

MIGRATION, CULTURAL MEMORY AND ADAPTATION

SOHEILA ESFAHANI AND GU XIONG



SOHEILA ESFAHANI
Wish on Water [installation view], 2013-14

How does the theme of migration with regard to water and culture operate in your thinking and practice?

S: The act of migration as the physical movement of people from one place to another has informed my approach to culture. This movement contributes to the emergence of the notion of cultural translation within the domain of post-colonial discourse. In my practice, my focus is on the notion of *translation* in its etymological meaning, as the process of “carrying across” units of culture from one culture to another culture. Therefore, in my work the theme of migration and subsequently cultural translation opens up non-Western (other) perspectives in regards to water and culture.

G: Regarding migration and water, for the past two years, the focus of my research and my art practice has revolved around the international seasonal workers and their living situations on Canadian farms among the waterways. I am interested in the living conditions of the workers, their repeated heavy and dull work, as well as the oppression, memories, sentiments and homesicknesses they experience during their extended periods of labour in a foreign country.

There are countless seasonal farm workers from countries such as Mexico, Nicaragua and Jamaica in both the eastern and the western regions of Canada. This year, the population of seasonal workers has reached 300,000 people. The current emphasis on globalization has established a specific working environment and conditions for this group. They have to endure their lives within this system, in order to fulfill the extensive demands associated with this profession.

To this day, the population of international seasonal workers in Canada is still rising.

Cultural practices regarding water, and memory, present themselves in your work; do you agree?

S: Yes, I have focused on specific cultural practices regarding water in my work. Contrary to the formation of the notion of landscape in Western countries around the presence of bodies of water, the notion of landscape in dry climates, such as the deserts of central Iran, is not defined by depiction of rivers, lakes, etc. However, water as a vital source of life still plays an essential role in such climates. *Sagha Khaneh* (houses of watercarriers/providers) provided drinking water to travellers and passersby in Iran for centuries. These water stations were commonly built close to natural springs by travel routes. The thirsty traveller would receive a drink of water traditionally in a bowl and light a candle in hopes of realization of a wish. My work is centred on cultural practices associated with *Sagha Khaneh*. It also draws a comparison between the tradition of wishing on water in *Sagha Khaneh* and various traditions of wishing on water around the world – from wishing wells to tossing coins in the water features of shopping malls.

G: I do. The history of seasonal workers in Canada can be traced back to forty years ago. Every day, after doing their repeated daily manual heavy labour from sunrise to sunset, they return to their isolated rooms in the field alone. There is no television or Internet; they can only communicate with

their families through cellphones and by using calling cards. They can only rely on sound, and on vague memories, to maintain their relationships with their families. They were once forbidden to have contact with local women, and were deported immediately if reported. Only in church are they allowed to have contact with the locals, a restrained communication gained through trading on their faith.

The produce, fruits and vegetables, which they harvest, are labelled as “Locally Made,” branding that completely erases their identity as international labourers. They lose their true identity while becoming living tools. Day by day, month after month, year after year, some spend their entire lives in this endless cycle of invisibility.

Speaking of the effects of globalization regarding water on workers in culture, it must be said that Chinese farmers have also needed to enter rapidly developing cities as migrant workers. By contrast, in developed countries, globalization’s current flow takes seasonal workers into the industry of the gradually fading farms. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the common fate of such workers is the same as that of educated youths: to strive for fundamental rights – fairness, justice and dignity. Only in obtaining these rights can they finally live in the world as true citizens.

The Niagara Falls pour rapidly with rage, splashing their waters, spraying tens of metres high. It is the rupture of the river that helps the waterfall gain its magnificence, and people choose only to see the beauty of the falls. No one knows the pain of the broken river. For me, the seasonal workers are just like the broken river. The water also rushes down their bodies, carrying their painful experiences, their longing for their families, their loneliness and the struggles they experience in this strange foreign land. Everything comes together, and flows to a place unknown to all.

Is the theme of adaptation important to you and your work?

S: Yes, because I am an immigrant, the theme of adaptation has been an important aspect of my life in Canada and consequently has influenced my art practice. Adaptation is the bridge that links various cultural practices and ways of thinking in both my life and art. In my current art practice, I explore the processes involved in cultural transfer and

transformation and how these processes open up a space of negotiation, and the emergence of a new object within a space of in-betweenness. I view adaptation as part of these processes. However, adaptation may not necessarily result in assimilation, but rather may create hybridization.

G: All cultures are complex, but the one into which you are born is the one you come to understand most profoundly. Thus, this influence is what finds its way into the work of an artist and, I believe, is expressed almost instinctively. If a person should move to another culture, he or she must make both a conscious and instinctive adjustment in seeking to understand what at first is a strange new world. It is within this dynamic milieu that I have found myself. This conflict of cultures in my work is in a state of constant evolution. It is a continuous generation of “artistic electricity” that fuels change, in both my personal life and my work as a contemporary artist.

Through the years, the direction of my research has centred on the creation of a hybrid (maybe even an “adaptive”) cultural identity. Cultural conflict erupts when the individual and society undergo a process of change. A new cultural identity is born as individuals reconstitute themselves through their own cultural practice. My research always draws on the critical angle of visual art as a point of departure, and then encompasses other areas of knowledge such as sociology, geography, economics, politics and literature. It addresses integration and assimilation, histories both collective and personal, and cultural synthesis across boundaries. My art seeks to delve into the dynamics of globalization, local culture and individual shifts in identity, and to rethink the spaces where global culture flows.

These shifts do not merely constitute a simple amalgamation of two original subjects, but instead seek to create an entirely new space. Alone and isolated from its birth, this new individual identity is nevertheless open and free. Visible and invisible global forces of social and cultural homogenization have overtaken the world. In this environment, individual spaces embody the seeds of difference and alterity. It is the construction of this new level of being in which I am interested. My art expresses this process, drawing upon my own life experience of displacement and rebirth in Canada.



GU XIONG

Jamaican Migrant Worker #8, 2014