

# sculpture

May 2016  
Vol. 35 No. 4

A publication of the  
International Sculpture Center  
[www.sculpture.org](http://www.sculpture.org)



\$7.50 05>



0 74820 64837 7

# Anne Chu



## Making Sense of Cultural Chaos

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Anne Chu is a mid-career, New York-based sculptor and painter whose work reflects many years of familiarity with the city's art museums. Her parents came from China—her father was a mathematics professor at Columbia University—yet she does not identify closely with Chinese culture. Instead, her sculptures reflect a thorough knowledge of world art, much of it coming from Western sources, the result of years of gallery and museum going. Chu's highly informed involvement in art history has resulted in a singular vision. Her quietly glorious sculptures, which place a contemporary sensibility in genuine dialogue with the past, have an ad hoc, but never excessively informal, sense of the present.

Chu grew up in New York City. When she was in middle school, her family moved to Westchester County, north of the city. She graduated from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts) in 1982 and received an MFA from Columbia University in 1985. She is perhaps not as well known in America as she should be, despite numerous awards, including a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation grant in 1997, a 1999 award from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Penny McCall Award in 2001, and a Guggenheim fellowship in 2010. Now working in a comfortably sized studio in Long Island City, Chu addresses her efforts toward a synthesis of painting and sculpture that blends a sense of physical impermanence with a powerful vision of art's potential. This melding of contingency and the long view gives her work its remarkable strength.

Above: *Equus* (detail), 2014. Leather, metal, and porcelain, 92 x 132 x 72 in.  
Opposite: *Lepus*, 2014. Wood, leather, metal, and ceramic, 130 x 120 x 60 in.



JEAN YVES, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD. NY



Left: *Flower Drawing No. 1*, 2011. Glazed ceramic, fabric, and wire, 60 x 48 x 48 in. Right: *Rattus No. 2 (underwater landscape)*, 2015. Wood, leather, resin, and fabric, 90 x 40 x 35 in.

Both insights are evident in even comparatively simple works. Chu made both the fabric flowers and the ceramic vase in *Flower Drawing No. 1* (2011). She has always favored a certain roughness of expression, but in accordance with a deep-seated feeling for expressive, even deliberate, beauty. As a result, her work becomes a synthesis of only seemingly oppositional elements. The flowers consist of similar shapes, but each one has been configured to look different from the others. Some of the brilliance of Chu's hand is evident: genuine and artificial at the same time, the flowers belong to the inspired artifice of craft and art.

The vase, on the other hand, evinces rawness: regular ridges define its construction, and the surface is rough, with sections pared down into a kind of relief. The construction looks rather like a bad piece of plastering, an effect that Chu obviously desired. We can even see the white of the clay in places. *Flower Drawing No. 1* occupies a zone of multiple contradiction—genuine and

fake, deliberately constructed and unconsciously inspired.

The glazing of the vase is more than decorative—it realizes an applied, perfectly compelling beauty. The greater part of the form is covered with shellfish orange, with patches of deep blue and an area of untreated white. One is reminded of the Romantic era's fascination with ruins and its preference for the rough over the finished. Chu, too, opts for the unfinished or slightly damaged. More recent work echoes this treatment of the vase. By mixing surfaces, allusions, and materials, Chu demonstrates a passion for a modified quotation of art history and calls on us to accept a mixed assortment of effects. Her vision changes, and is changed by, what she sees and has seen.

*Lepus* (2014), a wood, metal, and ceramic rabbit wearing a leather vest, is part of Chu's small menagerie of animals, including bears, horses, and rats. The outsize, erect ears lend an aura of faint humor. Indeed, Chu relies on a slightly comic sensibility

because her work needs a bit of distortion to balance its earnest quotations. The downward thrust of the rabbit's long, slightly angled front legs is offset by the placement of three patterned cloths hanging from the ceiling. This work, like Chu's other recent sculptures, is rooted in improvisation—of form, materials, craft, emotions, and ideas.

In *Rattus No. 2 (underwater landscape)* (2015), a vertical sweep of a piece, Chu works mostly with textures. A resin pedestal rising from wooden feet supports several swatches of fabric, and the work culminates with an abstract yellow form. At once extremely elegant and, to an extent, anti-formal, the assemblage first contrasts, then transcends oppositions. The decorative elements of the fabric and leather cloths offer a range of colors and effects: red, maze-like imagery, patterns taken from the sea, and pastel striping. A single rat rests on a blue cloth. Though visually attractive, these components do not meld into an easy overall gestalt.

The deliberate use of seemingly warring elements shows that Chu is willing to take chances as an artist. But such a riot of influences also describes the possibilities of change that occur in modern life, which is riddled with contradictions and insights that have been eclectically gathered and juxtaposed. All of contemporary culture can be understood as being at cross-purposes, with a heterogeneous existentialism taking over the cutting edge. This means that our perceptions tend to be intense and fragmentary—much like our perception of Chu's work.

*Figure* features a glazed ceramic figure whose face and body closely follow a work by Bernini. The head is particularly sensitive,

both in its own right and as a version of Bernini's angelic vision. Behind the sculpture, a gray head hangs just above the ground; it is a version of a Chinese guardian figure. And behind that stands a column of brown fabric—*Rattus (Brown) No. 2*—directly connected to the ceiling; its two rectangular openings are filled with images of a rat in motion. These are both works in progress, but they already possess the gravity of something finished. Seen in conjunction with *Rattus No. 2*, the general effect of this procession is highly original, with the ceramic figure leading a group of otherwise mostly non-objective works.

Chu truly distinguishes herself in this sequence of pieces. Her amalgam of abstrac-

tion and figuration, surface pattern and sculptural form, demonstrates the originality of her creative intelligence. Both formally and conceptually, the work is more accomplished and organized than the mélange-like array of imagery would lead us to believe. In a way, Chu's arrangement of visual effects echoes the crazy quilt of images that bombards us on the streets and on television and computer screens. Everything happens now without regard for historical or geographical or cultural organization. Chu makes sense of the visual chaos facing us in daily life.

*Jonathan Goodman is a writer based in New York.*

Below: *Single Bear (Bronze and Aluminum)*, 2008. Nickel, silver, bronze, and anodized aluminum, 71 x 31.5 x 26 in. Right: View of work in progress in the artist's studio with (right) *Figure*, (left) *Head*, (middle) *Rattus (Brown) No. 2*, and (rear) *Rattus No. 2 (underwater landscape)*.

