

Seeking Out – A Transformation Myth of the Material Power under Regional Modernity

by Kao Chien-Hui

1. Produce · Material · Local-color

Since 2013, Lo Yi-Chun has developed a personal artistic expression using local materials at various residencies and site-specific projects. The chromatic transformation of natural material is a part of the artistic expression presented in her series of works “Black · Gold · White”. The polysemy of “物色” (Wùsè) as “Substance color” as well as “Seeking Out” captures Lo Yi-Chun’s creative use of black, gold, and white colors in tracing the local economic development through historical materialism.

The motivation to “seek out” is inspired by the artist’s personal life experience.¹ For years, her family has run a neighborhood vegetarian restaurant. The fluctuations in the fortunes of small businesses and the impact on the livelihood of ordinary people caused by crop shortages and natural disasters made a deep impression on her. On the other hand, her time at the Hsinchu Education University (now integrated into the National Tsing Hua University) and later, the Taiwan University of the Arts, made “material art” an important and viable mode of creative expression for her. Furthermore, various artist residencies also engaged her in the historical and global dialogue of economic crops. These experiences have helped Lo Yi-Chun form an artistic practice style in which local products are placed in a global scope.

The insight into use of local agricultural materials through artistic means to reveal the relationship between the natural environment and human society has prompted Lo Yi-Chun to explore the local, historical, and creative economic connections from the colonial period to the present globalized age. She has continued to use natural materials as her creative tools in the historical context of Taiwan’s cash crops as well as the logistic chains that link East Asia and the world economy since the maritime era. At the same time, she has also thought about commodities and immigration in a globalized world. Beginning with the individual and taking an artistic, creative standpoint, Lo Yi-Chun’s aesthetic and cultural perspective on “materiality” is an entry point into her creative concepts.

The artist’s cognition of the materiality, narrative, and nature of materials can be contextualized through some artistic movements about matters of aesthetics and materiality within modern art history.² Among those movements, the phenomenological aesthetic movement concerning materiality has undergone several transformations. In post-war France, “Art Informel” deliberated the spiritual issue of material and body.³ The Japanese “Gutai School” explored the energy between creative states and material.⁴ In the late 1960s Japan, the economic recovery and the subsequent material desires gave rise to “Mono-ha”, which sought to “identify things” and revert the dynamics of interaction between material and body to existence, materiality and the environment.

In this aesthetic context, Japanese artists tried to use natural materials such as earth, stone, wood, and iron to emphasize certain internal and external relationships and create “new meanings.” (新語義). Additionally, in the 1970s, “Mono-ha” also had a cross-domain dialogue with Western “landscape art” and produced internationalist art that interacted with the material and the environment. In the late 20th century, in addition to good use of material products and making new forms, material artists also explored the relationship between natural and industrial materials. They did so through the deconstruction of language and concepts, and paid attention to the dynamics between art, nature, and environmental ecology.

The material use of local products breaks away from the phenomenological “thing-self relationship” and connects to the material context of deconstruction and reconstruction. In the new dynamic between material and culture, the locality of material is regarded as a regional symbol. The art

residency creations, site-specific works, and other creative expressions that have emerged over the past century have enabled the artists to focus on the search and interpretation of local, natural, and cultural materials.

Lo Yi-Chun's "Black · Gold · White" trilogy is composed of bananas, tobacco leaves, and sugarcane, which are prominent cash crops. The three-color reference is richly symbolic and produced through reprocessing. In terms of form and meaning, the created objects have duality and complexity. Therefore, behind these three "substance colors", there exists a myth of material transformation under regional modernity.

2. Name · Signify · Post-structure

Through the transformation of materials such as banana peel, tobacco, bagasse, and deer skin, as well as the reconstruction of objects, image files, and spatial installations, Lo Yi-Chun reveals her interest in exploring the transnational migration of products. In addition to archiving, her site-specific work facilitates a dialogue between "presence" and "absence".

Banana peels, tobacco, and bagasse are among Taiwan's major cash crops. Due to Taiwan's position in the regional supply chain and world economy since the time of maritime exploration, these crops are related to the flow of materials and people. Taking the product culture of human geography as a starting point, Lo Yi-Chun's "Taste of Ocean", part of her "Banana Series", is a portrait of migrant workers using sun-dried banana peels and reveals the labor and individuality that moves the industry. "Deer Rug" uses air-dried banana peels to create the image of Sika deerskin. In the context of historical materialism, this series demonstrates an attempt to propose a "modernity myth in the colonial experience."

The first part of "Black · Gold · White", the "Black" is characterized by the banana peels that turn from yellow to black when dried. The second part, "Gold", the crop used is the tobacco from southern Taiwan which has more than a century-long history in the region. In addition to a one-year residency in Meinong, Taipei, and Japan, Lo Yi-Chun further supplemented her work through research into literary works and other documents by a local writer Zhong Li-He (鍾理和) and interaction with local tobacco farmers. The "jasmine" in Lo Yi-Chun's "Golden Jasmine" is not the jasmine flower but the brand name of the first batch of

Taiwanese paper-rolled cigarettes produced in 1915. The name may have been derived from the association with scent, but the "golden jasmine" also signified two plants in one name: first, the addictive tobacco products and the other, thirst-quenching jasmine tea. Therefore, the flame-dried, golden-yellow "tobacco leaf shreds" appeared in Lo Yi-Chun's Golden Jasmine exhibition hall with alternative material meaning and connected the stories behind the two products. The creation of "tobacco carpet" and "bamboo slip album" using dried tobacco leaves as symbolic carriers advanced the form and meaning of the material and returned them as a resource for craftsmanship.

Lo Yi-Chun used the form of leather to address the ideas of "deprivation" and "protection".⁵Take, for example, the "tame" deer and the "brave" clouded leopard. Animal hides, "deer skin" and "leopard skin", have an important place as hunting trophies. The creation of these different objects brings out a "deformation" that produces an equivalent "signification" in exchange.⁶When the artist chooses clove tobacco, a crop from the colonial period in Indonesia, to make clouded leopard skin, or uses banana peels to make deer skin, it is an attempt to highlight the cultural and colonial history based on the distribution and connection of species in Southeast Asia. In a way, the relationship between the "tobacco plant" and "clouded leopard animal" is based on social, historical, and political narratives. Bananas, deerskin, tobacco leaves, and clouded leopard skin, beyond their symbolic meaning in the history of colonial economic exploitation, are transformed into symbolic forms like "black gold" and "blood diamonds".

From the name, essence, and function of the objects, the signifier, signified, and the sign itself in Lo Yi-Chun's works have already experienced the possibility of a framing system and extension. When natural objects transform into historical objects, the information and meaning separate from the object and undergo a transition from "disclosure" to "connection". Through this symbolic transformation, the works are contextualized as concepts to create a sign that is bounded by history, culture, and ecology. After the interpretation of historical texts and discourses is applied to the sign and signification, the form and meaning is further transformed into the concept of "naturalization".

3. Addictions · Consumption · Combat-power

“White” , the final part of “Black · Gold · White” , is “sugar cane” and the related “sugar culture” . With the transition from post-colonial modernity to the contemporaneity of global consumer culture, Lo Yi-Chun entered another phase of the dynamic transfer of “local material resources” .

The source of the “sugar” products that have been an addictive presence around the world for five centuries is the “sugar cane” . Lo Yi-Chun began her research into Taiwan’s sugar history in 2018 when she was invited to participate in the “Madou Sugar Industry Art Triennial” in Tainan. By this time, she had gradually progressed from the reflective historical thinking to interpretation, transformation, and connection of the past to contemporary culture. From the “sugar cane” as a crop to the refined material “sucrose” to the sweet substance known as “sugar” , this multi-layered transformation of sign and signification has allowed the artist to explore the idea of “alienation” in the understanding of product material.

From mellow to sharp, from sharp to explosive, Lo Yi-Chun discovered that the cane sugar industry has a hidden use. During the late Japanese Occupation era and the Second World War, in addition to the sugar production, the sugar factories also fermented “molasses” into “alcohol” (butanol), and used it as jet fuel for Japanese fighter planes. Lo Yi-Chun used bagasse to create farm tools and then combined these farm tools to form a bagasse model of a Japanese fighter jet (N1K2-J Shiden-Kai). After the conversion of cane sugar from agricultural to civilian and later, military use, the “sugar cane” no longer points to mere “sucrose” . It belongs to the imaginary “sucrose” of dietary function as well as the “gasoline substitute” for military use. From sucrose to ethanol, the artist has followed the transformation of the “sweet” product into the “explosive” product. In other words, the “sugar cane” in these works is not used in the same way as the original meaning of bananas, tobacco leaves, deer, and clouded leopard. Rather, it points to the positive and negative energy that “sucrose” has brought to modern life.

Between 2019 and 2021, Lo Yi-Chun created a new series of works aiming at the bodybuilding and fitness trends among the young and urban citizens. The title of the work is “Molasses, Ethanol, Fitness Workshops – just what is it that makes today’s life so different, so appealing?” and is adapted from the title of a 1956 collage by British pop

artist Richard Hamilton. Drawing from consumer media, Hamilton’s collage includes sexy bodybuilders, lollipop-like sports equipment, canned food, popular comics, household appliances, and modern consumerist attributes. Echoing it, Lo Yi-Chun presents a consumerist myth of Taiwan’s petit bourgeois fitness culture.

Lo Yi-Chun’s “modern fitness myth” is created with “bagasse” and uses the conceptual transformation from “sugar” to “calories” to highlight the transition from historical demand for “sugar” to its contemporary aversion. In the modern idea of healthy life, “sugar reduction” has become a lifestyle. If bananas are healthy foods and tobacco leaves are addictive, then sugar intake is a metabolic necessity. Sugar promotes the release of dopamine and serotonin in the brain, which temporarily make people feel comfortable and happy. Blood sugar and mood are affected with the ingestion of sweets and there is a necessary balancing mechanism in our bodies to control the chemical flow. Compared with the nutritious “banana” and the addictive “tobacco” , the caloric value and meaning of “sugar cane” extends differently as it transforms from natural food to manufactured “sucrose” .

“Desserts” are “luxury foods” that were only affordable to the upper classes in the past. They signify “temptation” or “desire” . In the present age, they still represent “exquisite” or “refined” life among the petite bourgeoisie and yet, also a “taboo” for certain petite bourgeoisie intellectuals. From “avoiding sugar and reducing fat” to “ketogenic diet” , this health “taboo” has a contradictory link to the fitness “guidelines” . As fitness became a national pastime, people’s pursuit and avoidance of sucrose lead to a “deconstruction of sugar myths” in the capitalist consumer world. With this expansion and contraction of “sugar culture” , the term “sucrose” began to have malignant connotations. It is associated with words such as “obesity” , “indulgence” , “unrestraint” , “harmful” , and “silent killer” .

The museum serves as a gym. Lo Yi-Chun has transformed the “sugar calories” from “calories” to “combat-power” . She has used leftovers from processing of sugar cane such as bagasse and molasses as media and turned them into different fitness and training equipment or “weapons” . Most of these are inspired by remodeling of different farming tools, combined with the form of military weapons, and then made into a variety of fitness and training equipment. In this “conversation space between sugar and fitness” , there are

bullet-shaped dumbbells, kettlebells that resemble mine bombs, curved barbell, plows turned into exercise bikes, and a “lat pull-down machine” connected to a bagasse model of Japanese Shiden-Kai fighter jet equipped with bagasse farming tools. Combining the military, training, and fitness attributes, these form a range of objects, sculptures, and installations. In the transition of symbol and significance, Lo Yi-Chun has uncovered another layer of “battle myth” related to modern physical fitness.

The product is a metaphor for the local landscape, global economic engagement, and modern consumerist life. Lo Yi-Chun’s “Black · Gold · White” can be considered in historical materialism context as proposing a relationship between local material culture and aesthetics. In the methodology of “materials as a cultural substitute”, her work utilizes three approaches. The first is literary and historical research based on the local product, the second is the thinking about the transition between matter and energy, and finally, the third is her personal and social observations of contemporary life. From naming to meaning to signification, Lo Yi-Chun proceeds through a post-structuralist modern myth-making process. Through the research, deconstruction, and reconstruction of material and material power, the context of her exploration for “Black · Gold · White” has also progressed from that of the colonial economy to global consumerist life.

¹ The interview with the artist took place on October 15, 2021 at Wellsun Hotel, Taipei.

² The artist mentioned that her materiality is influenced by the “Mono-ha” school.

³ In 1952, French art theorist Michel Tapié (1909-1987) proposed “l’art informel” (informal art) in “Un art autre” (Art of another Kind), which is a European abstract expression to make an aesthetic claim and set it apart from the American action painting and lyrical abstraction. Other artists identified by Tapié’s “Informal Art” include Italian-American Enrico Donati, Lucio Fontana of Argentine-Italian origin, Agenore Fabbri and Alberto Burri from Italy, Asger Jorn from Denmark, Emil Schumacher from Germany, Spain’s Antoni Tàpies, and Japan’s Gutai Group.

⁴ The “Gutai Manifesto” published in 1956 by Japanese artist Jiro Yoshihara proposed that “spirit” and “things” could be freely released and reveal “the essence of things” as an unprecedented creative state.

⁵ In 2019, Lo Yi-Chun was invited to be artist in residence at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) in Western Australia. She used the “Australian grass tree” and “Kangaroo grass” to create a Kangaroo-like animal hide. She sees leather as a protective layer, alluding to the vegetation needed to preserve the landscape. She also created a Fox-like animal hide to express the phenomenon of ecological transfer between alien and native species.

⁶ The term “equivalent” (valant-pour) here comes from Roland Barthes (1915-1980). In his *Mythologies*, the chapter “Myth as a semiological system” mentions that the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” is not “equal” but “equivalent”.