

## Interview with Christine Wong-Yap for Series on Artopic.org

1. Steven Barich: *Hello Christine. Thank you for taking this interview, on the eve of your solo exhibition titled Irrational Exuberance at [Sight School](#) in Oakland, CA. I'd like to talk with you about this exhibition in particular, in order to get a sort of "preview of the artist's mind," as well as some topics related to the activity of being an artist/writer/designer in the contemporary milieu.*

*I seem to remember you stating that Irrational Exuberance is your first "real" solo show in the Bay Area. You also mention on your blog that you have been making work for this exhibition that is perhaps outside or an evolution from past work. So, what are you preparing for the show, and does having a solo show affect how you create and therefore see the total artworks as a whole?*

Christine Wong Yap: Hello Steven. The title, actually, is "Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors)," and yes, it's my first proper solo show.... I've done solo projects and shows in non-gallery spaces, but this is the first time it's just my work—my statement—filling a gallery space.

I'm transforming Sight School into a colorful shop-like interior populated with reconfigured discount store items. There will be an installation, sculptures, multiples, one-offs, and maybe even some readymades. They're all in response to the idea of "cheap and cheerful," modest ambitions, and pleasure. This comes out of my interest in happiness, psychology and optimism.

To me, a solo show ought to make a clear statement. "Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors)" is not a collection of singular works in the same space; they're assembled and designed with Sight School in mind, and in relation to each other. I guess it's sort of an installation composed of several works....

SB: *I'm glad you pointed out the whole title to me, because I think it begins to frame your show: attention to the specific "language," adding incidental information to what is a state of being, slightly downplayed—or modest—via the abbreviation. Being a fan of titles as markers and keys to artwork, I like to see the title as a tantalizing statement.*

CWY: I borrowed the phrase "irrational exuberance" from Alan Greenspan, who used it to describe an attitude in over-inflated markets. I'm appropriating it to ask if attitudes like exuberance, joy, pleasure or optimism should be rational, or if they are necessarily irrational. It's possible, as well, to think that those emotions are actually quite rational, following certain principles in [positive psychology](#).

SB: *I have to ask you then about any possible connections to consumer culture with this installation/exhibition, on being a consumer, and whether or not you've taken it upon yourself to comment on the anti-relationship of art to discount goods, and to resulting feelings of satisfaction and happiness, often felt through the act of consuming culture...which then translates to feelings*

*of satisfaction when viewing art. I'm very curious to know where you began investigating the idea(s) of "cheap and cheerful," modest ambitions and pleasure.*

CWY: My interest in "cheap and cheerful" started last year during the Breathe Residency at [Chinese Art Centre](#) in Manchester, U.K. There are a lot of pound shops (the U.K. equivalent of dollar stores) in Manchester that sell utilitarian goods, as well as things like garden gnomes, glitter pens, and stick-on rhinestones. The idea that people who frequent pound shops should be able to access pleasure and feed their decorative impulses is compelling to me. (Of course there are easy political, economic and environmental critiques; I can't imagine these cheaply made, mass-manufactured objects were originally destined to end up on mantles in the North of England. But this isn't what I'm primarily interested in.)

Everyone loves their knickknacks, whether it's Poundland "tat" (junk), kitsch, Target diffusion lines, gadgets, mid-mod clocks, or contemporary art.

SB: *Continuing that thought, does optimism need pleasure as starting point?*

CWY: No, but I think it helps. I do think happiness and optimism can feed each other.

SB: *Well, pleasure has at times been a "dirty word" when talking about why one should look at art...*

CWY: I think it is valid to critique artworks that are purely pleasurable when they are insubstantial in content and/or concept.

Let's distinguish pleasure from desire, and pleasure from happiness. According to Paul Martin, author of ["Sex, Drugs and Chocolate: The Science of Pleasure"](#) (Fourth Estate, 2008), pleasure is one of three key components to happiness; the other two being the absence of displeasure and satisfaction. (See my [Cheap and Cheerful drawing #8](#)). I don't think my work could achieve creating the absence of displeasure or satisfaction (which comes from seeing oneself as an agent and enacting a plan) for viewers — I'm not sure any art could do that for its viewers, do you? But I can make work about pleasure, especially in thinking about how, as Martin explains, small pleasures will do just as well as large ones.

Psychological experiments have shown that [experiences matter more than things](#). I work on the formal aspects of the art objects and the strategies of display, but I also think my work in general has a life as a lived viewing experience. Being in a space filled with colorful things is a phenomenological experience, even if "Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors)" is less obviously interactive than my prior light- or mirror-based works.

SB: *So how about when objects/things randomly activate our memory of experiences, even if the object itself isn't directly associated with the memory? I would say things and experiences are*

*much more dependent on each other, when it comes to psychology, and kinda bizarre to say one matters more than another.*

CWY: Wow, Steven, this totally ties into other ideas that I've been reading about in "Metaphors We Live By" by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1978). Ostensibly, Lakoff and Johnson are linguists who apply their interests in metaphors to cognition: their book makes the case that metaphors are not only ways that we speak, but ways that we *think*. Metaphors are so critical to human understanding that there are certain concepts that we cannot grasp without metaphors, such as "an idea is an object" ("I'm still digesting that idea," etc.) or "communication is sending" ("I get it.") Further, Lakoff and Johnson explain that many of these metaphors are based in the orientation of the human body. For example, we 'containerize' our *field* of vision; we associate good and more with height ("Things are looking up").

I think "Metaphors We Live By" has meaningful implications for artists working with symbols *or* phenomenology. For me, this is an unexpected connection between representation and interaction. There's something paradoxical about de-materializing installations while we rely on metaphors to make sense of things and experiences. Maybe everything is mimetic, and "big dumb literal objects" are not so dumb after all.

So back to your question—yes, objects/things randomly activate our memory of experiences in personal ways, but also in orientational and conceptual ways deeply ingrained in our cognition.

And I agree that things and experiences *are* interdependent, as would Lakoff and Johnson: "...we typically conceptualize the nonphysical *in terms of* the physical—that is, we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated." I'm still synthesizing these ideas and excited about integrating them with my art.

When I said experiences matter more, I meant that from a positive psychology standpoint—people tend to overestimate the amount of happiness that material possessions bring. I could go on about how we adapt to all experiences, good or bad, but I'll save that for another time, and wrap it up with this:

I think the work of art mediates a relationship between artists and viewers. Viewers need not buy or own a thing to engage the experience. I'm interested in the experience that is visual as well as cognitive, and how it engages metaphors or orientational/bodily/nonliteral understandings.

SB: *And, although so much more can be said about the literal conditions in which we experience art (the white cube, in the public space, in the restroom, etc.), it's interesting to me that you are investing and directing the viewer through, as you say, an investment in strategies of display. Which segues into the following question, although asked a bit earlier in the interview exchange.*

*Would you say there is a certain added responsibility to the exhibition—being solo—versus being part of a group show?*

CWY: Yes, of course. In the case with Sight School, an artist-run space directed by [Michelle Blade](#), I've got a lot of creative control, and I'm happy to take advantage of that and make the flyers exactly as I want them, address the physical spaces, design the exhibition, etc.... And, since people will be coming to see *my* work, I want to work extra hard for them to see a good show.

*SB: Touching on something you wrote above, how do you specifically go about "designing" for a space, for your exhibition?*

CWY: Designing the exhibition is a matter of composing the works to fit the space, curating the works to create a coherent statement, and complementing or modifying the physical space to best house the artworks.

Some of the process is literally a design process—I use InDesign to mock up how the works might fill the gallery.

*SB: Is it a situation where time, actual physical space and sketched ideas gel together to form the show, then begins production?*

CWY: No. As much as I'm a conceptual artist and designer, I strongly believe that making is thinking. I make a lot of decisions in the making process....

For "Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors)," I am also responding to the materials that are available to me at discount stores. So some of the work is shopping, and spending time thinking about, playing with, and sometimes exhausting the aesthetic, material, formal or metaphoric potential of everyday objects. Like most artists, I make more than I actually exhibit. I like to think this failing and editing process results in better works for viewers.

*SB: Has this show been simply waiting for the right moment to become concrete?*

CWY: I think so, yes. Sight School is perfect because it's a storefront gallery.

*SB: Besides exhibiting a new direction in your work, has the overall process for preparing the show been new to you as well?*

CWY: This will sound funny, but I feel like everything before this moment in my life has lead up to this point. I feel this way quite often, actually. I'm stretching and pushing myself for sure, but I also feel like I know what needs to be done. I think working as a preparator has lent a lot of insight: massive exhibitions can be made as long as you've got organization, resources, skilled manpower and inspired teamwork and leadership.

2. Steven Barich: *In your writing you often speak to certain "professional practices," in regard to being a working artist, and to what end you involve yourself in a contemporary art scene. Where have you been gathering these professional practice thoughts from?*

Christine Wong Yap: First, I was lucky enough to be invited to participate in a [Creative Capital](#) Professional Development Workshop in 2006, and for that, I'll be forever grateful to [Intersection for the Arts](#) for the nomination, and Creative Capital for the knowledge and support. Second, in the workshop, I was amongst cohorts who have extended a lot of mutual support in the subsequent years. Third, I was awarded a grant from the [Center for Cultural Innovation](#) in 2008 to continue developing my professional practices. Finally, I am also lucky to be in a community of bright, intelligent artists with a lot of integrity and who often have very practical advice to share....

SB: *So, I'm going to ask: what you learned in these 4 points you've just made, shouldn't they be basic "courses" taught in the BFA/MFA environment?*

CWY: Yes and no.

Yes -- those myths that you have to suffer for your art, and that real artists are poor, are BS. That resigned, pessimistic, "victim" attitude, where society owes you something because you're an artist and your labor is more special than other people's, is too easy and far too common.

No.... This may sound deeply pessimistic, but I suspect that a lot of artists intentionally resist professional development training. When you believe that the art world is a corrupt oligarchy, then you're freed from responsibility for your own success/failure. Same thing goes if you think "the work speaks for itself" and you leave your fate completely to the whims of critics, gallerists, curators and collectors. When you realize that there is no conspiracy of power, that there are multiple art worlds, and that many people in these art worlds operate with genuine interest in art, then you start to become accountable as a participant.

Plus, I think BFA and MFA programs have their work cut out for them already. There's already so much that students have to learn in terms of form-making, theory, discipline and resilience.

SB: *I shy away from thinking of situations like yours to just be about luck, yet I understand what you mean. Sometimes, the use of the term Professional Artist seems amorphous—is it an actual title, a state of being, a "given" title, determined by length of your C.V. or whether you've exhibited internationally? I'm just throwing these questions out there...*

CWY: There are no criteria, are there?

That's why I think it's crucially important for artists who consider themselves professionals—by that I mean those who are actively creating work and exhibiting, who

participate in discourse rather than shy away from criticism, who aspire to be lifers—operate with integrity and professionalism. Be good, be ethical, don't be a brat, don't be flaky, be thankful, and be generous. Let's retire those stereotypes of arrogant, tempestuous artists. This work is hard. Honor it, and yourself.

SB: *While they might be affecting your practice and attitude as a whole, is what you've been reading/observing also directly affecting your artwork, your output as an maker/writer?*

CWY: Sure. After the workshop, I decided to become an optimist. I was a pessimist, concerned with making art about anxiety, limitations and futility. These ideas still pop up in my work, but much less often.

There are some other obvious connections. I'm obsessed with optimism and I think being more aware of attaining happiness can lead to a more optimistic and happy life. I think the practice of optimism is necessarily active—one has to have satisfaction to be happy, and to find satisfaction one must have a sense of agency, that what one does matters.

The same thing applies to artists; to feel like continuing to make art is worth it, one must have a sense of agency as an artist. I think deciding to be an optimist, and deciding to be an agent in one's life, are decisions that require constant renewal.

SB: *Amen to that. It is probably easier to have a feeling of renewal when others constantly deem your art "worth it," but a richer experience comes from being the agent of one's own art/life. It is a small art-world out there, so working with agency would provide direction and balance to one's art activities, when the opportunities are few and far between.*

*On that note, now that a general pessimism has been purged from your attitudes, is there any current "struggle" in your art practice?*

CWY: Steven, you're killing me! ;)

Being optimistic makes it easier to stay an artist. It doesn't mean making art got any easier.

When I'm starting projects I'm still as conflicted, confused, self-censoring and critically neurotic as before. I still have dumb ideas... Projects fail. Rejection stings. Just as you can't simply decide to be happy—you can only work at being happier—it's not natural for me to simply become optimistic—I can only work at improving my attitudes and behaviors.

And I've got a long way to go.

SB: *If you take on this role as an agent, does your artwork address a sense of agency as well?*

CWY: Does the work of art have agency? We could have a three-day symposium on this and still not get a fixed answer....

One of the things I am interested in exploring in my work is viewers' agency, actually. That their interpretations and experiences of any given work will be colored by their subjectivity, and how they choose to experience the work, for how long, etc.

Here's a question for you: Are authorship/agency limited or unlimited resources? For example, if it is a limited resource, the more authorship an artist gives up, the more the viewer gets, and vice versa. On the other hand, is it possible for the artist and viewer to tap separate wells of authorship/agency? I think this has to do with the stability of the identity of art, the concept that something could ever be finished or fully authored.... Of course this ties back into the market, and the archival mission of museums....

SB: *Is this why you specifically utilize mirrors in your work, as a way of literally showing a viewer how they "look" at a work of art?*

CWY: Yes. Mirrors are a way of engaging and implicating the viewer. They also highlight the act of looking itself: light, dark, reflection, projection, forwards, backwards, perception, perspective, the visible and its referents.

SB: *But to address your question: authorship, originality, individuality...these are all issues that are currently being fought over both personally and from a legal standpoint, from Google digitizing books to common copyright licensing for fair use of images, software, genetic code, and of course ideas.*

*As a maker of things myself, I claim authorship over my own work, and take a form of pride in it...but in some ways that claim is false, because my artwork relies on borrowing history, memory and technique from other artists, philosophers, tinkerers.*

*But agency lies in the connection between artist, artwork and viewer. Within that triangle then, strict authorship might need to be relinquished.*

CWY: Nice.

“Quoting is an inevitable component of all communication; it is what makes communication possible.”

—Thomas McEvelley, “Art and Discontent” (Documentext, 1993).

SB: *How does your practice as a writer balance out what you do as a maker of objects and presenter of ideas in visual forms?*

Artist, critic and educator Maria Porges put it best. To paraphrase: writing lends artists critical distance from their own work.

I also think of my writing practice as a way I engage community. It's a form of agency and reciprocity—I think there isn't enough critical writing or coverage of local art, so I'm trying to do my bit via my [blog](#) and [Art Practical](#).

3. Steven Barich: *We both did our undergraduate work at CCA in the late nineties—I remember your luscious large-scale woodcut prints—and I've been loosely familiar with your artwork since then, as you've regularly exhibited in the Bay Area. Beginning as a printmaker and having a relationship with the multiple, after your MFA studies, you seem to have found direction in more conceptual artwork that continues to utilize aspects of production: type, design, photography. Can you talk about this transition, and the value of the multiple in your art practice?*

Christine Wong Yap: The [papercuts](#) I made as a first-year grad student mark that transition from the print and flat paper towards the object. The page was literally coming off of the wall. In moving towards sculpture and installation, I was thinking about moving away from illustrating my ideas into making objects that embody them. The early text-based works were also attempts to move towards abstraction. Since then, of course, my work has developed a lot; I've got different ideas about language, the way I represent text, legibility, the viewer, etc.

I make multiples because I like multiples. Sometimes, they contextualize my installations—I can document a text in relation to specific works. Other times, like in the [Miniature Multiple \(Lens Flare\)](#), they reproduce a site-specific work and further distribute its concept to a wider audience, which can have a more personal relationship to it. Multiples also allow me to think about generosity and enact a kind of physically-documented social bond with a viewer. Lastly, I think multiples are totally valid forms for artworks. I was really impressed with [Cary Liebowitz](#) at his recent lecture at the [Contemporary Jewish Museum](#), in which he explained that his love of mass-manufactured items was genuine, however banal the products or ironic the gesture. I guess I've been moving away from making "precious" objects and thinking more about experiences as well as the objects and materials that already exist in our daily lives.

I suppose you could make a connection between prints and multiples about accessibility, but I'll leave that to you.

SB: *I like your comment about generosity. I sometimes think that small amounts of generosity exist in all artworks: a sharing of something personal, often a viewpoint, via the public presentation of the thing, the work of art. But it can also be so literal: the gift exchange (channeling Lewis Hyde here...) Often, any willingness to identify generosity within the practice of making artwork is overwritten when artworks become simple commodities: here I'm thinking about the gross sales of artwork in auction houses, for example. Is there a social bond anymore between artist and viewer when the economic bond is so very, very great?*

CWY: I don't know. Does an economic transaction necessarily supplant or de-value a social bond? Not necessarily. (BTW, wouldn't Lewis Hyde argue that gifts are currencies as well?) Maybe a social bond is independent of an economic transaction: either its there or not, regardless of whether you got it for free or for millions.

Do people who take Felix Gonzales-Torres posters for free and then forgetfully leave them elsewhere in the museum have a social bond with FGT?

SB: *Because The Art Object has such a convoluted relationship to value—either personal or monetary—there are instances when sometimes schlock will be worth millions, and beautiful, poetic ideas/gestures get rolled up, smashed up in a backpack, and end up trampled in the gutter.*

*But I like how with the premise of your upcoming exhibition, you are creating a situation where the viewer can experience a setup of an—as you say earlier—a phenomenological experience, and in this case irrational exuberance—its not just about viewing things, it's very much about what is "tied" to these things. Maybe after your show has had its run, you could make a follow-up comment regarding this topic.*

CWY: If I'm not rolled up, smashed in a backpack and trampled in the gutter by then, I'll give it a shot.

SB: *Can a viewer have a similar experience and/or bond to a mass-manufactured object as they can have to a "precious" object?*

CWY: Yeah! Anyone who's unearthed a box of once-beloved LPs knows what I mean.

Let me re-phrase the question:

Can a "precious" object have a similar experience and/or bond as mass-manufactured object? In other words, I sometimes wonder, can art compete with life?

"...we're all fetishists snared by the object... the object is the vehicle of the affections... until they reach the flea markets of the world, where these objects continually pile up stripped of their magic and cut off from the memory of their history... all that remains of these preserves is the container the artist made for them, the 'can' the preserves came in... the container will never interest me as much as the contained, but where would I pour my wine without a glass?—and it is inbetween these two poles of inseparability of the two that my anxiety of finding a definite solution will oscillate, which could be interpreted positively as the desire for instability and change."

—Daniel Spoerri, *The Mythological Travels*, 1970

SB: *Related to Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors), there is a long history of re-appropriated mass-manufactured, consumer goods and a shop-like situations (Claes Oldenburg, Tracy Emin/Sarah Lucas, etc.) to both empower and question the role of art, and our consumption of it...are you yourself borrowing from this lineage?*

CWY: I fancy myself participating in a legacy of artist-created shops/shop-like installations. Nauman's San Francisco studio/storefront, Oldenburg's studio/storefront and Emins/Lucas' storefront/loft were all productive sites for exploring of strategies of display and interaction.

Moreover, most of these shops, like Murakami's Louis Vuitton shop, Alan Ruppertsberg's Al's Cafe, or Keith Haring's Pop Shop responded to specific economic conditions and personal histories. They also participated in wider culture, and brought art to people outside of the sanctioned art world.

Some of the artists are directly engaging consumerism in their work, but that shouldn't be equated with positions of radical opposition. I think you could say that they were all attempts to bridge art and life. I like that Sight School is a gallery, as well as a storefront. Formerly a bike shop, its current neighbors are a barbershop, library, biker bar/service shop and ashram.

"Irrational Exuberance (Asst. Colors)" runs from May 14 to June 12 at Sight School, 5651 San Pablo (at Powell), Oakland, CA.

An opening reception will be held Friday, May 14, 7–10 pm.

"As Is: Pop Art & Stuffhood," a dialogue featuring special guests including critic and curator Glen Helfand and artist, writer and theorist Ginger Wolfe-Suarez, will be held at the exhibition closing on Saturday, June 12, 2–4 pm.

All events are free and open to the public.