

Gerard Choy *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls*

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Gerard Choy

One Ton of Won Ton Bowls

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A homonym is a word that sounds the same as another, but has a different meaning. For native English speakers, homonyms are a speller's irritant, but for native Mandarin speakers, homonyms are a source of humour. Gerard Choy's sculptural installation *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls*, at Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, is both a literal and a metaphorical homonym. It is a play on words and meaning between cultures — an exploration of opposites. The work consists of 279 cast won ton "bowls," constituting the one-ton of concrete, configured into an evenly spaced ten-row grid on the floor. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is initially struck by both the simplicity and the beauty of the installation. The verbal pun quickly makes literal sense, but the subtleties of the work's other possible meanings require more consideration. Disguised within the art historical references of Conceptual Minimalism are issues of identity, cultural appropriation, and commodification.

The phenomenological aspects of *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls* reference essential elements of Conceptual Minimalism and Op Art: simple forms, industrial materials, grids, multiplicity, and optical illusion; but each element is subverted. The bowl/object is a simplified, non-functional, solid concrete form, as Judd suggests, but the scale is human and the adornment subtle, yet evident in the solid blue surface treatment. Further, the grid's layout hints more at a military formation than an industrial complex; also, the large number of objects presented rejects Minimalism's traditional single-digit multiples. And the singular ultramarine blue colour of the objects denies any optical illusion, except for the fact that the objects seem to both hover in space and sink into the ground. This work is

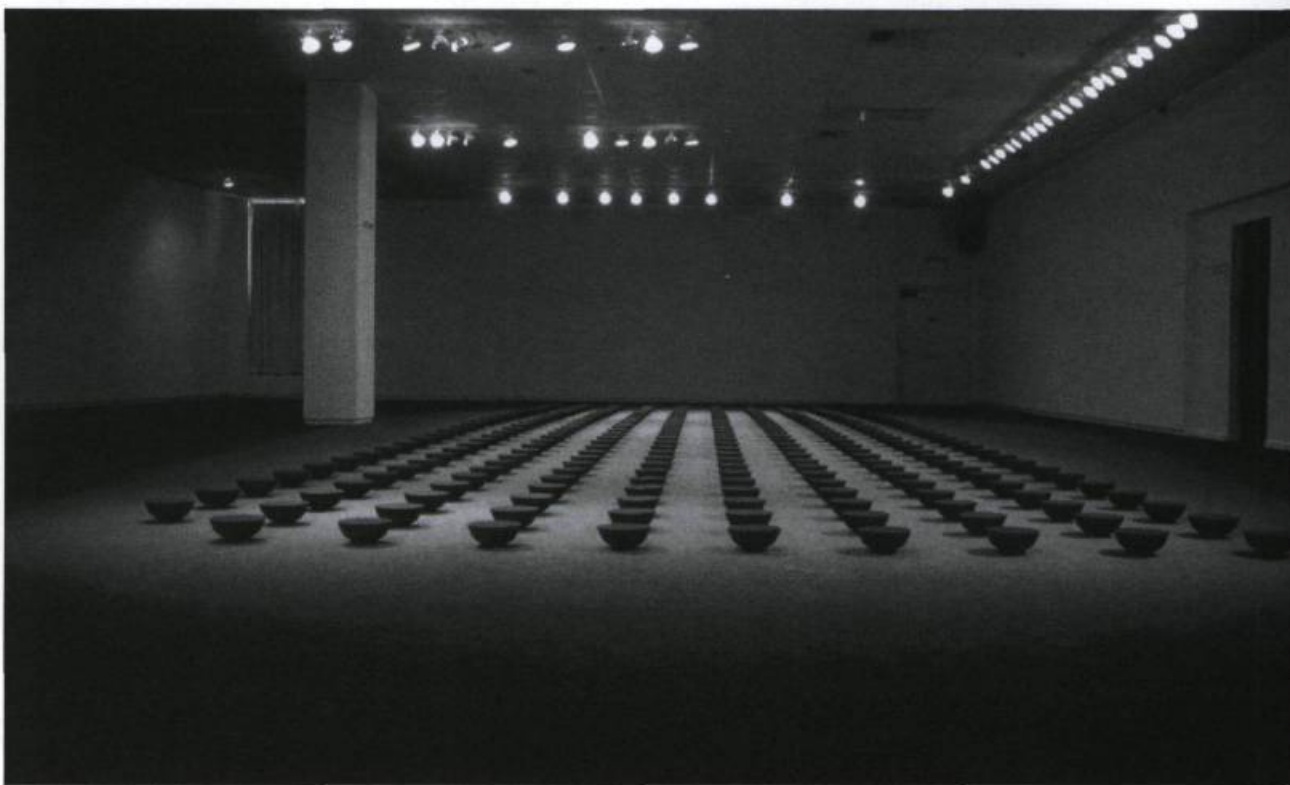
homage to, not slavish repetition of a Minimalist agenda.

Originally from Singapore, Choy's history straddles two distinct cultures: Colonial British and Asian; brought up speaking English, he doesn't speak Malay or any of China's dialects. He affectionately refers to won ton as comfort food, but admits that he never ate won ton from this type of bowl until his arrival in Canada. Familiar to Canadians from its role as the

serving bowl, rather than the singular handcrafted one, acknowledges its role as a comprehensible cultural identity and reflects its analogous representation of the Asian Diaspora.

The choice, also, seems to comment on art's displacement from the heroic to the banal, and its similar position as a commodity. Choy effectively draws this parallel with commodification when he mimics the consumer transaction of won

China still exports these bowls. For Choy, there is minimal personal connection to the icon. Yet in *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls*, he subversively appropriates this cultural identification. Is the intent to confront the viewer's assumptions about cultural identity, or is it an acknowledgement of his own exported existence? Depending on where the work is exhibited, it may be read as exotic Conceptualism or as banal Pop art — or, if viewed in



ubiquitous serving dish in Asian restaurants, the blue and white bowl becomes identified as an Asian cultural icon. Choy traced the lineage of the original fish serving-dish to the Sung-Yuan dynasty's hand-made ceramic ware in the early 13th century. Over the centuries, the traditional form and the pattern of blue fish on a white ground degenerated, until the mass production and export trade of the 19th century demanded the most expedient simplicity and cost-efficient quality. The solid blue colour of Choy's objects is the final devolution of the original pattern. His decision to make the mass-produced proletarian version of the

ton take-out in the production of his objects. Before they were made, Choy took requests from friends and strangers to fill an order for one ton of won ton. Each object was hand-delivered with a "bill" for \$8, which is about the cost of a "real" bowl of won ton. For a modest price, customers received an art object — one that doubled as a souvenir of their participation in the art-making process. In a very subtle manner, *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls* questions both the luxury of art and the viewer's relationship with it. Oddly, there is no mention of the performance component in the final exhibition.

Singapore, as subversive rebellion. Such a discrepancy hints at the importance of an artist's location in grasping the parameters of identity and artistic intent.

As his first solo exhibition since graduating from NSCAD, *One Ton of Won Ton Bowls* is an ambitious undertaking. Choy has opened the box to some difficult issues and approached them with thoughtful astuteness. He has managed to meld the simplicity of Minimalism and the complexity of identity into a visually stunning installation. ←

Gerard Choy,
One Ton of Won Ton Bowls
Saint Mary's University Art Gallery
January 10 – February 16, 2003

GERARD CHOY,
One Ton of Won Ton Bowls, 2003.
Photo: Aaron Schmidt.