

# Gayle Chong Kwan

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Gayle Chong Kwan / The Obsidian Isle  
January 2012  
Interviewed by Christiane Monarchi

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Gayle Chong Kwan (b. 1973 in Scotland) is a London-based artist whose large-scale photographic works, installations, sound works and videos have been exhibited internationally. Chong Kwan creates *mise-en-scène* landscapes and environments out of arrangements of waste products, sensory memories, food remains, and documentary sources, to interrogate notions of the 'join' and the 'gap' and the impact of tourism, master planning and urban development in relation to the landscape. Her exhibition 'The Obsidian Isle' first previewed at the New Forest Pavilion, 54th Biennale di Venezia, 2011 before showing at Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, until December 2011 and continuing to Milan and Aberdeen this Spring. Christiane Monarchi investigates the background and inspiration behind this highly acclaimed series.

Christiane Monarchi: *In discussing the background to your recent series 'The Obsidian Isle', you have mentioned an interest in Ossian, the blind third-century poet whose tales were supposedly collected by James Macpherson in the 18th century, and distilled into poetic imagery which helped shape public ideas of Scottish national identity and Romanticism throughout Europe. How has this interest manifested itself in your creation of the fictional Obsidian Isle?*

Gayle Chong Kwan: My fascination with Ossian began in 2009, when I had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout Scotland as part of my commission for the Vauxhall Collective Photography Award I won. In the same year the Scottish Government's 'Homecoming Scotland' was articulating and packaging very particular and partial perspectives on Scotland's history. The controversy and legacy of 'Ossian' resonates strongly with my interest in fictionalised terrains, the Romantic landscape, collective memories and competing histories. Macpherson's 'Ossian' was influential in the development of new notions of the Scottish (and in particular Highland) landscape, and articulated a changing relationship between national identity, history and landscape both nationally and internationally.

My research and experimental work developed into 'The Obsidian Isle', a fictional island on which exist Scotland's lost and destroyed buildings and places: from structures that fell into dereliction after the Highland Clearances; buildings destroyed during the Second World War; places torn down to make way for new developments; to structures which collapsed from poor construction. Through this I explored ideas of fragments and memories in relation to an epic whole, and then the subsequent disruption and dissolution back into altered parts. All the works in 'The Obsidian Isle' both support and contradict, or at least provide different versions, of the island itself.

I created a series of ten large-scale large-format photographs which function in-the-round as an immersive installation, sculptural works in the form of sensory aids for use on the island, a series of oval 'mirrored' works, tactile 'blind' photographic prints, a cyclorama map of the island and a limited edition publication with wrap around map, and a final print in which the view of the island is almost completely obscured by a storm.

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My research at Dunkeld, which is a site of homage and form of touristic pilgrimage to Ossian, was integral to the development of the work, with Ossian's Cave provided a framing device for each of the large works, whilst the relationship between the Romantic landscape and the senses relate to the specific features of Dunkeld's Ossian's Hall.

*CM: Looking closely at the works, it appears that each of your compositions contains photographic elements sculpturally crafted in a three dimensional studio construction, then re-presented in a large scale photograph with the vivid tonality and shallow depth of field to invite visual comparison to both Romantic landscape painting and the genre of aftermath photography. How does the process of construction in the studio progress toward a finished work, and when do you consider the sculptural installation to be an integral part of the exhibition?*

GCK: The works are constructed in quite complex and different ways, combining medium format photographs taken and objects gathered from around Scotland, as well as using found images from paintings, prints and drawings and photographs, written descriptions of places and buildings that no longer exist, and three-dimensional elements, which are re-made as mise-en-scènes of different vistas looking out from Ossian's Cave. Obsidian is a black volcanic material which, when highly polished, was used as an early form of mirror. It both reflects and absorbs images, akin to the ways in which places that are lost and destroyed still persists as traces or obscured memories in our collective imagination and histories.

'The Obsidian Isle' also refers to the role of the senses in ideas of the 'Romantic' landscape and the use of mirroring and framing optical devices in landscape painting in the 18th and 19th centuries. Sightlessness and the role of the senses in relation to the landscape are in Macpherson's Ossian. The eye is often regarded as the organ of distance and separation, during overpowering emotional moments we tend to close off our sense of vision. Perspectival representation made the eye the centre point of our perceptual world as well as concept of the self. Plato thought sight nature's most important gift and insisted that the ethical universals must be accessible to the 'minds eye'. Knowledge is analogous with clear vision, light is regarded as a metaphor for truth. I am interested in exploring the relationship between photography and the other non-visual senses, and the frustrations and synaesthetic cross-linkages inherent in these relationships.

I have been interested in allowing the viewer to travel through the photographic image, to try to amplify the monumentality of detail, or to part from it. The landscape can involve an alternation of expansion and contraction. For me, this links up with the ebb and flow of memory. Memory shuffles in between landmarks and rests on particular details to erect a wider totality. A blurring or contrast between focal planes can allow shapes to be summoned and dismissed. Memories are not simply stored images to be drawn out of the brain at appropriate intervals but instead are formed as interactions between the past and present. In the connection between memory and space, there is a kind of fragile topography where memory and fantasy merge. Often I like to play with repeated elements or tropes of the landscape genre in relation to ruin and theatricality, and constructing large three-dimensional sets which will only be viewed in two-dimension, from one particular angle, as represented in

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the photographic image, relates to the constructed or at least theatricalised nature of the tourist gaze. My work with waste materials in the construction further articulates the behind-the-scene aspect of this, that the gaze of touristic consumption only shows a partial view.

CM: *Where do the images within your images come from, and how did you choose these particular edifices?*

GCK: The photographs feature many lost, destroyed and ruined places: from settlements which were forcibly abandoned or left during the Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries; to the Tait Tower, a 300ft high art deco structure constructed at the summit of the hill in Bellahouston Park as part of the Empire Exhibition in 1938, demolished in 1939, allegedly because it would be a beacon for enemy bombers. I selected the particular buildings and places through a relatively long process and the project had a year long gestation period, which included: a residency in Glasgow with Ricefield and Creative Scotland; an interim work-in-progress exhibition and associated series of workshops during which I collected people's memories of places in Scotland that had disappeared; as well as through a symposium I organised with leading 'Ossian' academics and critics around my 'The Obsidian Isle' and broader notions of an 'Ossianic Landscape'.

CM: *In previous photographic series such as 'The Grand Tour' you had referenced the globalisation of tourism and its impact on environmental heritage. Would you consider contemporary tourism to be knowledgeable of the many Scottish ruins referenced in your tableaux?*

GCK: I first became interested in the tourist or theatrical gaze in during a residency in Mauritius, from which I developed the series, 'Cockaigne' (2004). In 'The Grand Tour' (2007-9) I developed new work to reference, celebrate and critique early forms of tourism and its relationship to landscape, in particular the historical Grand Tour, and its relationship to contemporary tourism, master planning, waste and landscape traditions within fine art. I made new work in sites associated with this in France, Italy and the UK. The Scottish landscape took on more importance in the historical Grand Tour as traveller's attention turned to it as a destination in the light of the French Revolution making travel in the Continent more precarious as well as difficult.

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In my series 'Senscape Scotland' (2009) I played with scale and merging the real and the constructed, as well as using items collected on the road trip, such as the granulated coffee and shortbread biscuits from my stays in bed and breakfasts and hotels along the way. This work was inspired by Daguerre's Dioramas and its connection to Scotland: Edinburgh was the site of one of Daguerre's Diorama Theatres, where visitors could witness painted scenes. Using light effects and sensory elements the dioramas created a cinematic experience, considered to be an early prototype of photography. The two dimensional models were intended to depict scenes and places of interest to audiences hungry to know more about burgeoning tourist sites. The theatrical depiction of the landscapes in 'Senscape Scotland' reflects the way in which Daguerre used his imagination to create the Scottish sites in his dioramas, as he did not actually ever visit Scotland. As a result his Scottish works played with scale and reality, such as Roslyn Chapel appearing more like a Cathedral rather than its actual size as a small chapel. Through the dioramas viewers were able to 'experience' scenes of places already well known in the European and British Grand Tour.

*CM: Best wishes on the next stop of this touring exhibition and accompanying publication, details of which are as follows: 'The Obsidian Isle', Galleria Uno +Uno, Milan 2 February - 30 March, 2012 then on to Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen, Scotland, 23 March - 5 May 2012.*

*'The Obsidian Isle', 2011, a sixty page limited edition publication is available for purchase at [www.gaylechongkwan.com](http://www.gaylechongkwan.com).*

*Full background text accompanying each of the displayed images can be seen at: [streetlevelphotoworks.org/microsite/galleries/gayle-chong-kwan-the-obsidian-isle](http://streetlevelphotoworks.org/microsite/galleries/gayle-chong-kwan-the-obsidian-isle)*