

## Mitchell F. Chan: *Traditional Strategies in Building*

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# MITCHELL F. CHAN

## TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES IN BUILDING

By John K. Grande

*The Burden of Sisyphus*, 2009  
Mixed media  
Courtesy Studio F-Minus



FOR SOME DECADES, CRITICS HAVE WARNED OF THE DANGER OF SCIENCE INVADING THE SPHERE OF ART, REPLACING THE HUMAN AND CREATIVE WITH MOTIVES OF PURE PRODUCTION. MITCHELL F. CHAN IS AN EMERGING ARTIST WHOSE LATEST ARTWORKS TRULY EXPERIMENT WITH MATERIALS, WITH CONCEPTS OF PRESENTATION, AND THE LANGUAGE OF ART. HE HAS EVOLVED THE LANGUAGE AND AESTHETIC OF HIS ART USING VERY UP-TO-DATE CONCEPTS AND MATERIALS, BUT INSTEAD OF INNOVATION AND SCIENCE STOMPING OUT THE ART, CHAN AND BRAD HINDSON (CHAN COLLABORATED WITH HINDSON ON THESE NEW WORKS) RECALL PAUL ELUARD'S UNIVERSAL INSIGHT — "THE WORLD IS ON THE TABLE OF METAMORPHOSES".

Using simple tools — light, a high-tech titanium and nickel alloy called Nitinol, and other elements, Chan and Hindson atomize and syncretize what are seemingly static elements. Nitinol is a material more likely used by NASA in outer space than by artists. Referred to as "memory metal", Nitinol's shape memory forms a crystal structure that becomes super-elastic with changing temperatures. Nitinol is able to withstand some deformation when a load is applied and to return to its original shape when the load is removed. What grabs one is the delusion/illusion paradox so central to the game these artists play. The viewer actually activates motion sensors and changes the look of the art. The audience brings the meaning to the work of art . . .

*Traditional Strategies in Building* is a show that critiques the concept-driven project that is contemporary architecture. Mitchell F. Chan, who graduated from the Carleton School of Architecture in 2005, is, like Melvin Charney, an architect who has turned to art. Chan co-opts the representational tools used by architects to create what look like extremely abstract yet tendentious, precarious constructions. The method is largely "structural" but equally critiques the standardized methods of structural product building assemblage of our era. Thin lines of cord project out from central "structures" that look as abstract as a Barnett Newman painting — all

this on a wood. A recent piece, *Narrow Entrance To The Tabernacle* (2009) has dark black elastic lines and the actuator wire is perpendicular, almost like a crucifix. The symmetry comes apart as the linear metal shapes shift. Chan's comment: "I think of it as a literally-animated Voice of Fire or a Mark Rothko piece." The conceptual bias in Chan's assembled wall works are so chance-like, they are like structures that have grown of their own volition out of a machine model — as if the ghost in the machine made them. This is a dream-like, hallucinatory vision of modern architecture and the shadow forms that light effects make it seem real.

An earlier Mitchell F. Chan and Brad Hindson collaboration that stole the show at Toronto's annual Nuit Blanche was called *A Dream of Pastures*. Visitors could ride a stationary bike to energize a series of set up lights and mechanisms. What resulted from all this exercise was an enormous shadow image of yourself riding on the exterior wall at the Art Gallery of Ontario. With projectors, a galloping horse image replaces that of the bike you are riding. As art, this recalls earlier arto-mechanical innovators such as Pierre Granche, Alan Storey and even William Kentridge, Chan's work was truly original in conception, so much so it won public and critical praise, (and the Ontario Art Council's Access and Career Development grant).

At Engine Gallery, works that look like a tangled mess of wire activate as you approach them and a light goes on. The light gets steadily brighter, adjusts its focus . . . What emerges is a shadow image of a tragic Greek mythological figure, Chan's allusion to classical mythology and our unconscious — the way we build constructs and archetypes of experience, part of collective unconscious. *The Burden of Sisyphus* (2009) has a weightless looking round form, a shadow image of Sisyphus struggling up a mountain . . . Cause and effect seems reversed here, for the boulder seems visually to define Sisyphus. The futility of Sisyphus' efforts seem illusionary by the artificial way the boulder and figure images are presented. By activating these shadow images, Chan's constructions of Sisyphus, Prometheus, and Euridyce, reveal how human ancient tragedy is. Tragedy happens for a "reason", and not by chance. Chan's work is emergent, proto-active, truly innovative art.

This is one artist to watch out for! □

#### EXHIBITION

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[www.enginegallery.ca](http://www.enginegallery.ca)