

Visual artists are often inveterate travelers, in search of adventure, escape, excitement – and, of course, new source material. Paul Gauguin’s travels to Tahiti and his permanent move to the Marquesas Islands come quickly to mind, as do Georgia O’Keeffe’s visits and eventual relocation to New Mexico. But in more recent years a new cadre of traveling artists has developed, artists who rarely alight for long in any one place, but make art wherever they can along the way. It seems silly to identify them by their native countries; they are not really “Argentinean” or “Nigerian” or “Chinese,” but truly global artists.

The moniker suits Chantal Maltais Oei, who has long exemplified that kind of

wanderlust. In the 1980s, after graduating from high school, Oei – Québécoise by birth – traveled for five years in South America and Southeast Asia with little but a backpack. Later, after attending art school and marrying, she and her husband extensively toured Europe and Asia. Now the Oeis use Santa Fe, New Mexico and the island of Bali in Indonesia as base camps from which to launch further adventures.

On these trips, Oei gathers material for her artwork, figuratively and literally. She uses a camera to record her experiences, and finds and saves natural and manmade objects that capture her imagination. Though at the time she may not know what she will do with that ceramic bead or antique hair clasp – or how an image of the hem of a Balinese dancer’s skirt may prove useful – these small acquisitive and inquisitive acts mark the beginning of her artistic process. Much later, in the studio, Oei will revisit the places in her photographs, consider the known and unknown histories of the objets trouvés she has carried home, and begin to see what can, and perhaps must, be made of them.

Since Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque first began adding things to their paintings in the early 20th century, collage and its progeny, assemblage, have focused on the disruption of meanings. In Louise Nevelson’s wooden sculptures, for example, the identity of a chair leg or banister is subsumed by the larger piece; in such a collision of meanings, objects cease to be what they once were. Oei’s work represents not so much a collision as a marriage of meanings; her found objects and images seem to retain their former connotations and to gain alternate or additional meanings, individually and collectively.

Oei’s most recent body of work, addressed in this book, includes six series comprising three to eighteen objects each. They include photography, collage, painting, assemblage and encaustic – sometimes altogether in a single artwork – and ignore definitions typically associated with the individual mediums. These new works reference her previous series, but also demonstrate significant shifts in approach and concept. Her love of the natural world – apparent in the feathers, nests, bones, quills, coral, shells and bamboo she has used – is still evident, and her new work, like that of the past, is exuberant in color and ornament. But she has pared down the number of objects in each piece and focused more on surface than dimensionality, resulting in simpler, elegant works.

The ground for each of seven pieces in the series *I Dream Of...* is a photograph of a brilliant blue, partly clouded sky, and all but one of the pieces contain either white bird feathers or images of such feathers. The only further

ornamentation is stitching in red thread that penetrates the photographic paper, and the whole is embedded in wax. This sewing also previously appeared in Oei's work, but in the past the stitches represented a background patterning, a minor suggestion of content, while in *I Dream Of...* they have been elevated to convey more powerful metaphoric messages of hurt, healing and connectedness.

The eighteen works in *Weaving Through Life* constitute a natural progression of Oei's aesthetic, and are the centerpiece of this body of work. The ground of each piece is a photographic image of a traditional Indonesian woven textile, atop which is fixed a small wooden bowl – the ubiquitous bowl used for spices or as monks' begging bowls in much of Asia. In some artworks Oei has presented the bowl open, or concave, symbolizing the receptive and containment; in others, it is upside-down, or convex, resembling an idealized round breast. At the center of the bowls are attached a few small objects – beads, painted finials, salt shaker lids and the like – small treasures that speak of abundance and plenitude. In some cases, a hat pin has pierced these "nipples," invoking the balance of yang to very yin forms. Oei painted each bowl, applying gold or silver leaf to the surfaces, thereby reinforcing the feeling of preciousness. Thus, the works in *Weaving Through Life* are, in essence, religious icons sans visage, the suns and moons of ancient worship rituals. Oei emphasizes the metaphor of weaving on the sides of these works, where thin strips of the images of textiles dance together in graceful, rhythmic patterns. This treatment also points out the sculptural aspect of the boxes that are the bases for these pieces – the circle-in-square of the bowl on the box – and the overall symmetry she has faithfully employed throughout. This attention to symmetry, to balance, reflects a theme common to most Asian cultures and religions.

Religious references, direct and indirect, abound in this body of Oei's work, perhaps a natural outgrowth of her most recent travels in Asia, Indonesia and Mexico. The small series *Three Days in Morelia* – Morelia being a colonial city in Mexico – features collaged and painted images of Roman Catholic saints. *Thai Offerings* likewise combines imagery of incense burners, bowls of flowers and fruit. The *Grand Palace* includes collaged images of the historic Bangkok royal complex's architectural motifs, particularly the guardian chedi of the Wat Phra Keow Temple. To these collages Oei has added gold leaf and tiny golden ornaments, transforming the images into devotional objects. The final series in this book, *The Golden Buddha*, is a trio of collaged and painted images featuring three Buddha statues of Thailand. Devotees often adhere small rectangles of gold leaf to such statues; the free ends of the pieces flutter in the air, magically catching the light, and sometimes creating the sense that the icon is about to ascend. Fragments of photographic images of clouds of incense, fonts and flowers frame the Buddha images, evincing the great mysteries of life and activating in the viewer what Jung called the "religious function" – that deepest of inner beliefs that, regardless of time and culture, all humans share.

Oei's artwork represents a journal of her journeys, but it is more than the memory book most of us create from the fodder of a trip. Instead, she integrates and synthesizes fragments of meanings attached to her latest collection of images and objects, repurposing and assigning new values to them. She combines concepts from various countries and cultures, in the process venerating the peoples whose ideas and aesthetics she has borrowed. This syncretism gives birth in each work to a new, nonlinear history unique to the artist. All of Oei's works ultimately share a celebratory sensibility, the feeling that something good has happened here, something worth singing and laughing and dancing about. Hers are stories with happy endings.

Hollis Walker, 2008