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Moon on Water

Jess Bradford

The title of Jess Bradford's solo exhibition *Moon on Water* takes its inspiration from an old East Asian proverb 'Mirror Flower, Water Moon'. This proverb refers to the unattainability of something, it can be seen however not touched, like a flower's reflection in a mirror or the way that the moon shines upon the surface of the water. What we see in those reflections is a mere copy, a mirage.

If we are to look at Bradford's work and keep this proverb in mind then we must also consider the role that photography plays. Ceramic pieces that are carved like mountains, glazed in soft candied colours sit alongside small pocket photograph sized miniature paintings also on clay. The skill is impeccable with no brushstroke in sight, on first glance they look as if they are the actual photographs that Bradford uses as her source material.

In John Berger's *Understanding a Photograph* he comments that "A photograph is not necessarily a lie, but it isn't the truth either. It's more like a fleeting, subjective impression." (Berger 2013) When viewing an image we are often not given the context or background story but just what we see at face value. We are presented with a moment in time that at times may not be our own however photography has an innate ability to hold memory and evoke emotion whether through the way it immortalises the past, present and even the future in one small rectangular or square shape.

Roland Barthes has articulated this previously in his well-trodden text *Camera Lucida*, where he searches in many photographs of his mother to find the truest representation of her. He famously does not show the exact photograph but instead describes the image that he believed best presented his mother, not physically but rather her personality or essence. Although published in 1980 this text still resonates today, it was radical for its time merging the personal with the historical in its articulation of the lasting effect of a photograph.

As mentioned previously, Bradford's source material for her works are a collection of found photographs. Collected over many years and from different locations, a large portion of her collection focuses on the famed Haw Par Villa in Singapore. Built in 1937 by philanthropist Aw Boon Han, the creator of Tiger Balm, it is described as an Asian cultural park 'a treasure trove of Asian culture, history, philosophy and religion – quirky yet enlightening, at the same time.' The park is full of large characters, carved mountains and grottos that share stories of Chinese mythology and traditions. Over its history, the park has had many owners with their own interpretations and input into the design and so in the current day the Chinese storytelling is interspersed with other cultures from around the world.

The collection of found photographs that Bradford draws from are a mixture of family holiday snapshots and landscape photos of the park. What is important to note is that these images are not Bradford's own family and mostly are not from the time that she remembered the park when she was growing up in Singapore. Therefore there is a mixture of multiple timelines, memories and voices that appear in Bradford's resulting work. It is easy to throw in the word nostalgia but her work goes deeper than that cursory reading, what is presented is a brief glimpse into a memory of a place that no longer exists. When I say that I mean that although the physical park is still in existence the moments that are captured within Bradford's own memories and those within the collected photographs do not. As soon as that split second of the camera shutter opening and closing that exact moment that was captured has passed and we are left with, as Berger says, an 'impression'.

Perhaps we can also apply this thought to the cultural park itself - it becomes an impression or someone else's interpretation rather than a truth. How can we possibly capture one culture? And what is the function of doing so? I am reminded of a venture by English born, New Zealand living television and infomercial host Suzanne Paul who in the 90s decided to create a Maori cultural park called Rawaka Village. The venture was criticised by local iwi who had described not being consulted at any point in the process and the project quickly fell into bankruptcy.

Although different in approaches in that one is created by someone from the culture and the other was not, Haw Par Villa ultimately also attempts to present a culture without consultation but rather from one person's or organisation's perspective. Chinese culture and Singapore itself has grown and made vast changes over the years of the park's existence and yet that is not recognised within the design. Instead it is a moment, a small snapshot of a time gone by. That is not to say that these histories are not important but that the purpose of the park remains muddled, who really is this park for?

Bradford's work is as intricate in its meaning as it is within the minute details that she paints and moulds. The scale is small, intimate and the objects appear almost as trinkets that one would purchase as a memento to put on their mantelpiece. Perhaps this sizing speaks to the commodification of culture, the way in which we create bite sized palatable pieces for tourists and locals to easily present where they are from but also maybe the size speaks to how our memories can work. They are not always large and loud but sometimes appear as small foggy images in the corner of your mind.

There are multiple slippages where time, memory and voices fold in upon themselves to create works that speak to the complexities of these concepts. Does it mean that the evocations of emotion that one can feel when looking at the painted found photographs is any less real because they are not your own?

I think back to the title of the show and the original Chinese proverb – *Mirror Flower, Water Moon*. What then really is the 'reflection' in Bradford's work, at first I thought it was the real and imagined memories and photographs but upon further consideration maybe it is actually Haw Par Villa itself. This is the third iteration of Bradford's artistic exploration into the site and possibly, when considering the other iterations, this could be thought of as her coming full circle.

When Barthes was searching for the perfect image that best represented his mother as he was grieving the loss of her, he came across an image that was in fact of her when she was a child. He believed that photograph to have best presented the way he remembered her and her spirit however how he interpreted the memory of his mother could be entirely different to someone else. That is where Bradford's practice sits, the intangible space between what is real and imagined or between her own memories and those of others. Although Haw Par Villa still exists physically the cultural park that she conjures within her work does not, instead it is merely a reflection of a moment like the *Moon on Water*.

Talia Smith

Talia Smith is an artist and curator from Aotearoa and now based in Sydney. She works as the Curator at Granville Centre Art Gallery and has presented exhibitions in and around public and private institutions in Australia and Aotearoa. In 2020 she completed her Masters of Fine Arts (research) at UNSW.