

'Remembering in Art': Kristina Chan in Conversation

Award-winning photographer and printmaker **Kristina Chan**'s evocative photo-collages and large-scale, multi-part installations often explore the correlation between architecture and sculptural landscapes. Evident in her work is a particular interest in photographing derelict or disused spaces, and the intersection between their former use as a place of gathering or communion, whether a former church, community hall, or theatre, for instance, and a fall into decline, disrepair or foreclosure.

Chan works between traditional printmaking processes and alternative photography to create large-scale public installations focusing on local histories and sense of place. She is equally interested in delving into the past to excavate the lesser explored history of a site, its hidden stories and the memories she uncovers of human interaction and their commemoration of significant historical events in the life of its former community. Chan likens this process to the piecing together of a puzzle, aiming to uncover a fuller picture, although at times she admits that there is always something that remains 'out of the frame' and that no matter how we try, we cannot pull the whole world into focus.

In some respects this sense of a puzzle reflects Chan's own exploration of how memory affects not only the way we look at a work of art but the very fundamental question as to why it has been made, and is one that often emerges out of memories of the past and how such memories impact upon the present. The artist grew up in Vancouver, Canada, and her father was an emigré there from Hong Kong. She has since lived and worked between various countries, cities and places – from Paris to South Africa, from Scotland to London – so the notion of 'home' or a nostalgia for a sense of place and belonging is, for Chan, one of being in a constant state of flux.

This conversation between **Kristina Chan** and **Pamela Kember** took place following the 'Lucid Dreams' exhibition at Beers London in 2020, which showed work produced in collaboration with the artist Itamar Freed. *Third Text* publishes it here in memoriam for Pamela Kember, who sadly passed away in September 2021 before seeing its final publication.

Pamela Kember: You have spoken previously about the fact that you are drawn to the metaphorical concept of place through your photographs and that your work is ‘narrative based, inspired by lost and minor histories of forgotten sites’. Could you expand on this?

Kristina Chan: I tell stories. Whenever someone asks me about my practice, that is how I begin. It is the inspiration and end goal and everything in-between. For me, this is what art is: a story told, a life shared and a connection made. All of my works share this thread. They investigate places, exploring remote and local histories. By that I mean stories about remote places or such pointedly specific events that they are rarely known beyond their region, town or place. I find there is a significance here, in this zooming in. There is almost always a wider significance that can be found within the layers of research, interviews and personal narratives.

PK: Speaking of stories, your own transcultural background is a fascinating one – as an Asian Canadian, yet with your feet firmly in Scotland for a time and now in London. I wonder if your work mediates encounters between issues of nationhood, or does it engage with the socio-politics of your own identity in any way?

KC: There is an interesting crossover here. We inherit stories like we do identities. And it leaves us curious. My family’s story is not an uncommon one. There was war and occupation, emigration and reinvention. My background is a varied one, with family from Hong Kong, the UK, France and Poland. Maybe that is why my story has been no less stationary. I have since lived, studied and worked in Paris, New York, South Africa, and most recently the UK, where I have been based the longest, for over six years now.

Maybe that is why I struggle with this idea of national identity. We are so much more than what is on our passports. And I think there is always hardship in starting over, in a new place amongst new people and cultures. That is not to say it isn’t thrilling; it is. But it is always new and different, intoxicating and isolating all at once. I prefer to think of it in terms of feeling at home instead. Where do I feel the most comfortable, connected and expressive? Canada is home. London and Edinburgh are equally my home. One is a childhood home; in it lives all the magic, myths and idealisation that only innocence can hold. The others are homes seen through different eyes, curious and learning eyes. That is the interesting thing about moving away. Sights stop being mundane; there are always comparisons against all you think you know and the thrill of realising just how little that is.

PK: I have heard you talk about your long-term interest in the correlation between architecture and sculptural landscapes – particularly those between derelict and disused spaces. Was there a particular encounter or project that drew you to seeing the relationship between the two?

KC: For me, they have become interchangeable. It has become more a question of consequence, in seeing how we affect the world we live in. This can be industrial or environmental. In fact, they tend to be both. But the scale is different. Landscapes provide us with the perspective of geological time, while disused spaces allow us to look more anthropologically. These buildings are recognisable. We understand their purpose and era, as well as their obsolescence. For both, the factor is Time, and that, of course, is also exactly where they differ.



Kristina Chan, *Centre Stage*, from the triptych *Stage Right*, 2017, lithography and monoprint, 135 x 245 cm, courtesy of the artist

PK: Your 2018 project, *Standing Stones*, marked the first Norwegian Seamen's Church established outside of Norway, in Leith, in Edinburgh, in 1865. Designed by Johan Schrøder of Copenhagen and the Scottish architect James Simpson, the church served the Scandinavian seafaring community surrounding the historic Leith docklands. Today, it is home to Leith School of Art. How did this collaboration come about and how personal was this to you?

KC: The Leith School of Art is very dear to me. After graduating from the MA programme at the Royal College of Art in 2016, I was invited to be part of their inaugural Graduate Resident programme, which gave dedicated studio spaces to recent graduates as well as a career development course and mentorship. The year there was one of the most welcoming I had ever experienced. The people and the ethos reminded me so much of home. There is such a rich culture of storytelling there as well. Whilst there, I learnt all about the history of the church that the school operates out of, and how they wanted to preserve that history and commemorate it. On multiple occasions, people would pass by and share stories about how their grandparents

visited the church, showing us pictures. There has been a long history between Norway and Scotland. In 2018, I was part of an exhibition at the Oseana Kunst og Kultursenter in Osøryo, Norway, organised by Leith School of Art, Helping Hand Trust (Norway) and the Hordeland Cultural Council (Norway), celebrating this.

It was here that I was approached to make a commemorative sculpture for the upcoming 150th anniversary of the church and the 30th anniversary of the School of Art. For the project itself, I wanted to incorporate the stories of the people who had used the church, engraving images from archival photos and inlaying them into the sculpture. They were made in the shape of traditional Norwegian fishscale tiles, while the overall sculpture is made to resemble Scottish standing stones, combining the stories and multiculturalism inherent to the place.

PK: In 2017 you undertook a year-long artist residency at the Florence Trust, located in a former church in Highbury, London, now given over to artists as studios. The following year, you began a collaborative project with the East London Printmakers entitled *Carriage*, in which you explored the subject of a train wreck that happened in the Canadian Pacific Northwest. Can you explain why this particular project appealed to you in terms of its narrative and historical significance, and how this project manifested itself in the space?

KC: The work was printed at East London Printmakers, as part of a keyholder's residency at the end of 2017. It was printed directly onto wood and later painted and engraved in my studio at the Florence Trust. I worked on this for a year, inside those eerie stone walls with the fading filigree that scaled the columns like ivy, with stained glass flooding the studio walls in the afternoon. I am often asked about why I chose to explore this wreck here in London. But it was this distance itself that added to the work. The wreck itself was imbued with traces. It had many iterations and incarnations, this much was clear. But it was also a metaphor. I called the work *Carriage*, because it is defined as a means of conveyance: a conveying of people from place to place, geographically and internally. We become transported in time when we encounter the train wreck. There are two histories at play: the first is how the wreck happened, what caused its derailment, while the other is everything that has happened since, how the wreck has lived many lives and been reincarnated as a bike park, an urbex (urban exploration) hot spot for visiting tourists, a graffiti playground. These carriages have been transformed, occupied, lived in and walked past. They are a monument to a time long passed, ever in transition between their obsolescence and refurbishment. I was struck by how sites can vibrate between these iterations of themselves, how forgotten moments resurface in the presence and we find curiosity in them. There was in itself a palimpsest of reused and altered histories. It evoked questions of sustainability, technology and industry. It made me reflect on our exponential pace of life and how time and history has shortened as a result.

And at the Florence Trust, I would print and carve and paint them into yet another iteration. Here, they would resonate at a different frequency. A different kind of resilience and reverie, in a space that similarly demanded it; abandoned, left, rediscovered and lived in once again. I enjoyed the strange familiarity I found in these two opposing spaces.



Kristina Chan, *Shelter*, 2018, engraved painting on birch, 150 x 210 cm, courtesy of the artist, photo by Oliver Holms

PK: Another of your collaborative projects was with the playwright, Alissa Anne Jeun Yi, entitled ‘Buzz From the Bush’ (2019), which celebrated Shepherd’s Bush and the local area. You created a series of public installations with QR barcodes located throughout Shepherd’s Bush to engage audiences in the area. How did the project evolve?

KC: The project was commissioned by Elephant West and the Bush Theatre. It’s a funny story actually. We were invited one evening to Elephant West; five artists and five playwrights were instructed to find a seat and describe their ideas and practice in a format very similar to ‘speed dating’, after which we were told there was an open commission for interactive works that engaged the community and they wanted to hear proposals from those of us who ‘matched’ creatively. Alissa and I wanted an interactive work that got us physically exploring the area itself. We selected five areas to focus on: Shepherd’s Bush Market, Frestonia, Dimco Buildings, the Bush Theatre and Elephant West. Our aim was to create a fun, accessible, interactive and engaging activity that was public facing, highlighting the rich community it was inspired by. It was received very well by the

community, expanding into partnerships and satellite events at the Frestonian Gallery and the Hammersmith and Fulham Arts Festival.

It was a very personal and exploratory project. We had to speak with countless people, seek permissions and deep dive into many public and private archives. I can imagine a lot of access issues if we were attempting to undertake the project now. However, in terms of its presentation, the outdoor walking tour would be an ideal presentation during the pandemic lockdowns. It is interesting to imagine how severely the landscape of presentation itself has shifted in this last year.

PK: Speaking of lockdowns, you have recently acquired a new studio space in the now converted Lambeth County Court in Kennington. What do you feel you have gained from having a separate space from life in the (domestic) interior, especially these long periods of isolation during the pandemic?

KC: It has made all the difference, having somewhere to go. The building itself gives me a lot of inspiration. It is an amazing space. The courtrooms remain intact and we exist around it. But studios are different for printmakers. They don't uphold this singular solitary space stereotype that we have of them. They are communal and collaborative. In the time between exposing, inking and printing, there is discussion and curiosity. I need this. I think it is because my practice so often requires long periods of remote research. There is an isolation in that. But it is different from that in the studio. And different again from the isolation of lockdown. Isolation in the wild is about being taken in by the world. The studio is your internal world expressed outward. Lockdown was something else entirely. But it was reflective, nonetheless. This pandemic has been a difficult and yet undeniably creative time for me. It has been a time of rerouting. There have been amazing initiatives coming from it, and I have found myself rethinking growing my practice in directions I would never have thought of before this.

PK: I have heard you say before that this period has also been a time of reflection: 'beginning with the encounter: the discovery of the work and its documentation'. Can you elaborate on how important research, documentation and more recently artists' books are to your practice?

KC: Research, documentation and personal narrative have always been the pillars of my work. It is an attempt to build a sense of place – or, rather, paint a portrait of a place, very much from the perspective of an outsider. I am interested in coming into a story out of context. It's more realistic. Like opening a book midway through, we find ourselves in the middle of things, *in medias res*, stepping into other people's stories on a daily basis. And in doing so, we learn about each other and ourselves. Each series of work represents a different place and time. With that comes their stories; stories that weave together academic research and personal experience until it becomes difficult to tell which is which. This ambiguity is important. It is saying that this is not solely my

experience. Nor is it one confined to its own time and place. It is real. It is a metaphor. It has been encountered and lived and left and rediscovered again. It is timeless.

Perhaps this is why I am drawn to the book format. It is another way to tell the story. Books have a resuscitative quality. Like these places, they live on, outlast us. The shelves are filled with stories we can enter, waiting to transport us. And they come alive, these worlds: something similar happens *in situ*. It is a beautiful correlation.

PK: What is it about printmaking, in particular photographic printmaking, that has attracted you to both mediums since the beginning of your artistic career – or even before?

KC: There is a fluctuation between the two processes I enjoy. They fluctuate in time and tradition, chemistry and immediacy. Time is a factor here. As it is with most things. There is a stillness to my work; it is in limbo. Sometimes, I feel as if it is just out of reach. At other times, perhaps it is more a question of picturing ‘place’. I find myself feeling as if it is calling me in, not exclusively in a photographic sense but in an experiential one. We touched on it earlier. But there will always be this question of belonging to factor in. Where is home? Or where does one feel at home? This is an integral aspect of my work. The question then of how to use print to elicit this becomes really important. It would not have the same effect if it were just a digital photograph. You have to play with it. It has to become less of a fact and more of a dream. The medium can achieve this. Working within photographic printmaking allows more manipulation of the medium, ink and application. It becomes evocative: something between gesture and process. It becomes felt.

In this sense, my work is always looking at society and culture. Politics and economy become inescapable. But it is subtle, and it is also personal. I can only comment on my own comparisons and insights. There is a responsibility in this, and an acknowledgement that needs to take place internally. I have worked in a lot of politically charged places and projects and this is something I tackle frequently. There is a humility to it. And an ownership in knowing you may never have all the information.

PK: ‘Lucid Dreams’, the title of your exhibition in the summer of 2020 at Beers London, was held jointly with the New York and London-based artist, Itamar Freed. Tell us more about the meaning behind the title and what significance such a phenomena has for this latest body of work and for you more specifically.

KC: ‘Lucid Dreams’ has been a real passion of mine. Itamar and I have been working together for a few years now and this was by far the largest body of work we have created together. Like myself, Itamar has lived abroad and travelled all his life, and his work reflects this. We would often speak about memory and place – what we take with us and what we leave behind.

The series was a way to turn these discussions towards the visual. ‘Lucid Dreams’ is our story: how these places have shaped us and how we in turn have impacted them. Can you ever occupy space without altering it? And, when you leave, do you take part of that with you? How is the past idealised and compartmentalised, and how, given enough time, does it begin to merge together? These works look at that. They draw on elements from places we have both lived and visited, that have left an impression on us, that we carry with us. Yet, like all places we leave behind, it becomes romanticised, fading and blending from one memory into the next until reality becomes fantasy. Maybe that’s why we titled it ‘Lucid Dreams’, because, as with a lucid dream, we control the narrative.



Kristina Chan and Itamar Freed, *Dream in Blue*, 2019, cyanotype, each 80 x 60 cm, courtesy of the artists and Beers London, photo by Damian Griffiths

PK: In the accompanying catalogue for the exhibition it states that ‘...the photographs search for vanishing notions of realness in the natural world, influenced by post-impressionism, Japanese prints and contemporary photography, with each digital image printed on Japanese paper’. How important was this meshing and melding of technology and traditional mediums to your working process?

KC: As a printmaker and photographer, I am constantly asking myself about this. At times, I think of it as working backwards, in time and process. There is something fantastical in what cannot be placed. This is important. Images have never been more accessible. We can see images of places we have never been to, so much so that they begin to feel familiar. We mistake this familiarity for fact, and it strips us of experience. Obscuring this combats it, in the same way a metaphor would. Shifting between mediums allows for this. So often is tradition and technology

presented as mutually exclusive, but I am not sure this is the case. They are tools, like any paint-brush, nib or pen.

And in many ways, we are drawing a place from memory. It is subjective, much more so than a digital image would suggest, and so we must adapt accordingly. This is where the vanishing point comes in: we use print and paper to strip this assumption, to decontextualise 'place', and in doing so prioritising experience over geography. This is not just our story, it is far more universal than that, and we recognise this.

PK: I am drawn to your earlier comment about memory and place, what we take with us and what traces we leave behind. The architectural theorist and scholar in Japanese, Günter Nitschke, speaks to the multifarious uses of the term, *ma* 間(ま-*ma*) – 'space' – that he defines as the product of lived-space and lived-time. Are such notions important to you?

KC: I love that notion of lived-space and lived-time. Certainly, there is a difference between them. And I think of photography representing this. So often we associate photography with capturing or freezing time. But something else happens and I am not sure if I will be able to articulate it here. Perhaps instead of trying to do that, I will share two works that come to mind. The first is by the photographer Michael Weseley. From 2001–2003, he created a camera capable of taking three-year-long exposures. Using this, he documented the deconstruction and renovation of MoMA in New York in his project titled *Open Shutter*. This image not only captured the stages of the building works on a single image, but the sun as it rose and fell throughout the days, the streaks of car lights through daily traffic. It was lived-time. Lived. Past tense. It held a ghostly quality. Oddly, it has always reminded me of Daguerre's *Boulevard du Temple* (1838), where the long exposure time of early photography erased us; erased us but not our impact: lived-space.

And we see the same affect unfold, albeit from opposite ends of the spectrum. The question of tradition and technology becomes void and you are left with this same sense of fluctuating space. We live in this impasse, this fluctuation. It is often hypocritical: beautiful and eerie, unsettled and invigorating, real and fantastical. How could it be called anything else, but lived?

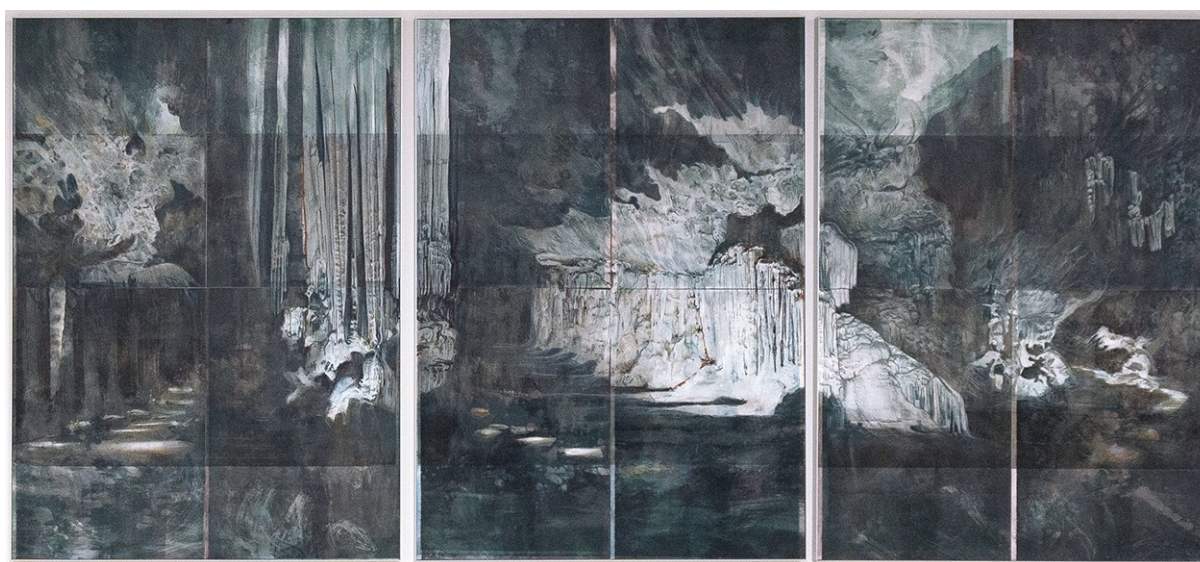
PK: Your response reminds me of the architect Daniel Libeskind's argument with regards to the lived experience. For him, an important part of any building is memory, which is why he suggests that you have to make an effort to listen to the earth and 'voices of the site'. As you have previously spoken of the physical relief of your prints being a reminder of the site itself, that the work is somehow imbued with the memories, traces, textures, the substance of the interior, do you have a sense of the past living on in the present?

KC: I think these spaces hold a history that is felt much more immediately than can be expressed through words. This resonance can be expressed as a trace, a mark, a voice. It speaks to us. There

is a reason for the phrase. I think we hear it. This resonance with the past, our histories: in all our victories and fallacies. We romanticise the past. We fixate on it and it haunts us. How could a space do anything less? With all the people and voices that have passed through it. All the lives and moments it has collected through the years.

PK: I would like to end by reconnecting to your panoramic installation, *Between Our Seas*, inspired by a research trip you made in 2015 to the Cango Caves in South Africa. Consisting of a series of large-scale lithographs and monoprints, depicting centuries-old bedrock and caves with their extraordinary calcified stalagmites and stalactites, the work was shown in 2016 at the Royal College of Art's Sackler Building and the Anise Gallery, London, before travelling to Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 2017. You have stated that the piece is fundamentally about renewal, an intricate and interwoven portrait of a place, 'an amalgamation of stories, histories, memories, and experiences'. The accompanying artists' book you created specifically for the work acts as a synthesis of nature and experience, a firsthand account of a travelling outsider, observations and contemporary reiterations of an ancient land in the midst of its present cultural redefinition.

I wonder if this positioning of yourself as a peripatetic 'outsider', yet in some respects with an insider's view, is, in fact, an interweaving of the very fabric of your approach to the making of things. An approach which has allowed for a reimagining of various regimes to do with the printmaking or photographic process and continues to lead you towards new journeys and new discoveries?



Kristina Chan, from *Between Our Seas*, 2016, lithography drawing and monoprint, 135 x 100 cm each, courtesy of the artist

KC: I think that is exactly it, and a wonderful summation of my practice. A narrative that weaves and interlinks together. And in doing so, transforms itself again.

PK: That is what I find intriguing about your work, how it often deals with the notion of a trace or a mark that speaks to us across time and space. ‘Remembering in art’, the title I have given to our conversation here, is from one of the essayist and writer Siri Hustvedt’s texts on how she views art. For her, the experience of looking at a painting is inextricably linked to memory, and to an awareness that the gestures of the artist’s body remain a part of the work. Thank you, Kristina, for sharing your thoughts about your work and ideas.

Kristina Chan has exhibited internationally, most notably at the Louvre during the 5th Annual Exposure Award Black and White Collection; Offprint TATE at TATE Modern (2015, 2016, 2018); Royal Academy, London; Royal Academy of Art, Antwerp, during the 1st Edition of the KoMASK Master Printmaking Salon; Oseana Kunst og Kultursenter, Bergen 2018; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Bremen; Mindepartementet Museum of Art and Photography, Stockholm; Hellingkreuzer HOF Venna (all 2016), Litvak Contemporary Tel Aviv, Israel (2019); Beers London (2020); Photo LA (2020); Photo IS:RAEL (2020); Anise Gallery (2018, 2016); the Mall Galleries, London (2017); Royal Scottish Academy; Edinburgh (2019, 2018, 2019,2020); and Project 88 Mumbai (2016). Chan was part of the 2018 restoration team (Jason Hicklin, Edward Adlington and Kristina Chan) charged with the restoration and editioning of the nineteenth-century engraving plates of the original British Museum Catalogue, first published in February 1835. She is currently a research fellow and Intaglio tutor at City and Guilds of London Art Schools (Sept 2018–present) and worked as the Lithography Technician at the Royal College of Art London (October 2018–March 2020), and teaches Drawing Fundamentals at the Art Academy. Chan has work in the permanent archives of the V&A Museum, the Royal Collection, Clarence House, and the Ingram Collection.

Pamela Kember was an independent art historian, curator, and lecturer on contemporary art, including notions of transcultural and transnational identity, migration and belonging. She was a former Head of Arts at Asia House in London, and a former Director of the Board of the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong where she lived and taught at various universities from 1998 before returning to London in 2009. She published several essays and reviews in art journals such as *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art Monthly*, *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and *Third Text*, and curated a number of exhibitions focusing on artists of the Asian diaspora. She was the Advisory Editor for the *Benezit Dictionary of Asian Art* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Pamela will be very much missed by her family, friends and the wider art community.