

A Permanent State of Transcendence:

The familiar and the ineffable in the art of

Chantal Maltais Oei

Chantal Maltais Oei employs the tantalizing mediums of aquarel and ink on paper to create artworks that are characterized by the exquisite delicacy of the butterfly. Like the butterfly's wings, however, Maltais Oei's art is not simply charming. Each—the wing and the artwork—demonstrates the weight of its function and history that has evolved the quotidian struggle for growth into ever-changing transformation—a paradoxically permanent state of transcendence. Stitched, chiseled, and collaged, the artist's mixed-media drawings, paintings and sculptures anchor the oeuvre of this artist, allowing the viewer to bear witness to a process that reflects the marvel of life itself. Nestling within the sweet shadows of our memories, these objects, ranging in size from the monumental to the diminutive, grow into their own strength, coaxing substance from the ineffable.

For her solo exhibition *Sense of Infinity* in the fall of 2009 at the Longview Museum of Art in Texas, Maltais Oei presented bits and pieces from her international journeys, and most importantly, from her journeys to and from that deepest intangibility: selfhood. She has recently maintained home bases in Santa Fe, New Mexico; San Francisco, California; Bali, Indonesia; and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; she studied in Italy and her origins lie in Montreal, Canada. Layering collected visual memorabilia into assemblages that are truly personal, her work references the individual as both the archetypal seeker and as "everyman," humble citizen of the planet. Exploring Maltais Oei's art is as cozily intimate as poring over an old-fashioned, handmade book of keepsakes; nonetheless the encounter sustains the rigors of the study of global social history. More than simple mementos of a life well lived, however, the artist purposefully generates souvenirs in order to "remember" another dimension of awareness, a beyondness that comes from the stuff of dreams and the subconscious. Somehow, there is always a sense of familiarity to the artworks, whether they are made from photographs taken by Maltais Oei or sculpted out of Balinese driftwood. A *milagro* from Hispanic Catholicism is as likely to show up in her work as the image of a *mudra*, an amalgam of Hindu and Buddhist culture and beliefs. The peeling impasto of an ancient Italian fresco is suggested through the medium of encaustic layered over found imagery. History and memory conflate in Maltais Oei's work into an empathic insight that transcends the linearity of time and dimension. The art contains a circular wholeness within itself, clay brought to life through the breath of its creator's intention.

As arts journalist Hollis Walker wrote in her essay about the artist (*Chantal Maltais Oei: Acquisitive/Inquisitive*, Artwork International, 2008), Maltais Oei "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 notion of veneration is intrinsic to Maltais Oei's art, deeply rooted as it is in the essential feminine of our shared Mother Earth, revered by all humanity—despite evidence to the contrary in today's world events. The artist brings that female fecundity and grace to bear in her work, using its transformative power to re-present the vitality of ritualized beauty found in every civilization across the ages.

At the same time that Maltais Oei's art bears witness to the wealth of culture wherever it is sought and found, her work testifies with the fervor of an acolyte to the holiness of nature. A tiny hummingbird's nest rests within a sculpted form, protected and protector. Real butterfly wings glimmer, jewel-like, in the setting of a golden painting. Her work sings a hymn of praise to the rhythms and splendors of nature, a nature in which we are the grateful recipients of an unconditional munificence. Maltais Oei neither elevates nature nor does she condemn mankind; compassion comprises her stance. "See the magnificence all around us," her art requests of us. "Don't let it pass you by without experiencing the ecstasy of life itself." This joyful appeal calls out from overlooked nooks and nests as well as in grand cathedrals, in the manmade as well as the natural world.

The exhibition at Longview was arranged into groupings of works built upon certain themes of place and process. The series "A Sense of Infinity" on the title wall consisted of 12 box-like paintings on board. Mostly Mexican imagery from photographs taken by the artist, some of these works gleam with the ethereal ecstasy of Bernini's *Teresa*, highly baroque in sensibility. Maltais Oei says that she "truly loves color," and this is quite evident here, as it is throughout the show. Especially in this series, however, do the palette and theatricality of the 17th and 18th centuries of Europe as it affected New World devotional art and architecture shine through Maltais Oei's constructions, as if she had somehow removed portions of the walls of crumbling cathedrals and remade them into her own version of heaven on earth.

Around a corner, the sculptural *Angel* stood guard. Carved from mahogany, its wings are a sweeping, delicate net of wood; the pillar is topped by a whirl of branches. Out of the heart of the columnar piece emerges a swirling, trunk-like proboscis of elephantine wisdom: On the dual wings of love is borne the oneness of union. On the walls behind *Angel* hung "Nature," a series of square, wooden wall sculptures. In *Colorado*, a multi-media vertically shaped piece, an egg, bone white, rests in the crook of a branch upon a many-hued pedestal. The fragility of the egg atop its sturdy plinth makes for a satisfying tug-and-release system of tension and repose.

Another standout series in the Texas exhibition was titled "Searching for Balance," an expression of the dualism of life on Earth—and our very human efforts to achieve a kind of

mystical unity—as inspired by the religious celebration of the lunar-based Balinese New Year, called *Galungan Kuningan*, in which whip-like offerings of leaves and bamboo arc across the streets of the villages. Maltais Oei's visual translation articulates eight box-shaped structures made of carved wood and paper. Ropey lanyards project out of the boxes, hung with ornamental amulets. Some of these multi-media works conjure the sumptuousness of exotic hand-dyed fabrics in tropical colors and motifs, while others clearly evoke Gothic chapels in the Western world—in either case, the numinous qualities of spiritual devotion are awakened in the viewer. One of the mediums the artist employs can rightly be said to include light itself: The whips seem to soar from the boxes and form mysterious shadows next to the wall pieces themselves. Inscrutability, ritual, and luminosity all reside within these physically small pieces.

As in "Searching for Balance," Maltais Oei found inspiration from ritualized human movement in the sculpture *The Dancer at the Lotus Palace*. A large Asian burl partially layered with a decoupage of colorful shredded images woven together to create a rich, linear patterning, *Lotus Palace* connotes the dualism of good and evil as it is danced in all Balinese performances. The sturdy wood from which it is carved is naturally handsome, while its decoration suggests scarification, even vanity. The burl reposes, incapable of movement on its own; our vision gives it animation, the power of flight.

It will come as no surprise to learn that Maltais Oei has long used the subject of the nest in her work. The nest as nexus for an art centered in a nurturing Divine and our relationships with our own fragile yet indomitable divinity seems a natural object of expression. Nests of aquarel or mixed media on rice paper, clay, and linen composed a large part of *A Sense of Infinity*. Delicate-seeming eggs were on display in a number of the sculptures presented in the exhibition. It would follow, then, that notions of guardianship and shelter be under profound consideration as well; after all, one's own identity exists upon the constantly shifting sands of perception. Maltais Oei protects her creations as fiercely and tenderly as a mother would her young, offering a "Guardians" series of four blue and black figural drawings of ink and collage on paper, accompanied by several feathered and spiny constructions that serve as angelic knights in armor. One, from the "Feather Blues" boxes, is a swirl in shades of blue with spotted, gray and white feathers and porcupine quills jutting protectively from its defenseless, anemone-like center. A particular striking piece, *L'attente*, all in white, consists of a porcelain bowl containing a real bird's nest surrounded by feathers from seraphic wings. The sculpture's lissome musculature suggests a gravity-defying choreography that springs from within.

Finally, the "Egg Bearers" series served as an installation work in the exhibition. Totemic figures hung from above against multi-media paintings, in blues and whites, of a place the artist describes as "between the sky and the sea." The hanging figures are equally feline and avian; each bears only one wing—denied the ability to fly, their sacred responsibility is to stay behind, floating, protecting, witnessing. These creatures, the egg bearers, were

flanked by columnar sculptures that suggested the ruins of Atlantis; like the Mayan *ruinas* at Palenque, for example, there is a sense of vast knowledge barely remembered in the collective unconscious, an ageless wisdom that must not be lost. The realization of our deepest truth will come, says Maltais Oei, with “a return to essentials: We have to look after each other.”

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