

## Evan Lee's Elders and Roots

*"In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity."*

Confucius

Migration is the world's way of dealing with environmental and political imperfection; people migrate seeking 'greener pastures'. It is also a mechanism for addressing the genetic inbreeding that results from the entrapment of village life. When migration occurs to things or products we call it shipping or transport. Much of Evan Lee's art focuses on migration; it was his idea that these three migration works might make a provocative exhibition. As art migrates from the private to the public world opportunities arise, as they do for people.

In Lee's art the notion of 'capturing' is another central concern – every time we make a picture, we 'have it' and every time a capture is shown publically, you 'have it'. Lee's captures have taken many forms and the older works contained images that looked like something they were not: box handles as faces, oil stains as cosmic nebulae, French curves as sea creatures and here, ginseng roots as miniature people.

Evan Lee is a Vancouver artist whose practice often 'diverges from itself'; the dissimilarity among the three bodies of work shown here is typical. Each probes a new problem, each is a separate but related 'project' marked by beauty, a spirit of inquiry and curiosity about picturing. A sharp critique may emerge: previously, his series of 'Stain' photographs commented on oil spills by focusing on the miniature spills that we see and ignore in our everyday lives.

The exhibition consists of thirty-six photographs of ginseng roots (which are scans rather than images made with a conventional camera), the video work 'Manual Labour' from 2006, and thirty-six pencil drawings of elderly Chinese women ('Old Women', 2008) shopping in Chinatown or gleaning (foraging for unwanted goods) in the lanes of Vancouver. All three bodies of work are portraits - linked by their relation to Asia, to globalism, migrations and the plight of the aged. 'Old Women' also explores the idea that shopping is a contemporary form of gleaning. Each is sociologically inflected; one reason for showing 'Old Women' in Richmond is to raise the question of whether suburban shopping malls are, in fact, the new Chinatowns. If old Chinatowns are a community's 'roots', are malls their branches?

### Things & Pictures of Things

In art, each medium is like an elder – we can have new drawings, but drawing itself is ancient; a new photograph is made using a 150-year old medium. As well, each medium reveals things that other media cannot. Evan Lee's work openly invites us to contemplate the sources of his images and other choices he has made; why did he decide to show us drawings of women, rather than the photographs from which they were made? How would ginseng look if photographed with a camera rather than using scannography? Why video rather than a series of photographs for 'Manual Labour'?



The answer is that artists are like drivers – there are many routes to a destination, but the artist has to choose one, or have a work exist in multiple forms. The magic of drawing is not just that someone can actually draw, but how changing media is like translation, creating new meanings by the divergence from the source. So, consider Lee's "Old Women" as links to the deep past – they could almost be in China in the year 1800. An inexact but expressive drawing can expand time and show us what a photograph might not. The drawing evokes another time, offering viewers what life often does not: time to reflect.

Most art depicts something that the viewer will never see or experience in the way the artist did, so our only connection to that event is via the picture. This is known as 'privileged access'; art gives access to the inaccessible, to places, ideas, constructions, people, and events that we cannot see, or might never seek out. It functions in the same way that having good social connections might. There is nothing in the exhibition that we can't see on our own, but by converting the everyday into art, artists give us deeper access to the worlds they depict, in this case workers, the aged and ginseng's strangely beautiful forms.

### Generational Regard Respect Your Elders

The elderly have been photographic subjects since the earliest portraits taken with a camera. Evan Lee is working in that tradition, but as it might be if crossed with street photography – and then drawn with pencil. Photographers work from a wide range of motivations and the resulting images are equally wide-ranging even when the subject is 'the same'. To pick three examples of other art that looked at the aged, the old people in Depression-era photographs from the 1930s show us a world that needed to be repaired. Donigan Cumming's more recent Montreal images of damaged, broken seniors clearly demonstrate that the repair job is very incomplete. The aged subject of Julian Germain's 2005 book 'For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness' reminds us that we have a long way to go before we can claim to understand aging, or to accept what our elders might have to teach us.

Evan Lee's 'Old Women' drawings are an homage to aged Chinese women in present-day Vancouver. The idea of old versus young is itself an ancient subject – think of Greek plays. Forty years ago, anthropology courses still taught that there were two kinds of societies, whose differences defined their basic character. Youth worship, like that of the Greeks at Sparta, was one model. Conversely, China and India were held up as examples of societies where the aged were venerated and cared for. Today, newly mobile populations on an increasingly globalized

planet create new forms of cross-cultural youth worship, with elder veneration having to fight for attention. Vast migrations, both within and between countries, including the vast rural to urban shift within China itself, have eroded the old ways of doing things, including the tradition of elder care.

Twenty-first century people of Chinese descent are found in almost every country on earth, studying, working, doing business or being tourists, but in spite of that internationalization, China itself continues to have its unique ways of addressing problems and finding solutions. China now has an 'Elderly Rights Law', enacted in the summer of 2013, dictating that the elderly be visited and cared for by family members. Failure to visit aging parents can now result in fines or jail time. Rather than waiting at home to be visited, all of Evan Lee's old women are contemporary examples of elders who are staying active, venturing forth like contemporary hunter-gatherers – they are gleaners and shoppers out in the urban landscape. The South Asian labourer in 'Manual Labour' and the elderly women may be second or third generation Canadians – we just don't know – or they may have come to Canada more recently, believing stories about Canada's benefits, including perhaps stories about how they would be cared for by their fellow countrymen once they arrived.

### Resilience and Convergences

Ginseng may mean 'image of man' in Chinese, but the convergence of form through which ginseng roots happen to look human is not an example of real biological convergence; rather, it is an accident of formal structure. Yet, as a group, Lee's ginsengs do present a typology of humanity's character traits, physiognomies through which we can reflect on the human condition.

Actual biological convergence is different. The eye of an octopus and that of a blue whale are very similar – but cephalopods and vertebrates separated from each other in their evolutionary process hundreds of millions of years ago, long before any common ancestor could have had 'an eye'. Conversely, ginseng has a homomorphic similarity with humans, but it is converging with humanity only in our minds.

Convergence can happen anywhere, even with art's media. The first-ever book of photographs, Fox Talbot's 'The Pencil of Nature', published in England in the 1840s deals with a completely new medium, photography, but is titled to reference drawing, as if to say nature was the artist. The two media, separated at the birth of photography, now converge again, not least through software such as Photoshop.

Convergence is a puzzle. We 'converge' on museums when we travel, seeking refuge from urban hassles as much as wanting to see something new in art. Travel is like temporary migration. Sometimes miracle cures for the things that plague us can be found simply by sampling a root from another part of the world, or, if migration is what's wanted, simply sampling another part of the world and making it one's home. Exhibitions re-sensitize us, like recharging our batteries. Evan Lee is quietly looking at freedom, and the freedom to migrate, sensitizing us to forgotten forms of human resiliency.

Bill Jeffries





Cover: *Old Women* (series of 1-36), 2007, 20 x 16 in, pencil on paper, courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver. Page two: *Manual Labour*, 2006, video, 5m 31s, looped, courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver. Above: *Ginseng Root Studies* (series), 2005, archival pigment print, courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver.

## Evan Lee

Evan Lee (b. 1975) received his MFA from the University of British Columbia in 2000. He is known for his experimental photo-based work but also works across a range of media and subjects. In 2009, Lee was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award.

Exhibitions include: *On the Nature of Things* at the Kamloops Art Gallery; *Again and Again and Again* and *In Dialogue with Carr* at the Vancouver Art Gallery; *Triumphant Carrot: the Persistence of Still Life* and *Playing Homage* at the Contemporary Art Gallery; *Evan Lee Captures* at Presentation House Gallery; *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal*; *At Play* at the Liu Hai Su Museum (Shanghai) and *Curb Appeal* at Confederation Centre (Charlottetown).

Evan Lee's work has been featured and reviewed in *Border Crossings*, *Flash Art International*, *Lapiz International Art Magazine*, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *Canadian Art*, and *Art on Paper*. Lee has taught at the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design and in the Department of Fine Arts at UBC, and has served on the Board of Directors of Centre A. Lee is represented by Monte Clark Gallery.

## Bill Jeffries

Bill Jeffries has curated 140 art exhibitions since 1983. He works as a freelance writer, lecturer, artist and environmental activist. He was the owner of the Coburg Gallery in Vancouver from 1983 to 1987, which was, at that time, the only privately-owned photography gallery in the Lower Mainland. In 1984 he founded the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society, which continues to operate today, and from 1988 to 1991 he was Director /Curator at the Contemporary Art Gallery. From 1998 to 2001 he worked in a variety of registration positions at the Vancouver Art Gallery. He was Director/Curator at Presentation House Gallery from 2001 to 2005, and held the same post at the Simon Fraser University Galleries from late 2005 until the end of 2012. He has texts in over 20 published books.

Bill has a BA from Jersey City State College, a BFA from the University of British Columbia and an MA from Simon Fraser University. He started his professional life in 1967 teaching sciences at the grade nine level and subsequently taught Biology in Los Angeles. In 1996 Bill co-wrote a book on protecting BC's wetlands that was published by the Westcoast Environmental Law Foundation.

He is currently curating, and making art, directing a feature film project and trying to learn cross-country skiing.

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