-Pacific, National Hydro Meteorological Service of Viet Nam', 21 July, 2009

³ John Ehrenfeld, *Attaining Urban Resilience in the Face of Climate*, 20 September, 2010

⁴ Erik Hams, 'Tiffany Chung, Floating Town', *Singapore Biennale Open House* (catalogue), 2011

⁵ Paolo Soleri, *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*, Cambridge, Massachusetts MIT Press, 1969