

Alien Beauties: the haunting world of Pey Chwen Lin's Eve-Clones

The space I am entering is eerily cool and dark, pierced only by the green glow of laser lights. From the portraits on the walls flirty eyes stare in my direction. At the center, set in tall medical jars, are six sets of transparent hand-casts reaching upwards with animated gestures. Finger-shaped objects are presented meticulously in elegant display cases near by. The sound of bubbling water lingers from another room. It is easy to imagine there might be formaldehyde in the air. A sense of unease begins to pervade: what kind of perverse alchemy is taking place here?

For the alchemist at the heart of this solo exhibition, Pey Chwen Lin, the philosopher's stone is not the promise of the elixir of eternal youth but rather it is the pursuit of eternal beauty gone sinful and the transmutation of materials gone wrong that are being examined. The collection of a new body of works Lin is presenting to us posits a vision of Man's unrequited desire to manipulate human flesh verging on evil.

Pey Chwen Lin is an established Taiwanese media artist with a long history of investigating the relationship between the natural and artificial in the context of human's attempts to control biological matter so that it can be fitted into certain ideals of beauty. For her solo exhibition she has done so using sophisticated technological means, elaborate casts of 'mutating' body parts and digital video with which to give form to her philosophical and artistic concerns.

Central to the exhibition is the series of portraits of clones of the Earth's first woman—Eve, as seen through Lin's eyes. According to Christian theology, after God created the first man Adam, God created Eve as the second human and Adam's companion. 'Eve' means 'source of life' and is regarded to be the 'mother of all living'¹ beings. Much has been written about the story of Eve. Author Pamela Norris even wrote her 'biography' in which she goes as far as arguing that our interpretation of Eve's Biblical role 'was developed to manipulate and control women'² as Eve is often regarded to be subordinate to Adam. Following Norris' theses, which challenges the

¹ Genesis 3:20

² Harris, P. *Eve: A Biography*, NYU Press, 1999

place society has prescribed to Eve (and through her to women in general), Pey Chwen Lin's artworks focus on problematising male desire to subject Eve to stereotypes of beauty and perfection, which continue to be imposed upon women by the prevalent patriarchal belief system.

In art there are many examples of female artists who have dealt with this issue. Perhaps the most shocking is the work of French artist Orlan³ who challenged the iconographic constructs of the Western ideals of female beauty created by male painters by using a radically new method of art-making: plastic surgery performance art. In her work *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990-1993) she attempted to embody particular facial features of famous female portraits such the forehead of Leonardo's Mona Lisa, the chin of Botticelli's Venus, the nose of Gerome's Psyche, the lips of Boucher's Europa, and the eyes of Diana by the French School of Fontainebleau. To sculpt each facial feature Orlan underwent radical and very dangerous surgery. For the first time in art history she treated her own face as a collage. Not only that she also recorded and broadcasted the process. By showing what goes on in the operating theatre Orlan brought attention to the extreme manifestation of the hybrid self-portrait that modern science and technology are, both, imposing upon and enabling us to create.

Within this art historical context Pey Chwen Lin is taking us even further into the dark chambers of biotechnology and genetic engineering by presenting us with disturbing visions of Eve's cloned identities signified by a series of faces, hands, and fingers made as erroneous copies of Eve's flesh. Pey Chwen Lin states that in creating *The Portrait of Eve Clone* series she wanted to encourage us to reflect on our overly developed civilization that, in her view, is the result of Man's fall from grace. The faces of her Eve-Clones are both alluring and beastly with strange animal features such as skins, horns and bones pushing through the shiny metallic color of their skins. This theme is continued in the medical glass specimens of what appear to be severed forearms (*Eve Clone Hands*), as well as a series of finger casts, which allude to Eve's mutating body. The surface of some of the specimens has animal skins, tentacles and bones contained within it. One set of arms has pieces of industrial machinery pushing through their flesh while another looks more as if it is emerging from rock. The '666'

³ www.orlan.net/

characters written in different languages are inscribed throughout the works. For Lin these numbers symbolise ‘obstacles from which all races and peoples cannot escape’.

Looking at the Eve-Clone portraits is like looking at ghostly faces staring from the dressing mirror late at night—seductive and spooky at the same time. Their hollow eyes follow us wherever we move in the space, an effect Pey Chwen Lin has achieved through the application of holographic techniques. Holography is somewhat a mystical form of art practice traditionally concerned with the creation of illusions of presence that can enrich our visual experience of time and memory of the subject recorded in the hologram. What is unique about holograms is that they are made of light and therefore lack material substance. Essentially the light emitted from an object is recorded and through sophisticated scientific and technological means it can be reconstructed so that it can create an optical image of that object. Characteristic of holography is the illusion of three-dimensionality, which presents an image that can shift and change depending on our position to it—in the same way as if it were a real volumetric object viewable from different angles. Australian holographic artist Paula Dawson describes holograms as being like ‘mental images and, hence, lend themselves to being associated with internal representations of reality’⁴. Thus the aesthetic critique of holographic art primarily focuses on its *mimetic* qualities—how well the optical illusion of an image imitates reality.

Within this lies the paradox, and the technical sophistication, of Lin’s holograms—they are illusions of an already immaterial virtual reality. Pictorially, the holographic imprints of the Eve-Clones are alien faces created digitally in a 3D virtual space. The extremely high resolution and spatial fidelity—the faces appear to turn corresponding to our movement in front of them including the highly challenging to achieve full head turn—are created to suggest the actual presence of Eve in her various stages of cloned evolution. There is an attempt to tell us that her existence, her ‘presence’, is real albeit she was born virtual.

The concluding work in the series, *Revelation of Eve Clone*, is a large interactive installation of six moving image projections of a life-size female figure, slightly curled up inside a liquid-filled glass container that rotates gently on its axis. Its right

⁴ Dawson, P, *Mirror Mirror*, artist exhibition statement, College of Fine Art, University of New South Wales, 30 April 2004

arm rests on the heart area, covering the chest, while the left is shyly lifted up towards the face as if to shield its gaze from onlookers. Starting from left to right a copy of the first image is repeated sequentially, with each next version being delayed in time from the previous one, thus, alluding to a process of cloning.

The installation set up is intimate though sombre. The acoustic space is filled with sounds reminiscent of religious incantations. The atmosphere is almost chapel like. But what is it exactly that is to be worshiped here? The figure is neither that of a woman nor a beast but of some mutant creature—at once repugnant and alluring in its strangeness. The ray of light illuminating its presence: an artificial one.

Drawing inspiration from the Western Christian view of Eve as the ‘great prostitute who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the Earth committed sexual immorality’⁵ and whose waters became ‘peoples, nations, and languages’⁶, Lin presents a life-form created not through the *original* but a new techno-scientific *sin*. The Biblical flesh-and-blood body of Eve—the one whose primordial functions of carrying life and giving birth are uncontrollable and, thus, were to be feared—is taken over by a new body: a slippery, porcelain like, artificially made-to-order and fully containable Eve Clone.

Pey Chwen Lin’s art work brings us alarmingly close to the heated debate about the value of genetic determinism promulgated by the biotech industry. In 2003 the thirteen-year long project of mapping and sequencing the entire genetic material that orchestrates the chemistry of human life was concluded. Known as the Human Genome Project⁷, this massive undertaking manifests humanity’s quest to know the building blocks of what makes an individual human being. Each cell in the human body carries a master script that determines its development and function. This biological code is organised in genes arrayed sequentially along chromosomes. Genes take millennia to develop in response to many environmental factors, and are passed on from parent to child.

After the conclusion of the Human Genome Project much of the information was transferred to multinational corporations with vested interests in the medical industry.

⁵ Revelation 17:1-2, *The Holy Bible*, The Bible Societies, Hong Kong, 1966

⁶ Revelation 17:15, *The Holy Bible*, The Bible Societies, Hong Kong, 1966

⁷ For extensive information see www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome

While the potential health benefits of one day being able to ‘switch off’ faulty genes are real, the very cloning of biological human matter posits deeply concerning ethical and moral questions: *who owns and controls individual genetic information; who should have access to it; how will it be used*⁸, and so forth. Some might say that already there are genetically modified organisms circulating the food chain, so why stop there. Why not allow the existence of genetically enhanced humans?

In *Revelation of Eve Clone* the moral dilemmas of the future nature of life are narrated through embedded Biblical texts written in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Chinese and English. To Lin the languages signify stages in the evolution of humanity: religion, culture, philosophical thought, political might, and macro-economy, within which there is always the seed of evil.

Furthermore, the urgency of Lin’s revelations is made even more palpable by the display of a real time computer-generated numbers running along the top of each of the projection screens. Upon entering the installation space viewers trigger the counter meter and the numbers begin to accumulate, always presenting us with the most current chronological time. This encoded time emphasises Eve’s artificially supported existence. The experience is enhanced by the changing colours of the work, which shift from grey scale when there is no one in the space to luminous sepia hues when our presence is detected. Periodically a *Document of Eve Clone Revelation* is produced as evidence of Eve Clone's vital status.

Throughout the entire body of work—from *The Portrait of Eve Clone* series and *Mass Production of Eve Clone*, in which eighteen versions of Eve Clone are displayed in a palette of techno-colour hues, to *Revelations of Eve Clone*—there is a persistent and pervasive questioning of Man’s desire to play God, to control nature (and the female body as the Biblical source of life) in accordance to his own interpretations of it. But is this techno-scientific way of thinking not actually pushing us toward some great, irreversible harm: the end of the world, perhaps?

The overall aesthetic of the entire collection of works is reminiscent of the cold ‘bio-mechanical’ renditions of merged human bodies and machines seen in the works of

⁸ Ibid.

Swiss artist H.R. Giger⁹. Perhaps best known for the creation of the science-fiction scenes and characters of Hollywood's blockbuster movie ALIEN, Giger's style evolved the surrealist art tradition into a late 20th century visual vocabulary of sleek, often scary or sickening imagery of alien bodies—a dark vision of humanity overtaken by machines¹⁰. Pey Chwen Lin's art extends these aesthetic approaches into the of 21st century by presenting us with a vision of genetic engineering and the merging of biological and artificial systems whereby the potential for error, while tampering with nature, can be truly frightening. Take these art works as a warning: despite all of humanity's technological and scientific advances we remain mere mortals. Eve's biological state of being is sacred to the continuation of humankind—and as Pey Chwen Lin's alien beauties reveal—it is best left to her creator.

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⁹ www.hrgiger.com

¹⁰ Petros, G., 'The biomechanical surrealism of HR Giger', Juxtapoz, 2001