

Secret Immigration



Invisible Transformation Project, 2013.

Knowing someone personally doesn't mean that you necessarily understand their work in any deep sense: the work and the person are never identical. The personal history may shape the art, but the art also shapes the personal history. How the two interact is so complex that I doubt anyone understands it. Neither can be reduced to an image of the other. I've known June Pak for more than a decade, but I feel that I'm just beginning to understand what's at stake in her work.

I've come to some provisional conclusions. We'll see if they last. In a nutshell, it seems to me that June's work is engaged on a program of "secret immigration" that draws from and transmutes the fact of her immigration to Canada, and turns it into different figures. Perhaps each is a different way of considering that experience. If my interpretation is plausible, then her art might be something like a hall of mirrors in which the fact of immigration is multiplied—or a distorting hall of mirrors in which each image is different, and each one true in some new way while being false or distorted in another. The idea comes and goes, but it has begun to colour my understanding. What I have is really just a collection of clues, and a way to stitch them together. What I have, what has seeped in, are a yellow wall, a reflected scrap of a film, and a bit of painting inserted into someone's space.

Let me start with *Walkthrough*, her video installation. Video installations routinely are set up so that no viewer crosses the path of the projection. This creates a sort of ideal rationalism: the projection appears in the space as though independent of us, continuously running, never disrupted, always visible. Usually the image fills a gallery wall, dominating and mesmerizing.

Walkthrough instead was initially confusing, disorienting. Brief film clips appeared in hazy roughly circular patches, one high up, another quite low, erratically placed and without that ideal clarity of focus. Walking around, I often found myself interrupting one of the projected clips, crossing the beam for the image I was trying to view. It took me awhile to sort out what was going on. The projectors sat on the floor, with the images being bounced off small circular mirrors attached to columns in the gallery, the paths of the projection criss-crossing the space. It was almost impossible to move around in the gallery without cutting through the projection. So the content of the work seemed to include learning how to behave in the space. The habits of behaviour that guide interaction with a video projection didn't hold here.

The clips themselves were often hard to read: a shadow seemed to be entering homes. Again, the images were not the huge, floor-to-ceiling high-definition ones one usually encounters. Here, they were small blurry cameos, oval or circular on the wall. All the ideal clarity of the conventional viewing situation was gone, each aspect of it disrupted. The experience was like fumbling to grasp something, a kind of clumsiness. This too must have been part of its content: where the conventions of video installation establish us as lucid viewers, here we, or I at least, was just a "feeler and fumbler"—as the *Hunters and Collectors* once sang.

Things became a bit clearer once I learned that the clips were taken from Kim Gi-Duk's *3-Iron*. In that film, a man breaks into homes while their owners are away, but instead of looting them, inhabits and tends them in their owners' absence. At one level, I think this can be taken as an allegory for June's installation in the gallery itself—a breaking in and inhabiting with care. At another level, it can function as an allegory of immigration.

But there is one more complicating element. The figure that breaks in has been erased, painstakingly taken out of the film. Now only a sort of shadow remains, but a shadow cast by no figure. Perhaps this is how the work discloses its self-understanding, that it is an allegory, that it is a construction and not a truth... And yet it is also a kind of haunting of spaces, a redisposing of how we visitors experience ourselves as viewers. This seems to be the "truth" of the work, a content which is a formed around a missing subject or around a lack of understanding of how to behave.

In certain ways, *Paint Job (2004-2008)*: a social exchange between art and everyday is *Walkthrough's* opposite. Where the video installation is quite complex, *Paint Job* seems quite simple. It involved June making a wall painting for various individuals in the space where they lived or worked. Each painting was simply small square of colour, chosen from the "Algonquin Autumn" series. The spaces were offices, labs, studios, apartments and houses in a number of cities across Canada. In each case, June offered, or found herself invited, or initiated a "self-invitation" to execute the painting.

The process involved her briefly in the lives as well as the spaces of the persons for whom the paintings were made. These people were the usual mix: some had been born here in Canada, some had immigrated, while others were visitors to the country. The social relationships and the stories behind the making of the painting seemed to constitute an important part of the work, and so they were carefully and quietly recounted, always as they were seen by June, with her intuitions about the person. This rough equality of painting and social interaction was made visible through the artists book which both documented and reformatted the project. That book imitated the form of the colour samplers supplied

by paint stores. That emphasized the importance of the colour choices, which drew from what were commercial attempts to profit from an imagined relation to the fall colours of Northern Ontario and the Group of Seven. In this colour chip format, the work seemed to be an assertion that there was something like a decorative quality to the interaction of persons, and that whatever element of self-assertion there was in the choosing of colours was a choice already circumscribed by commerce and history.

I think that sense of circumscription ran through the work. There was a modesty to the project: the paintings small in scale, carefully poised between decoration and the sort of self-assertion that often announces avant-garde art. In spite of the obvious differences, this work, like *Walkthrough*, seemed to focus on the right to inhabit a space or place. Each painting served as a marking of June's presence in that space. The stories often dwelt on how someone arrived in this country, relating how tenuous or firmly rooted was this particular person's right or capacity to inhabit this nation. This seemed mirrored by the small squares of colour, whose narratives recounted by what means they came to exist in a particular space, and by what right.

I didn't see the first incarnation of her *Invisible Transformation Project*, but I've been fascinated by it even before I saw its later version at 26. To be a little more precise, I'm fascinated by how it is condensed into an image. In it, we see simply a yellow wall with June seated in front of it, reading from a book. Once again, the colour was chosen from the "Algonquin Autumn" series, which situated the work within Ontario's mythology of the Group of Seven and the supposed empty wilderness they explored. At the same time, it made a veiled reference to the "yellow" skin that once was believed to typify Asians, and therefore herself. To the sides, leaning against other walls, are painting tools. June's figure sits in relative darkness—it is the yellow painted wall that is brightly lit, which seems to indicate that it is the painted wall and not the artist that is most important, that it is the object that is to be seen, much more than the person reading.

In the image, forms of labour are assembled. The tools, rollers, brushes, a long handle, a drop sheet, indicate that the yellow wall has not simply appeared but is the result of labour. It seems to be an object produced for us to view, and is, in a quite literal sense, her background—a colour against which she could be seen. But if the colour situates June in mythologies of the nation and race, it is also crucially important that this colour be understood as a condensation of labour.

The piece also involved another kind of labour: periodically she would sit and read out loud from Rey Chow's book, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. This involved her in intellectual labour—a labour which is not usually understood as labour, the labour of reading theory. Neither type of work seems to have been treated as more important than the other. But here they don't merge or blend into each other; they do not unify into some new form. The Rey Chow text does not supply the meaning of the wall painting, though it does supply terms by which the work—the work as a whole, not simply the wall painting—can be understood: "diaspora," "tactic," "intervention," "cultural studies." The two forms of labour are non-identical but bound together now. The work of painting is taken up, then it stops and the work of reading is taken up. Then painting begins again, followed by more reading. Once the wall is entirely and intensely yellow, the work begins of repainting back to the conventional white of the contemporary gallery. The work advances, then is undone. No evidence of it remains. But the having-been-undone is not the same as if it had never been done. I know it still exists, a thin yellow membrane behind the standard white appearance of a gallery wall, an invisible claim. The reading out loud of the Rey Chow text too has vanished into the air. Nothing of it remains, except for the effect it may have had, however slight, on June herself. I know Rey Chow's thought and writing means a lot to her, but in this image in which so many things are condensed, what I see is not Rey Chow but a

picture of the practice (or the labour) of reading aloud. Here my idea of a secret immigration begins to fall apart, or to transmute.

Behind the white wall remains an invisible yellow membrane. Obviously this can be read as a whiting-out or erasing of an ethnic presence she had briefly proposed. But while this might support my very provisional conclusions about June's art, it's also at this point that I begin to see things differently. This must be an effect of the work—that it allows an interpretation to rise, to seem convincing enough, and then to begin to disperse and transmute it. Now her work seems more like what Li Zehou once termed ““human nature as practice,” the forming of what we seem to be. June's work, then, would be a work performed on herself: the traces of reading Rey Chow aloud remain but are invisible—unless they surface, transmuted in June herself, in the intricacies of her behaviour, her thought and feeling. The now-vanished yellow wall too is part of that same practice, a work performed on us, her viewers, her small invested audience, in which nothing has changed except that which is invisible.

-Andy Patton, June-October 2014.