

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET  
HARTFORD CT 06106  
860 232 1006  
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Step Up" competition in 2004, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Step Up" was juried by Joe Amrhein, Owner/Director of Pierogi 2000, Artist Ellen Driscoll, and Tumelo Mosaka, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Carriage House Drive, gouache on paper, 2004, 11 x 15", courtesy of the artist.

# Amy Chan



The Peaceable Kingdom, 2005, gouache on paper, 76 x 100", courtesy of the artist.

## Utopia, USA

By Kimberly A. Masteller and Donovan B. Dodrill

A painting is an object. The materials of sculpture are part of its subject. Picasso's assembled collages used cardboard and newspaper to make reference to the world of three dimensions. Today, after Donald Judd's open forms and Sol Lewitt's linear structures, Modernity can be sampled from the debris of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> In Post Modern art this sampling is often what enables the work to turn back towards itself, becoming self-aware, self-referential. Amy Chan's painting samples from a world full of competing interests both on aesthetic and socio-political levels.

Chan's painting has been moving toward an exploration of the three dimensional spaces they occupy, sampling from the visual debris of her life specific to the Northeastern United States. Chan claims, "my paintings portray 'new ecosystems' that are created in our landscape as a result of the close crowding of human development with nature...The fragmented landmasses echo the East Coast suburbs where nature, suburban development and historical remains closely border each other but seldom mix."<sup>2</sup> In so doing, these paintings become self-aware. Chan's simple illustrative depictions of unremarkable suburban homes call to mind wallpaper patterns. Indeed, subsequent to her exhibition at Real Art Ways, she produced wall paintings at the Wave

Amy Chan received her BFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design in 2000. She has shown at The Rotunda Gallery, Wave Hill, Rush Arts, The Bronx Museum and has received the Special Editions Fellowship from the Lower East Side Printshop. She was born in Danbury, CT and currently lives in Brooklyn.

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Hill Glyndor Gallery in the Bronx, New York. She has also begun producing a limited run of wallpaper. While referring to a specific location and time (e.g. Riverdale, Yonkers, or western Connecticut) her paintings are removed from that setting and become a portable motif on an otherwise bare gallery wall.

Upon entering her installation, the viewer is confronted by an idealized world. The suburban home becomes an archetypical image of mundane life. It is a symbol of the American dream void of context. Often drained of details like driveways and power lines, the homes are generalized and idealized in their isolation. As if to underscore their generalization, Chan's thin applications of paint are also nearly devoid of any evidence of the artist's hand. Such signs of artistic authenticity would only detract from the emptiness that is the power of the American dream. Chan's paintings remind us that homogene-

**Tri-boro, 2005, acrylic on wall, 2 sections each 10 x 12', installed at the Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery, Bronx, NY.**



ity is a form of idealization and that, while it may be unattractive in theory, homogeneity is a corporate magic bullet, a marketing triumph, just like the American dream.

There is another way that Chan's work evokes a peculiarly American self-perception, although this seems almost unconscious, more the result of an increasingly globalized stock of visual strategies. Nonetheless, the familiar image of the United States as a melting pot, a great cultural and religious homogenizing process bears on the artist's compositional choices as well. Not only does her work blend the Minimalist trend toward site-specificity and the Pop elevation of lowly popular design, but her isolation of suburban homes or retail stores on a blank field recall certain Eastern practices often reserved for the embellishment of religious sites, as much as they evoke the decorating choice of the western aspiring middle class, toile wallpaper.

Standing in the gallery, the viewer is surrounded by ranch and suburban homes floating against a white ground. By treating her subject in this manner, Chan has in effect enshrined it. As Carol Duncan has demonstrated in her work on museums and reception theory, the gallery space and the constructs that it creates for its audience is similar to a religious experience, replicating a ritual or sacred space.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the austere white ground of these neoclassical gallery walls provide space to invoke Chan's icon, the mid-twentieth century American home. *Peaceable Kingdom's* playful illustrations of iconographic retail stores float in perpetual openness separated by a defining white space not unlike Zen painting. The subjects of Zen painting are defined by their absence of form. Mountain temples seem to float in a heavy mist. The void created by a mist becomes more important than the temple itself.

Based upon similarities in composition and an ironic relationship in content, one may make a comparison between this installation and the painted caves filled with Buddhist imagery found in Central Asia and China. When visitors entered the caves at Dunhuang they left the reality of the mundane world and moved into a shrine space that illustrated a conceptual paradise. In many caves, the viewer was surrounded on all sides by images from Buddhist paradises filled with gardens and palaces and celestial inhabitants. These heaven worlds float against a flat ground, suspended

above the physical world. Chan's *Peaceable Kingdom* evokes many of the same relationships in its composition of isolated structures and reduced landscapes. Although the artist may not have intended to reference Buddhist cave imagery in her installation, the visual relationships between these interiors is present. Connections between cave imagery and Chan's interior is even more poignant, as the perfect Buddhist heaven worlds of the Sixth Century translate into ironic visions of an American utopia in the early Twenty First Century.

Perhaps *UHAUL* makes Chan's point most succinctly. Standing atop a featureless rectilinear building stands a sign that reads "UHAUL." The sign itself composed of five linear squares each suspended in space by a solitary gray pole, forming an open man-made grid, partially occludes the steeple of a church or the clock tower of a courthouse. In either case symbolic of the center of an authentic community. It is only through this grid that we may see the clock tower, the remnant of older values. These structures dissolve on all sides onto the bleak ground of an empty page. This is a reductive image with little imagery and a limited palate. It conveys a sense of emptiness and loss. It should not be lost on the viewer that a UHAUL is the literal vehicle of our departure away from real values toward a more attainable, but less desirable American dream. That dream is most aptly depicted in *Peaceable Kingdom*.

In *Peaceable Kingdom*, bland linear compositions reference everyday retail brands in fantastic settings. Although the white space provides a unifying narrative, that space separates rather than joins her sometimes whimsical commercial fronts.

*Carriage House Drive* again evokes memories of Chinese painting, in this case the monumental landscape paintings that developed during the Tang Dynasty and continue to be produced today. The narrow horizontal format of Chan's painting is reminiscent of the vertical hanging scroll format. This format allows Chan to frame the prominent green hill while cropping out other landscape elements, in the same way that the hanging scroll enables Chinese artists to explore singular imposing mountains as their primary subject. Chan's narrow composition is dominated by a whimsical, steeply pitched hill, producing a green field of color that flattens the composition. The hill is capped with a colonial home. The house inhabits an uneasy position; the high ground, which should be the most desirable piece of real estate. However,



**U-Haul, gouache on paper, 2005, gouache on paper, 36 x 80", courtesy of the artist.**

the house sits at an oblique angle. Tipping away it is visually overpowered by its formidable front yard. The yard is washed out with thin applications of transparent paint again offering no evidence of hand. The house depicted in *Carriage House Drive* occupies at the same time a prominent and a precarious position upon such an ephemeral foundation.

Even while Chan's subject matter comments on the increasingly precarious balance between development and open space, her approach is rooted in an equally careful balance between image and void, and between Minimalism and Pop. More provocatively, her global visual references suggest a way of balancing a sometimes precarious East/West dialogue.

*Kimberly Masteller is the Assistant Curator of Islamic and Later Indian Art at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University. Donovan Dodrill earned his MFA in painting from The Ohio State University. He is now a practicing attorney in the Boston area.*

<sup>1</sup> In Donald Judd's 1965 essay *Specific Objects* he observed that "half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture."

<sup>2</sup> Letter from the artist dated September 28, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See Carol Duncan's discussion of the museum experience as a secular ritual in "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship" in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine ed. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990 p. 88-103