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Lifestyle / Arts & Culture

Dumplings dive, a lychee lounges, a tea egg totes a suitcase – there's food for thought in oil painter Chang Ya-chin's still lifes, on show in Hong Kong

- Chang Ya-chin paints still lifes of everyday Hong Kong food items, from fruit to dumplings to bubble tea, placing them in unexpected settings
- 'I don't go into it thinking I want to be funny,' says the classically trained Chang, whose art, showing for the first time in the city, is laced with poignancy

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Fionnuala McHugh

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Detail from "Hide and Seek: Rice Cooker, Rice and White Rabbits", one of the paintings featured in Chang Ya-chin's first Hong Kong exhibition, "These Things", in which the artist brings food to life to get viewers to look at the world in a new way. Photo: Chang Ya Chin/Kiang Malingue

If one of the functions of art is to make you view the world in a different way, then the success of Chang Ya-chin's paintings is – like the noodles she features in her work – instant.

Once you have seen her dumplings bravely climbing a ladder as they prepare to dive into a bowl of dark vinegar, or her lonely tea egg carting a suitcase across a bridge, or her unpeeled lychee lying back on a swing looking more wanton than any decent fruit has a right to appear, the universe of Hong Kong food takes on a new flavour.

These are not dashed-off jokes. They are old-school oil paintings in the style of Jean Siméon Chardin or Jacob Van Es, had those artists taken an anthropomorphic approach to their still-life work.

"I don't go into it thinking I want to be funny," says Chang at Kiang Malingue gallery in Aberdeen, where her first Hong Kong exhibition, "These Things", is being shown.



"Dive: Dumplings, Black Vinegar", by Chang Ya-chin, features in her Hong Kong exhibition "Chang Ya-chin: These Things".
Photo: Chang Ya-chin/Kiang Malingue



"Lychee on a swing", by Chang Ya-chin. Photo: Chang Ya-chin/Kiang Malingue

"When I go to a grocer's store, it's like a casting call. You pick up a pear and it has so much personality. But I'm also playing with the shapes, the light and the shadow and how they interact."

She points to a work titled *Hide and Seek: Rice Cooker, Rice and White Rabbits*. The title nudges the viewer into a grin as the familiar sweets peek out of pale rice mounds.



It's like a hug from the inside

Chang Ya-chin, on food's comforting quality



To the artist, however, it is also an exercise in how to achieve different shades of white. She wants to balance her aesthetic technique with narrative, and that gives what could be merely quirky a proper seriousness.

Chang, 38, who was born in Hong Kong and now divides her time between the city and New York, has found her vocation via a circuitous route.

She studied economics at Northwestern University in Illinois, in the United States, and then lived in Beijing, where she worked as an on-air host for the National Basketball Association before covering NBA games for Chinese conglomerate Tencent. Her artistic life began a decade ago.

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Chang came full circle and returned to drawing years after loving it as a child. Photo: Jonathan Wong

“I was burnt out,” she says. “I’d loved drawing as a kid but you sort of get swept up in ‘status anxiety’ – [writer] Alain de Botton’s term – and what you’re supposed to do with your life.” She returned to drawing, doing illustrations, and an art course in Florence, Italy.

In 2017, she produced a wordless book called *The Window* featuring a child whose face we never see, who works throughout the night on a secret painting project until, exhausted by morning, she captures a spark of sunlight in her hand.

By then, Chang was studying at the Paris Academy of Art in a suburb of the French capital. In 2018, she began classes at Grand Central Atelier in New York, which offers a classical art education.

“I want to be extremely technically sound, to know the rules and then break them,” she says.

One day, she gathered together a Vitasoy box, clementines, haw flakes and Pocky sticks and created a character that, by some alchemy, looked more real in an oil painting than a photograph.

A new visual world, based on strict standards, was born. It adheres to its own artistic logic. The venerable tradition of self-portraits, for example, continues: a Rubenesque pear sketching itself with crayons, a bubble tea (with a straw) examining its pencilled self-image, a clementine waving a paintbrush.



“Bubble Tea Self Portrait”, by Chang Ya-chin. Photo: Chang Ya-chin/Kiang Malingue

In New York, she creates in a small space in the apartment where she lives with her husband. In Hong Kong, her studio is her childhood bedroom in the Pok Fu Lam flat where she grew up. She works through the night.

Each unlikely scenario – the diving dumplings, a Hong Kong paper cup flying a kite, *har gow* shrimp dumplings paddling in a dragon boat – is painted from life.

She harvests potential props from the internet. On a crowded shelf, there’s a doll-sized suitcase, a tiny bathtub, a Vitasoy box wearing miniature ear muffs and a scarf.

Down the centuries, every still-life artist has known the battle is with time. Fruit is perishable, tea eggs rot, a chilli sauce bottle lingers forgotten in a Hong Kong fridge long past its sell-by date.



"Bridge: Tea Egg, Suitcase", by Chang Ya-chin. Photo: Chang Ya-chin/Kiang Malingue



"Egg Tart, Incense, Ashes (II)", by Chang Ya-chin. Photo: Chang Ya-chin/Kiang Malingue

Chang laughs frequently, but she has experienced family loss in recent years, and chiaroscuro – the distribution of light and shade – adds poignancy to her clever vignettes.

"There's so much comfort from food, it's like a hug from the inside," she says. The same can apply to art. In the show, an exquisitely painted egg tart is pierced by a single incense stick that sprinkles ash on its surface.

In the darkness above, she has caught a tiny spark of light.

"Chang Ya-chin: These Things", Kiang Malingue, 12/F, Blue Box Factory Building, 25 Hing Wo Street, Aberdeen, Tue- Sat, 11am-7pm. Until March 9.