

Gayle Chong Kwan

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Camilla Brown / Gayle Chong Kwan: 'Arripare', 2013
March 2014

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Participation and collaboration have long been at the heart of Gayle Chong Kwan's art practice, which ranges from photography and video to sound work and installation. She has developed work with neuroscientists and also invited members of the public to participate in the creation of her pieces. Recent work includes *Garden of Adonis*, commissioned by Tate Modern in 2013, in which she developed a sensory collaborative dining experience where guests were invited to share dishes cooked using herbs and spices grown in local community gardens. The spices picked related to the spices used in the ancient Greek Festival of Adonia and also the culinary history of the artist's own Scottish and Chinese-Mauritian heritage. In another work *Sensory Banquet*, 2011, commissioned by Eurotunnel and held on the reclaimed land of the nature reserve of Samphire Hoe, Dover, Chong Kwan developed a sensory sound walk and open air banquet. Here she worked with local food producer, employees and volunteers around sensory memories of the area and using foraged food found on the Hoe.

Chong Kwan also has a track record of working internationally with photography in the public realm. In 2008 she worked on *Memoryscape Moravia*, which was developed with the community of Moravia, an area in Medellin in Colombia built on the city's unofficial rubbish dump. In 2007 she developed *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, commissioned by Art on the Underground, in which she worked with London Underground employees, Borough Market traders and catering students to create an ambitious large-scale piece over three London Underground sites. In that context it seems fitting that she is the first winner of the biennial REFOCUS: The Castlegate mima Photography Prize. This commission, and the ongoing Prize, aims to re-position photography as a medium which is able to work on multiple levels – as transitory, but also long-term, as something that is a democratic tool, but also an artform.

The new landmark artwork for Stockton-on-Tees stands at over 38 metres long and is sited all along one side of Castlegate shopping centre, facing outwards towards the River Tees. It will be on display over a two-year period and is intended to connect Stockton residents and visitors with visual art. It aims to engage people's curiosity, creating a talking point across generations, different cultures and demographics. There is a planned two year programme of workshops and projects, with which the artist is involved, working with local artists, schools and art students to encourage and facilitate local engagement with the work.

Chong Kwan has created *Arripare*, a mythical and mystical island seemingly hovering between arrival and appearance or departure and disappearance, following a period of local historical research and engagement with local residents. Chong Kwan's island takes its title from the origin of a word rooted in the sea, 'arrive', and from its vernacular Latin root 'arripare' meaning 'to touch the shore'. It also references Captain Cook's epic voyages on the Endeavour, the area's industrial and historical relationship with the sea, and its international connections. Chong Kwan developed *Arripare* as an alternative version of Stockton and the surrounding areas through research in historic Stockton, Thornaby, the industrial landscapes of Seal Sands, as well as newer developments such as Billingham, Ingleby Barwick, along with other locations along the river.

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Chong Kwan has been keen not to be nostalgic nor clichéd in her representation of Stockton-on-Tees but instead to present a view of place which also reflects the residents' positive feelings about where they live. So alongside iconic architecture, both industrial and classical, she also includes the much loved Sparks Bakery with its optimistic 1920s building alongside modern office blocks, the current lifeblood of the town's industry.

Arripare is an island; this is a recurring subject in Chong Kwan's practice. An island can be both mythical and real. As Dominic Paterson has stated on Chong Kwan's use of islands, "It is worth noting that islands seem frequently to become sites of historical or narrative importance in large part because of the ways in which they solicit fantasies of timelessness or of being outside of history". In particular on her project *The Obsidian Isle*, 2011, he goes further to state "this mnemonic isle seems an ideal solution to the problem of living with, but not in the past, the tone of Chong Kwan's images, with their sense of ruination, uncanniness, and hallucination, intimate that this too is an unattainable or dystopian utopia." Combining complex multiple techniques of documentary photography, collage and sculptural construction, the island *Arripare* is rooted in the context and history of its location and the river which runs alongside it. Yet enveloped in mist, the island could be located in the past, present or future and also could be sighted in the midst of a vast ocean or be hovering somewhere in the clouds.

The work has been meticulously constructed and involved Chong Kwan crafting a new work from hundreds of documentary photographs of the area. The time involved in her sculptural creations should not be under-estimated. Previously Chong Kwan has worked with materials such as discarded food waste and plastic milk bottles. Here she uses the material of photography itself printed out to make a sculpture. We do not see the actual sculpture but the photograph of it. Scale is investigated throughout; the small becomes large, large becomes small and the size and shape of her sculpture is significantly enlarged for this huge end print. In turn this is sited within the wider landscape in which it sits, big enough to be seen from numerous vantage points – half glimpsed across the river, passed by when driving, looming into view when walking over the river's bridge, or viewed amidst the bustle of a busy town.

This natural relationship in Chong Kwan's practice between photography and sculpture and the blurring of the boundaries between the two seems relevant today. One could argue there is an almost indexical link between photography and sculpture which seems to be explored in the work of a number of contemporary artists. Chong Kwan has a relaxed and fluid way of working that allows her to seamlessly move from one medium to another.

The way in which Chong Kwan uses scale and the size of this work suggests a slightly new departure for her. Previously large work such as *Cockaigne*, 2004, seemed to involve the magnification of a small and minuscule world rendered large. This piece has been constructed and evolved to be the size that it is. The artist has spoken particularly of the need to provide space around the island she has constructed. Here she has created a fantasy world writ large, not simply enlarging the work for readability.

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In a talk on how she has made the work Chong Kwan makes reference to a Chinoiserie ceramic plate in a local museum. This reference seems relevant to her new work on a number of levels. Firstly, it refers to the history of trade that is linked to the River Tees. It also speaks more widely of immigration and travel and the historic link between such industrial towns and the wider world both in the past and today. Chinoiserie was of course a westernised version of the oriental. It is how the west viewed Chinese ceramics work and is a completely made up visual language. It reflects taste at that time and is full of misunderstanding and misconstruing otherness, whilst still holding a fascination for the oriental. Chong Kwan explains that she was meticulous in creating the work in relation to the space and site so that the viewer could have the sense of existing between arrival and departure from a sighted and yet distanced island. She has created a place one could almost grasp, yet it is not close enough to be able to really see. It is an island where one's hopes, fears, expectations, and hesitations coexist. Similarly Chong Kwan's work is both a fictitious view of a non-existent place and yet responds to a real town. It hovers not simply as an island emerging from the mist but also between what is real and made up. Yet in this fantasy isle there is perhaps more of a truth, as it presents Stockton-on-Tees in the way that it is viewed by residents. This hovering fictitious isle, which we suspect will at some point float away, is a more real document of the place than a series of tourist photographs would be. The work is in the realm of dreams and as such offers a suitable 'punctum' in the fabric of its urban setting. One expects it will be embraced and much loved by the dreamers of Stockton-on-Tees.