Owen Leong

Bitten Peach 分桃

21 Nov 2024 – 28 Feb 2025

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture

澳華藝術文化研究院

Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture
Building EA, Parramatta South Campus, Western Sydney University
Opening hours: Monday – Friday 9:30 am – 5:00 pm

Introduction

The Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture (IAC) at Western Sydney University proudly presents the exhibition of the year: *Bitten Peach* 分桃, a solo show of high-profile multidisciplinary visual artist Owen Leong, known for his artistic exploration of queer world-making. As the recipient of IAC's Chey Fellowship, and with support from the City of Parramatta through Parramatta Artists Studios and the NSW Government through Create NSW, Leong has created a major body of new works for this special exhibition.

Leong's creations are inspired by a queer reading of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*《聊齋志異》, a collection of classical Chinese stories by Qing dynasty writer Pu Songling (1640–1715). The collection, regarded as the pinnacle of classical Chinese fiction, conjures up a world in which nothing is as it seems, stretching the boundaries between the supernatural and everyday reality, using physical and psychological detail to make the move between these realms seem natural. Generations of Chinese creative minds have been deeply influenced by *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio,* including Mo Yan, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who in his acceptance speech paid a tribute to Pu Songling by naming him "one of the great storytellers of all time" and acknowledging that his own creative writing "carried on the tradition Pu had perfected".

A unique feature of this exhibition is an illuminating collaboration between visual and literary mediums. Award-winning author Tom Cho has been commissioned by the artist to write a piece of creative fiction as a looking glass into the exhibition and its own creative response to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. The short story entitled "The Whole Cannot be Understood Without Reference to its Holes"《無缺亦無圓》is now published in Series 3 Number 16 of *HEAT*, a renowned Australian literary journal. The author, who has a background in spoken word performance, has recorded the story, the video of which is playing at the exhibition.

The story of the “bitten peach” 分桃 comes from an anthology of writings by Chinese philosopher Han Fei (c. 280–233 BCE) during the Warring States period. As the story has it, a courtier called Mizi Xia was the favoured courtier and lover of Duke Ling, ruler of the ancient Chinese state of Wey (ruled c. 534–492 BCE). One day, when the two were taking a stroll, Mizi Xia picked a peach from a tree and took a bite. He found it so sweet that he instinctively handed it over to Duke Ling. Duke Ling exclaimed that Mizi Xia must love him so much that he forgot that he had taken a bite of the peach before handing the bitten peach to him.

In this exhibition, by fusing historical materials with contemporary forms, the artist has created an exquisite body of work. In the words of Leong, these works “navigate the delicate interplay between past and present, desire and fantasy, self and world” and “transforms classical literature into a contemporary celebration of queer joy, power and agency”.

For viewers of the exhibition to find their individual connections with the artworks, I have prepared resource texts based on the original Chinese version: Liao Zhai Zhi Yi 《聊齋志異》, Zhonghua Book Company (2022), English version *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, trans. by John Minford, Penguin (2006) and other original Chinese classic texts.

Enjoy this exceptionally rich, stunningly beautiful, and sensual exhibition.

Professor Jing Han
Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture
Western Sydney University

The Whole Cannot be Understood Without Reference to its Holes《無缺亦無圓》

Tom Cho

In a village in what is now known as Toisan, there was a young scholar who was always reading and writing one thing or another. He read poetry and political thought from the Confucian canon, and he wrote essays and stories. On most evenings, he preferred to be in the world of his studio with a book or brush in his hand.

Late one night, he was composing a lengthy essay when the lines of watery ink lifted off the sheets of paper around him. While the scholar looked on, all of the ink cumulated at a corner of his studio ceiling, forming a dark and surprisingly sizeable cloud that was soon ready to burst. As the ink began raining down, it recomposed itself midair, stroke by stroke. First, the strokes formed an expressive outline and then came a suffusion of colours and realistic details until, within minutes, there stood a young man in the flesh. Having just rained down into the room, the youth's ink-black hair was shiny with droplets, his skin was moist and dewy, and his wet clothes clung to his body. He introduced himself as Wu (無名, namely "Nameless").

For a moment, the scholar looked at the blank sheets of paper from where his writings had now disappeared. He had written some serviceable prose to theorise about the rhyming patterns in a volume of classic Confucian poetry, but Wu's beauty was better formed and more persuasive. The scholar put down his brush and walked over to Wu, who smiled and raised his head to meet the scholar's kiss. Wu stripped off his sodden garments and the scholar followed suit.

With his hastened breaths and flushed face, Wu indeed seemed a real, flesh-and-blood lover. But when the scholar reached for the naked Wu, he found Wu's body extraordinarily permeable, forming moist openings wherever the scholar sought to apply pressure. These openings would stretch to accommodate any protrusion, enclosing it snugly, and when the scholar withdrew, the apertures would close over.

Since childhood, the scholar had enjoyed gazing at both clouds and inkblots alike, projecting familiar images onto their formations. Wu had rained down from a cloud of watery ink, and yet his fluid nebulousness was like nothing the scholar knew. But Wu's permeability soon prompted the scholar to project many desires, familiar and unfamiliar to himself, onto Wu's form. And because he had holes anywhere that the scholar so desired, Wu proved to be a supremely receptive partner.

The next morning, the scholar woke alone. Where Wu's body had been, dried blots were on the sheets. These blots and the spaces around them now indicated Wu's absence. Although he ached for Wu, the scholar had not been expecting Wu to linger. After all, clouds pass and cannot be pinned down. He also doubted that he would receive such a visit again, from Wu or anyone, let alone with the frequency he now desired. He dared not hope that it was going to start raining men.

So the scholar began finding other openings for his desires: the orifices of merchants, eunuchs, fellow scholars, maidservants, fox spirits and ghosts who took many forms, and guards in full leather armour who carried chains and cudgels; a hole that had been worn into a log by pelting rain; a long-necked vase and other favourably shaped ceramic and glass vessels; a lattice panel; a bitten peach; his own clasping hand. His studio was itself a concavity 凹形 that formed a shape in concert with its enclosing walls and the various objects inside the space, and the scholar came to spend even more time in the world of his studio, composing a new essay.

Thinking of the spaces that are both created and left behind, he asserted in emphatic brushstrokes that the whole cannot be understood without reference to its holes. On the days when he especially missed Wu and ached for hole-ness, he proposed more radically that the nature of the body can only be understood as a hole. He termed his perspective 圓缺, which years later, should have been translated to “hole-ism” but was not. This is how this scholar came to be linked with another concept instead—one that stressed the importance of a thing or system as a whole 整體, over and above its nature as a sum of constituent parts.

In reality, the scholar’s writings sprung from his tendencies to submerge parts of himself within a hole, where the parts and the hole could be in intimate interconnection, in turn creating depths within himself. He would spend the rest of his life exploring the contours of these depths too, knowing that holes give shape to what a whole can be.

Tom Cho is the author of the collection of fictions *Look Who’s Morphing*, originally published by Giramondo. His current project is a novel that philosophises about religion. Originally from Naarm (“Melbourne”), he now lives in St John’s, Ktaqmkuk (“Newfoundland”). His website is at tomcho.com.

This piece was recently published in the literary magazine *HEAT* (Series 3, Number 16).

Twin Lanterns
2024
Bronze, hand-blown glass, glazed porcelain, steel
60 x 102 x 32 cm

Candle Tears
2024
Bronze, candle
76 x 49 x 78 cm

Spirit Seed
2024
Bronze, rosewood
112 x 30 x 30 cm

Double Happiness 囍
2024
Hand-blown glass, rosewood
110 x 30 x 30 cm

Strange Tale
2024
Fox tail, hand-blown glass, glazed porcelain, chain
263 x 40 x 40 cm

Painted Skin
2024
Cotton, bleach, silk, steel
107 x 110 x 18 cm

Golden Elixir
2024
Cotton, bleach, silk, steel
160 x 120 x 16 cm

Clouds and Rain 雲雨
2024
Cotton, bleach, silk, steel
152 x 181 x 5 cm

Mist and Moon 霧月
2024
Cotton, bleach, silk, steel
152 x 181 x 5 cm

Bitten Peach 分桃
2024
Cotton, bleach, silk, steel
152 x 209 x 5 cm

Artist Statement

*Bitten Peach*分桃 is an exhibition of contemporary art inspired by a queer reading of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* 《聊齋志異》, a collection of classical Chinese stories by Qing dynasty writer Pu Songling (1640–1715). The studio, as a physical and symbolic space, functions as a gestalt—a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this exhibition, the studio embodies an aesthetic, cultural, and sensual universe where historical narratives intertwine with contemporary queer identities.

My artworks use Asian gothic symbolism as a metaphor for haunting by heteronormative systems of power. When I read these tales, the boundaries between the supernatural and everyday reality are fluid. In my imagination, fox spirits, ghosts, and demons exist between realms as genderless creatures of otherworldly power and sublime form, focused on enlightenment through sensual pleasure.

The erotic, as a profound expression of human desire in all its extraordinary intensity and richness, explores the depths and nuances of human nature and consciousness. By blending historical materials with contemporary forms, I have created a series of queer-coded sculptures that navigate the subtle interplay between past and present, desire and fantasy, self and other.

Lanterns and candles symbolically light the way for the ones that have passed, while also illuminating the unknown to be seen. A bronze ghost claw clutches a dripping candle on a melting bronze staircase, suggesting a delicate tension between worlds. Another claw digs its talons into a rosewood table, referencing a lustful and life-changing encounter with a ghost. A giant glass peach, traditionally symbolising immortality, swells with an intensity of emotions. Oversized silk teardrops convey a sense of longing through cartoon

aesthetics. A fox tail suspended by a chain sheds glass teardrops towards a porcelain ring on the floor, like a portal into another realm. Bleach paintings on deconstructed cotton bed sheets feature ghostly calligraphic characters drawn from classical Chinese literature, erotic poetry, and love letters.

For this project, award-winning author Tom Cho was commissioned to write a piece of creative fiction as a looking glass into the exhibition. “The Whole Cannot be Understood Without Reference to its Holes” 《無缺亦無圓 》is the story of a young scholar who makes love to an ink spirit that springs forth from his imagination, and reflects the theme of art making as an intimate encounter with the self. From Pu Songling’s studio to Cho's writing space and my own artist's studio to the IAC gallery, this exhibition is a collaboration between artists and writers that unfolds through visual and literary mediums, connecting us across time and place.

About the Artist

Owen Leong is a multidisciplinary visual artist exploring counternarratives of queer world-making. His work navigates the body as a site of individual experience and a product of social and cultural forces. He uses personal mythologies and kink aesthetics to explore power, control, and care, to reframe and reimagine identities and intimacies. His work centres queer pleasure as an act of political agency and healing. At the heart of Leong’s practice is a belief in the power of art to transform the way we see ourselves and others.

Leong has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally including the Art Gallery of New South Wales; Art Gallery of South Australia; Queensland Art Gallery; Newcastle Art Gallery; Monash Gallery of Art; 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art; Singapore Art Museum; Today Art Museum, Beijing; Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai; OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, Shenzhen; and the National Museum of Poznan, Poland.

In 2024, Leong received The Chey Fellowship to present this current exhibition, a major solo show at the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts & Culture at Western Sydney University. In 2017, Leong was a finalist in the Ramsay Art Prize, Australia's premiere prize for young contemporary artists. In 2016, Leong received the MAMA National Photography Prize, and in 2015, he won the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award.

Leong has been awarded numerous grants from Creative Australia, Create NSW, Ian Potter Cultural Trust, and Asialink. He is currently undertaking a two-year studio residency at Parramatta Artists' Studios. He has also held artist residencies at Artspace, Sydney; Centre for Contemporary Chinese Art, Manchester; Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; Tokyo Wonder Site, Japan; Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai; and Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong.

His work is held in the public collections of Creative Australia, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, Detached Cultural Organisation, Gold Coast City Gallery, Murray Art Museum Albury, Newcastle Art Gallery, University of Salford Art Collection UK, and private collections in Australia and internationally.

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture

澳華藝術文化研究院

Exhibition production: Jing Han
Text editing: Sallie Beaumont
Catalogue design: Yanni Liu
Launch coordinator: Lindsay Liu

All artworks copyright © Owen Leong, 2024

This project is supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW, a City of Parramatta Creative Grant, and The Chey Fellowship administered by the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture at Western Sydney University.

PARRAMATTA ARTISTS STUDIOS

NSW GOVERNMENT

Penfolds