

## SHIFTING FOCUS

Jo Stockham

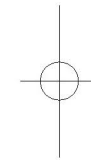
I still remember my first meeting with An Gee Chan when she entered the interview at the Royal College of Art with a large folio of work, anxious and intense, and with a shy smile. As she leafed through her images, worlds spilled into the room. Stories tumbled from the mouth of an individual seemingly reluctant to speak, yet eager to share her wry observations and extraordinary imaginings, mixed with news stories and overheard conversations which populated her papercuts, ink drawings, and zines.

One of the most prolific and hard-working individuals I have ever encountered, An Gee Chan experimented ceaselessly in the RCA workshops and worked in a wide range of media at vastly different scales. Adapting her papercuts to screenprints on enormous hoardings bounding our (then) building site in Battersea, she created a narrative of building-as-process, connecting the building of the workshops with the making of work inside them. In a characteristic doubling; buildings and presses have faces, things and people exchange places or merge as Chan playfully deconstructs the conditions of image making.

Chan revels in the ambiguity of images in endless recombination. Viewing an early work *Future head* (2007), zooming closer and closer into a papercut face, you instead get further away from the individual and more towards the conditions of the wider world. The head is crowded with ghosts and aliens living among people as they go about their everyday lives. The *Stressful city* ink drawings also teem with comic incident: a shocked and excited population is devoured by the city they also consume, fuelled by *Jamie's pies* and *Anabolic steroids*. The density of these cityscapes possibly echoes the density of Hong Kong, Chan's birthplace and home. While Londoners tend to think of their home as crowded, a recent visitor from Hong Kong said it must be lovely to be in such a spacious city as we looked over the dense rooftops of Hammersmith.



**Future head**  
2007  
papercut  
84cm x 59cm



**Better see Battersea**  
2010  
screen printed mural  
200cm x 3300cm  
Royal College of Art  
Howie Street, Battersea

If there is a trajectory in the work since 2009, it is that the images have become simpler, with more of an emphasis on the emotional relationships of a small group of characters and less on the tumults of media or busyness of cities. A technique of painting directly onto screens using leftover screen ink at the RCA also required more simplification and speed. The directness developed in recent work echoes the work of Rose Wylie — part diary, part wild fantasy, and recent trips to Ireland have given Chan access to very different pictorial traditions and underpopulated grey-green rural landscapes.

Working and living between two languages, Chan has developed an acute sense of the ridiculous — she sees the possibilities for humour and misunderstanding that literal translation enables. *Melon Colin inside in house* (2016) is both a sad fruit on a table and a person with a melon for a head. In Chan's self-portrait *Loopy* (2016), which grew from dwelling on the strangeness of the word, the self is simultaneously erased and expressed: the face as puzzle and maze, with bricks as rings of tree growth appearing as both a revealed core and a mask. Many of her faces have doubled eyes and mouths, a disquiet evident in *Quiet night* (2016) where an elegantly dressed and faceless woman sits next to a head on a table. It could be a hat stand or a decapitated lover.

Yet, despite a melancholic emphasis on failures of communication, there is humour and tenderness in the dilemmas of Chan's characters as they, like us all, navigate an unpredictable world. She carries us along with her sheer joy in image making and with the confidence of her gestures.



*(left)*  
**Melon Colin inside the house**  
2016  
mono screenprint  
77cm x 112cm

*(right)*  
**If someone is avoiding you, you'll never get to see them**  
2011  
mono screenprint  
153cm x 102cm