



*everyday
ambition*

FORAYS INTO OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

christine wong yap

Introduction



Breathe Residency studio, 1 February 2009

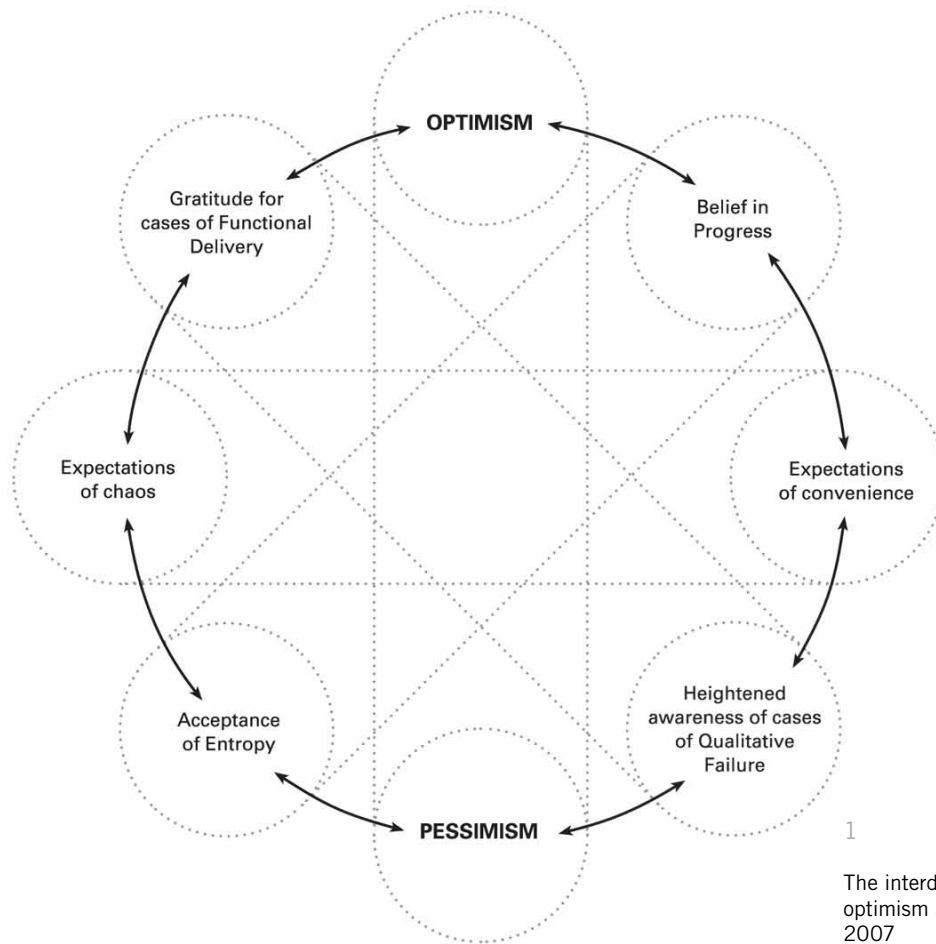
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PROJECTS PRODUCED DURING THE BREATHE RESIDENCY, 30 JANUARY TO 30 APRIL, 2009.

In January, I left northern California for Manchester, U.K., to embark on a three-month artist's residency emphasizing experimentation. I arrived at the Chinese Arts Centre's spacious live-work studio with a few butterflies in my stomach, anticipating how my work might develop, given ample time, space, and support.

The months that followed were filled with reading, research, travel, writing, looking at art, studio experimentation and meeting members of the Manchester art community.

At the end of the residency, I opened my studio to the public, presenting new installation, sculpture, drawings and an artist's multiple. The new work stems from my response to Manchester, and reflects new thoughts on optimism and pessimism, which are described here.

Background



Prior to the Breathe residency, my understanding of optimism and pessimism can be summed up as these fundamental principles:

1. Daily life is full of shitty experiences, like looking for parking or waiting in line at a grocery store.
2. Consumer culture boasts of progress and convenience, but cannot live up to the expectations it creates.
3. Feeling trapped in the corporeal world (what William Gibson calls “meatspace”¹) exacerbates the sense of frustration.

4. *Pessimism is tied to the mundane.*

5. On the other hand, happiness is fleeting and ephemeral.

6. *Optimism is tied to transcendence.*

However, rather than viewing optimism and pessimism as an intractable dichotomy, I see them as interconnected and simultaneously useful. [FIG. 1](#)

7. I am ambivalent (pulled strongly in two directions) between optimism and pessimism.

1. William Gibson. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books [1984]

8. I explore optimism and pessimism using metaphors like light and dark, works and meanings, material and ineffable. FIG. 2

9. I am not sure how materialized art can contain the ineffable. I am acutely aware of the difference between the “container and contained.” As Daniel Spoerri wrote in *The Mythological Travels* (1970)

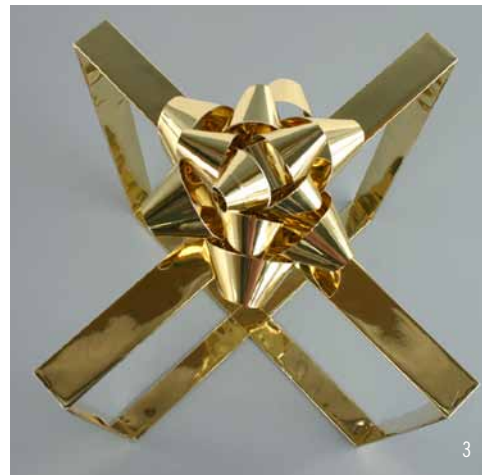
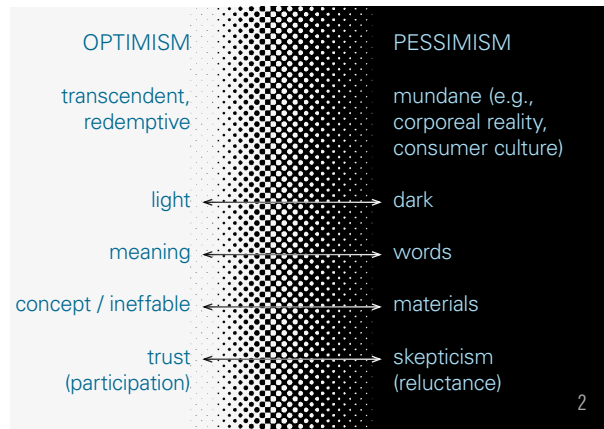
...we’re all fetishists snared by the object... until they... pile up stripped of their magic and cut off from the memory of their history... all that remains of these preserves is the container the artist made for them,... the container will never interest me as much as the contained, but where would I pour my wine without a glass?—and it is inbetween these two poles of inseparability of the two that my anxiety of finding a definite solution will oscillate....

10. I am skeptical of the expectation that art *should* convey the ineffable. My works sometimes suggest an embedded futility or failure, frustrating the viewer’s assumptions about the art experience.

For example, in the *Presents* series (FIG. 3), ribbons and bows suggest a present, however the gift is absent. This raises the paradox of who is responsible for the ineffable in art—*does the viewer project it onto the art object, or does the artist provide it?*

11. The art viewing experience provides an opportunity for enacting skepticism or trust. I see the work of art mediating a relationship between the viewer and artist.

In *Dark into Light* (FIG. 4), 100 lights that respond to darkness are bathed in a spot light. To trigger the lights, the viewer must interrupt the beam of light with their bodies, literally inhabiting the center of the installation. The result is that the viewer’s shadow becomes illuminated—making an ephemeral image from common household goods.



2 Table of metaphors
 3 *Gold Present*, 2007, balsa wood and paper, 22 x 18 x 18 inches / 56 x 46 x 46 cm.
 4 *Dark into Light*, 2008, mixed media installation: 100 night lights, par can, spot bulb, 10 x 10 x 8 feet / 3 x 3 x 2.4 m.

Context: Breathe

The Chinese Arts Centre's *Breathe Residency* is "a three-month opportunity to provide an artist the time and space to contemplate their practice." The residency came at an opportune time in my development. I identified a few reasons for pushing my practice further after exhibiting several new works last year.

I became aware of the risk of mannerism: I didn't want to become known as "the light artist." Light installations are gratifying to make, but they can easily become too populist, popular and easy.



Foreground: *Binary Pair*, 2008, installation (motors, lights, screen-printed texts), 6 x 14 x 6 feet / 1.8 x 4.2 x 1.8 m. Background: *Anti-Campfire*, 2008, charcoal, binding agents, light, solar power, 13 x 13 x 10 inches / 33 x 33 x 25 cm.

The metaphors in the work became increasingly complex. For example, *Binary Pair* (FIG. 5) attempted to draw parallels between binary star systems, black holes and the interdependence of optimism and pessimism, as well as the end of the American century. I'm interested in making works that embody an idea, an wanted to steer away from such heavy symbolism.

Last year was also a tumultuous year, and my artwork and attitudes changed. My ambivalence between optimism and pessimism shifted towards uncertainty. I became more pessimistic, but I'd rather be an optimist.

During the residency, I engaged in a **self-directed course of study** spanning:

- Slang, weather and temperaments in Manchester
- The case for optimism in America's near future^{2,3},
- Time perspectives
- Psychology: happiness, pain, pleasure and desire

Throughout the residency, I also enjoyed my opportunities to **view and write about art** on my blog, CWONGYAP.WORDPRESS.COM. I visited art institutions around the Northwest and Midlands, including Birmingham, Leeds and Liverpool, as well as in London. The shows that left lasting impressions include:

- Simon and Tom Bloor's *As Long As It Lasts* at Eastside Projects
- Armando Andrade Tudela's solo show at IKON Gallery
- Annette Messenger's *The Messengers* and *Mark Wallinger Curates The Russian Lineman* at Hayward Gallery
- Gregor Schnieder's *Kinderzimmer* in *Subversive Spaces* at the Whitworth Art Gallery

- Julio Le Parc's *Continuous Mobile, Continual Light* (1960) and Melanie Smith's *Six Steps to Abstraction* (2004) in the *DLA Piper series' The Twentieth Century: How it Looked and Felt* at Tate Liverpool.

Finally, I engaged the **U.K. arts community** via:

- Attending exhibitions and publishing reviews on my blog.
- Attending the *Tuesday Talks* lecture series at the Whitworth Art Gallery.
- Attending symposia, namely, *Fly Eric* in Barrow-in-Furness (Art Gene/Castlefield Gallery/Storey Gallery) and *Global Modernities* at Tate Britain.
- Sharing my work with MA students from Leeds University, MA Fine Arts Manchester Metropolitan University, MA Museum and Curatorial Studies Manchester Metropolitan University
- Sharing my work with Plaited Fog, an artist's collective in Preston.

These experiences, combined with research, have resulted in surprising new developments in my theory of optimism and pessimism.

2. Fareed Zakaria. *The Post American World*. London: Allen Lane [2008]

3. Barack Obama. *Dreams From My Father*. Edinburgh: Canongate [2007]

Context: Manchester's All Right

My observations of Mancunian⁴ vernacular, weather and temperament led me to consider the value of humble expectations.



Mancunian Slang Adjective Flash Drawings: Stroppy, Naff, Scally, Grotty, Mardy, ink on six ready-made fluorescent yellow die-cut papers 12 x 7.5 inches / 30 x 19 cm each ; 37 x 50 inches / 1 x 1.2 m assembled. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

Vernacular. I noticed that Mancs have many colorful slang words [FIG. 6], but most express displeasure. Compared with Americans, Mancs tend to downplay expressions of pleasure or enthusiasm.

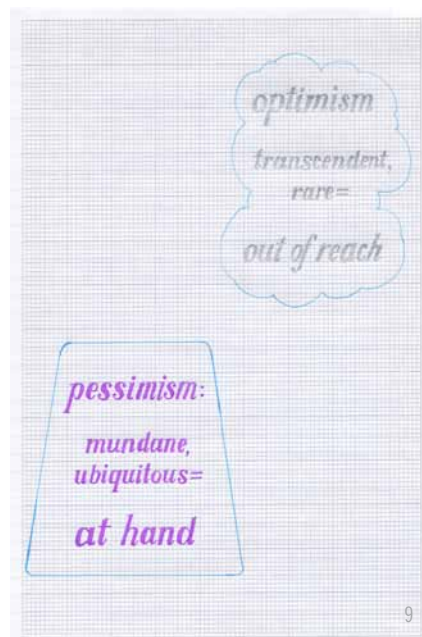
Weather. I also noticed a contrast between the perceived and actual weather in Manchester. Mancs are quite happy to complain about the poor weather, but I found it not nearly as rainy as I was warned. In fact, I wore a too-heavy waterproof parka for the first several weeks, and was pleasantly surprised by the mild temperatures and occasional sunshine.

Temperament. These observations suggest that Mancunians may employ defensive pessimism.

4. "Of Manchester." Shortened as "Mancs."

Propositions

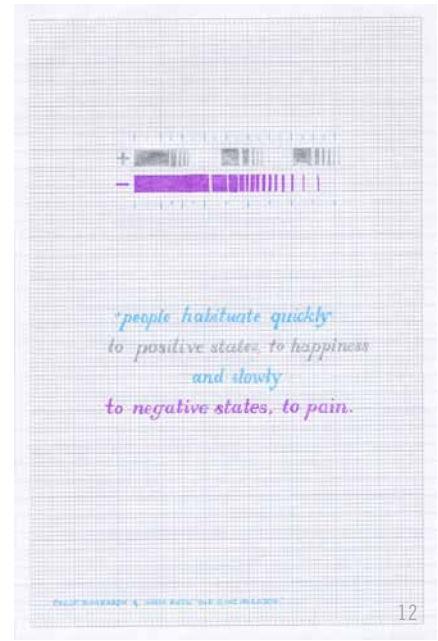
1. Modest expectations embed more opportunities for pleasant surprises. [FIG. 7](#)
2. Tying pessimism to the mundane and optimism to transcendence is not a balanced, ambivalent view. It skews the bulk of available experiences to pessimism. [FIGS. 8, 9](#)



7 *Expectations Occasionally Surpassed*, 2009, Ink on poster board, 25 x 20 inches / 63.5 x 51 cm

8, 9 *Cheap and Cheerful #1 & 2*, 2009, neon and glitter pen, 11.625 x 7.75 inches / 29.5 x 45 cm

Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.



3. This view is not balanced, but it *is* a logical one. Negative emotions and experiences are powerful.

For example, of the six basic universal emotions and the social emotions, most are negative.⁵ FIG. 10

Psychologists have even noted that individual negative experiences carry more significance than positive ones.⁶ FIG. 11

This is because pleasure is necessarily self-limiting, while pain recedes from memory more slowly.⁷ FIG. 12

*We habituate quite rapidly to pleasurable sensations ...any given pleasure will fade and the moment will pass.... Unpleasant feelings such as anxiety, fear and pain are generally not as ephemeral as pleasure; we do eventually adjust to displeasure or pain, but more slowly and less completely that in the case of pleasure.*⁸

Cheap and Cheerful #3, 4, 5, 2009, neon and glitter pen, 11.625 x 7.75 inches / 29.5 x 45 cm. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

5. Paul Martin. *Sex, Drugs and Chocolate: The Science of Pleasure*. London: Fourth Estate [2008] 152

6. The research of John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington, summarized by Stephanie Coontz. "History May Not Be a Guide," a submission in "Husbands, Wives and Hard Times." *Room for Debate*. New York: *New York Times* [April 8, 2009]

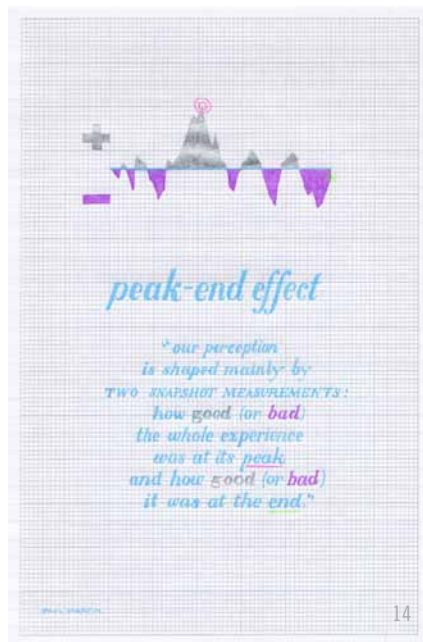
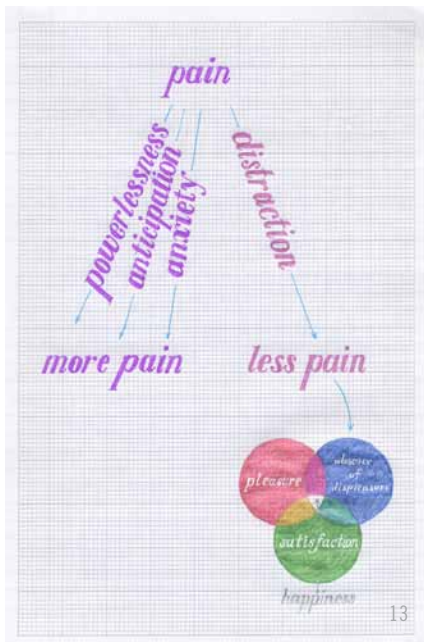
7. Philip Zimbardo & John Boyd, *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time*. London: Rider [2008] 254

8. Martin 19

4. The diversity of negative emotions, the high impact of negative experiences, and the longer duration of displeasure—suggest that negativity and positivity are not mere inverses. They have unique characteristics. Different approaches are required to abate one and cultivate another.

5. Negative emotions and experiences must be balanced by a constantly renewed pursuit of joy and positive experiences.

Pain is highly subjective. Negative emotions can increase pain, while changing one’s behavior and finding distractions can actually decrease the awareness of pain.⁹ FIG. 13



Cheap and Cheerful #7 & 6, 2009, neon and glitter pen, 11.625 x 7.75 inches / 29.5 x 45 cm. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

Memories are also recalled in a highly subjective manner. Psychologists describe *Peak-End* effect, the brain’s mechanism for judging a past event. We make snapshot judgments based on two moments, rather than retaining the emotional highs and lows of the entire experience. FIG. 14

6. Pleasure and happiness are distinct. Pleasure is one of three necessary components of happiness, along with the absence of displeasure, and satisfaction.

*...happiness and pleasure, though frequently confused, are not the same....
 ...happiness is made up of three distinct but complimentary strands...
 Pleasure ... means feeling good; it is signified by the presence of positive emotions like joy, contentment, pride or affection. The absence of displeasure refers to the absence of pain or unpleasant emotions like sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt or shame. Satisfaction, the third element of happiness, means judging, on reflection, that you are satisfied with your life in general and with specific aspects of it, such as your personal relationships or career. Satisfaction can come from believing your life has meaning.”¹⁰*

7. While pleasure should not be confused with happiness, people cannot be happy without pleasure.

Happiness ... comes in many different flavours, each comprising a different blend of three core elements. To be truly happy, you need at least a little of each.¹¹



Cheap and Cheerful #9, 2009, neon and glitter pen, 11.625 x 7.75 inches / 29.5 x 45 cm. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

8. Pleasure may be the most attainable component of happiness, the most modest in ambitions. [FIG. 15](#)

I characterize satisfaction as a high ambition because it requires a sense of self-efficacy, impulse-control and sustained behaviors. I characterize the absence of displeasure as a moderate ambition, because, as we have already established, negative emotions and experiences are common and powerful; to abate them requires emotional intelligence and willpower. Pleasure, however, is a modest ambition. As pleasures are necessarily fleeting and self-limiting, modest pleasures will do just as well as grand ones.

10. Martin 148
 11. Martin 148

9. Pleasure is also important in a balanced time-perspective.

Psychologists Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd identified six time-perspectives common in the Western world: past-negative, past-positive, present-fatalistic, present-hedonist, future, and transcendental future.¹² An optimal time-perspective consists of healthy attitudes towards the past, present and future and simultaneously balancing all three. Readers are advised to embrace, with moderation, present hedonism.

*A hedonistic present gives you energy and joy about being alive. That energy drives you to explore people, places and self. Present hedonism is life-affirming, in moderation....*¹³

10. *If tying pessimism to the mundane and optimism to transcendence creates an imbalanced perspective, then optimism can and should be found in the mundane.*

Cheap and Cheerful
#10, 2009, neon
and glitter pen,
11.625 x 7.75
inches / 29.5 x 45
cm. Produced in the
Breathe Residency
at Chinese Arts
Centre.



11. *One pathway towards finding optimism in the mundane is in Manchester's discount and pound shops. They epitomize cheap and cheerful, signifying immediacy and pleasure.* FIG. 16

Cheap and cheerful is an English phrase notable for its thoroughly appreciative tone, even though Mancs can seem unsentimental.

It's also characteristic of the 'Northern Soul.' As Stuart Maconie put it,

*...many of the north's market and mill towns ... have become shrine[s] devoted to binge drinking and discount shopping.*¹⁴

Cheap and cheerful also reminds me of a Chinese expression, which is nearly identical:

又平又靚

[Literally, "also cheap, also attractive"]. For my ultra-frugal immigrant parents, no higher compliment could be paid.

12. *Making works that embody modest expectations, in tandem with works of higher expectations, can be a viable method for pursuing a more nuanced understanding of optimism, and result in a more varied practice.*

12. Zimbardo & Boyd 52

13. Zimbardo & Boyd 298

14. Stuart Maconie. *Pies and Prejudice: In Search of the North*. Reading: Ebury Press [2008]

Points of Reference: Modesty



17 David Sherry, *Auctioning a forged pound 'Captain Hyde'* 2008 during a talk at ECA. Source: Dave-Sherry.com

18 Chu Yun, *Unspeakable Happiness (No.2)*, 2003, Installation, "The Fifth System: Public Art in the Age of Post-Planning," The 5th Shenzhen International Public Art Exhibition, Shenzhen, China. Source: ChuYun.net

19 Ceal Floyer, *Helix*, 2003, helix template and objects, 17 x 20 x 12.5 cm. Source: LissonGallery.com

During the residency, I learned about these three artists, whose modest works I've returned to time and again.

Glasgow-based artist **Dave Sherry** (FIG. 17) is a performance artist whose gestures may be read simply as odd behavior. In one work, he stands in a gallery for the duration of a preview with a lampshade on his head. For a video, he cut out pictures of eyes, and pasted them onto his eyelids, and titled the work *Seeing Through Tom Cruise's Eyes*. While these works may seem like conceptual one-liners, Sherry is an articulate artist rigorously contextualizes his practice with an interest in chance, procedures and a "compulsion to be yourself."¹⁵ He cites his influences, including David Hammons, Martin Creed, Bruce Nauman and Martin Kippenberger. According to Sherry, he is happy if his works prompt a response as modest as simple curiosity: "Oh, look at that. What's going on over there?"¹⁶

Chu Yun's works are so slim as to verge on invisibility. As Philip Tinari wrote in *Artforum* (March 2009), there's

something subversive ... about works that were barely works."

For example, in *Unspeakable Happiness II* (FIG. 18), Chu Yun reveals the

uncanny power of blank flags to elicit an affective response from viewers, whether through their banal beauty or through the feigned promise of new avenues of consumption. Empty signifiers, they announce without announcing anything in particular.

Ceal Floyer makes work of extreme reduction. Floyer's art is "a mixture of Duchampian word play, absurdity, illusion and linguistic pendentry."¹⁷ In *Helix* (FIG. 19), she placed various bits and bobs in a plastic template; each object fit their respective apertures with baffling exactness. In *Ink on Paper* (1999), she "drew" a circle of ink by holding a felt-tip marker on the surface of the paper until the marker bleed through the paper and went completely dry. Floyer's practice is a very tightly controlled reductionism whose end products frustrate the viewer's expectations of grand feats.

15. Dave Sherry lecture, *Tuesday Talks* series, Whitworth Gallery. 3 March 2009.

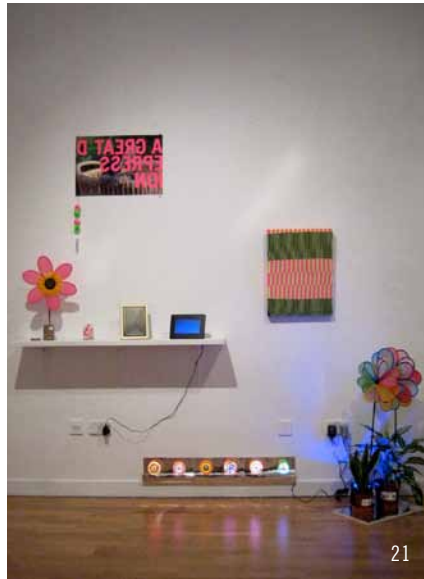
16. Ibid.

17. Jessica Lack, "Ceal Floyer: Genuine Reductionist," *Art World Magazine*, Feb./Mar. 2009) 132.

Results



20



21



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23

SORTED: A MANCUNIAN COMMEMORATIVE FIG. 20

The result of my investigation into British commemoratives and Mancunian slang, weather and temperament is *Sorted*, a limited edition of 50 gilt and enamel pin badges. The badge depicts a banner over a rain cloud, which is obscuring a drab rainbow. These symbols suggest the coexistence of gloomy outlooks and vibrant attitudes.



25

20 *Sorted*, 2009, badge, 1 inch / 2.5 cm diameter. Edition of 50.*

21 *Pounds of Happiness* (installation), 2009, mixed media, 8 x 8 x 5 feet / 2.4 x 2.4 x 1.5 m*

22, 23 *Pounds of Happiness* (conveyor belt), 2009, paper, pen, wood, motor, table, 48 x 34 x 24 inches / 122 x 86 x 61 cm*

24 Mary Heilmann, *Lovejoy Jr.*, 2004, oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. (102 x 81.3 cm), Collection of Rena Conti and Ivan Moskowitz, Chicago. Source: NewMuseum.org

25 Renee Gertler, *Secret Garden*, 2007, mixed media. Approx. 18 x 14 x 15 inches / 46 x 35 x 38 cm. Source: ReneeGertler.com

POUNDS OF HAPPINESS: CHEAP & CHEERFUL, MODEST EXPECTATIONS (FIGS. 21-23)

The result of my investigation of cheap and cheerful is *Pounds of Happiness*, an installation and freestanding sculpture that highlight modest pleasures available in daily life. Free of class ambitions, the works are a celebration of visual pleasure and a cheap and cheerful aesthetic. The sculpture is a simple conveyor belt displaying a drawing of pound store products drawn with pound store materials. The installation is an intuitively made collection of works of modest ambitions—small moments of pleasure. The simple gestures draw visual connections, make curious recursions, and declare unwarranted exuberance.

The project is really just about pleasure, in the same way as Mary Heilmann's paintings (FIG. 24) or Renee Gertler's *Secret Garden* (FIG. 25) assemblage. The intent is to inspire pleasure, unadulterated by skepticism or irony. As slim as the works in *Pounds of Happiness* are—with their simple techniques and familiar materials—they attempt to embody optimism via the hope that small pleasures are alone are rewarding.



Unlimited Promise, 2009, installation: foil paper, thread, light, shadow, 15 x 20 x 14 feet / 4.5 x 6 x 4.2 m. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

**UNLIMITED PROMISE:
MATERIAL MODESTY AS CONTRAST** FIG. 26

Unlimited Promise is an installation of text cut from mirror foil paper and hung individually. Gallery lights cast a strong shadow on one wall, and reflections spin around the room as the letters rotate. It is an installation of inversions: forward- and reverse-readings, light and dark, cast shadows and reflections. The work is mostly immaterial, correlating to its theme of the unknowable future.

Unlimited Promise is an examination of how high ambitions bring optimism and pessimism into sharp contrast: the phrase, UNLIMITED PROMISE, may be read as available potentials (to an optimist) or impossible goals (to a pessimist).

While *Sorted*, *Pounds of Happiness*, and *Unlimited Promise* look and feel much different from some of my past works, there are a few interesting points of continuity.



My interest in the overriding influence of **consumer culture** can be seen in the *Presents* [FIG. 27] and *Inventions* series. The *Presents* are clearly influenced by retail display and the language of desire. The *Inventions* are fictional product design-like drawings, but in contrast with the reconfigured pound shop items in *Pounds of Happiness*, the *Inventions* are embedded with a sense how consumer products fail



to improve the quality of life. For example, the *Dark Light (Desk Model)* [FIG. 28] is a proposal for a light that shines dark, to compensate for a dim laptop monitor in a bright room. The objects in *Pounds of Happiness* evince their planned obsolescence as well, however, taken without pretensions, they are completely sincere in their ambition to provide pleasure, however brief or modest.

27 *Gold Present*, 2007, balsa wood and paper, 22 x 18 x 18 inches / 56 x 46 x 46 cm.

28 *Dark Light (Desk Model)*, 2007, graphite, vellum, paper, acetate, 16 x 20 inches / 41 x 51 cm.

29 *Untitled (Lens Flare, Large Mirror)*, 2007, mirror, frame, lights, 26 x 32 x 2 inches / 66 x 76 x 5 cm.

30 detail of *Pounds of Happiness* (installation): Recursion, laser print, found frame, 7 x 9 x 0.5 inches / 18 x 23 x 1.5 cm. Produced in the Breathe Residency at Chinese Arts Centre.

31 *To-Do List* (installation view), 2006, ink, paper, monofilament, 48 x 60 x 5 inches / 1.2 m x 1.5 m x 5 cm.



Pounds of Happiness shares an interest in **happiness** with *Lens Flare (Large Mirror)* [FIG. 29], a partially-sandblasted found mirror. In its most basic function, *Lens Flare* is an instrument for making people smile. It also suggests the moment when everyday banality is transcended. In the *Recursion frame* [FIG. 30] in *Pounds of Happiness* also uses a gold frame to a similarly curious effect. However, the image in the frame refers knowingly back to the object, heightening awareness of both the object and its representation.

Language is an important part of my practice; it has been an organizing principle in recent projects, but has been a material that I work with in the past.

Unlimited Promise can be seen as following a body of papercut texts [FIG. 31]. Of course, the previous work was concerned with anxiety, accumulation and illegibility, where as *Unlimited Promise* relies on legibility, semantic ambiguity and an economic use of materials. Interestingly, I had hung text in a similar fashion before in my studio two years ago, in an explicit and pessimistic gesture; returning to the form with more meaning-filled intentions has been rewarding.



Available Areas of Inquiry

These areas of inquiry are the logical next steps to advance my investigation.

1. Happiness requires three components, of which pleasure is but one. What of satisfaction and its relationship to optimism and pessimism? What of the absence of displeasure?

*Everyday notions of happiness often focus on the pleasure element while neglecting satisfaction and the absence of displeasure. This tendency... is in tune with our consumer culture of instant gratification. True happiness is thought to be elusive,... pleasure is assumed to be quick and easy.... The result can be a one-dimensional form of pseudo-happiness from which satisfaction is lacking and displeasure is all too present.*¹⁷

After all,

*...anyone who attempts to rely exclusively on pleasure to make them happy is likely to have a struggle on their hands.*¹⁸

2. Investigate how the three components of happiness correspond — or don't — with Zimbardo and Boyd's six *Time Perspectives*.¹⁹

3. Consider the difference between pleasure and desire (liking vs. wanting), especially as it relates to art experience? What of visual attractiveness, marketability, etc.? Are there correlations between liking and wanting an art object, and do these correlations have any implications on the viewer's expectations of how a work of art performs?

17. Martin 149

18. Martin 148

19. Zimbardo & Boyd 52

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Notes

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For more information about the *Breathe Residency* and Chinese Arts Centre, please visit:
www.chinese-arts-centre.org

For more information about Christine Wong Yap, please visit:
www.christinewongyap.com