Espace Sculpture

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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 Disguised within the art historical references of Conceptual Minimalism are issues of identity, cultural appropriation, and commodification.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. The bowl/object is a 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 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.

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 Singapore, as subversive rebellion.

Such a discrepancy hints at the importance of an artist’s location in grappling 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.