Espace Sculpture

Gerard Choy
One Ton of Won Ton Bowls

Audrey Nicoll

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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 spellers' 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 Disguised within the art historical references of Conceptual Minimalism are issues of identity, cultural appropriation, and commodification.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 original pattern of blue fish on a white background degenerated, until the development of the blue and white serving bowl, rather than the singular handcrafted one, acknowledges its role as a comprehensible cultural identity and reflects its analogous representation of the Chinese Diaspora. 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.

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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.