

KATE BEYNONA
AUSPICIOUS CHARMS
FOR TRANSCULTURAL LIVING

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AGNSW CONTEMPORARY PROJECTS

#2 08

KATE BEYNON:
AUSPICIOUS CHARMS FOR
TRANSCULTURAL LIVING

The imagery of the works intends to promote and share 'good spirits' for dealing and living in today's mixed up world. Kate Beynon



Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The arrival* is a migrant story of wordless images following a man who seeks better prospects in an unknown country.¹ Eventually, he finds himself in a bewildering city of foreign customs, peculiar animals, curious floating objects and indecipherable languages. This familiar tale of struggle and survival, upheaval and hope is part of the journey for every migrant, refugee and displaced person. Like Tan, Kate Beynon depicts fictional characters grappling with multifarious influences. Hers is an integrated world of defiantly assured females who are resplendent with luscious orchids and lucky talismans and surrounded by magical beasts.

Beynon retrieves signs and symbols from history, thereby rejoicing in ambiguous cultural origins. She avoids rigid ethnic boundaries and stereotypes in favour of a celebratory melange of identities and physical attributes. Amidst her distinctive identity politics, she blends personal and ancestral influences in a semi-autobiographical way:

In part my work contemplates the 'melting pot' of my son's mixed heritage which includes Chinese, Welsh, African-American, Native-American Pima, Mexican, Irish and Norwegian ancestries, while also being Australian born.

Conceptually, Beynon has been influenced by the writings of cultural theorist Ien Ang, who identifies as neither 'fully Asian' nor 'completely Western', presenting instead a 'hybrid point of view'. In her writing, Ang argues, '...beyond identity and difference toward a more dynamic concern for togetherness-in-difference'.²

Beynon draws too on ideas of cultural hybridity articulated by London-based, Nigerian-raised artist Yinka Shonibare, whose work explores issues of race and 'cultural authenticity':

*... there is a mythology around ideas of pure origin or notions of nationalism which is just a convenient way to get power and to exclude other people. But the reality of life is that we don't only experience things from our own culture. And yet, we insist, on the rigid boundaries. So it's a boundary crossing strategy, this notion of hybridity.*³

Beynon's visual narratives evoke the diasporic condition. Part self-portrait, her global warrior women accost the ramifications of a mutable identity with dazzling impact. *Auspicious charms* 2008 depicts a strident female with an elaborate headdress adapted from traditional Cantonese opera, whose confident stare is matched by her bold stance of hands on hips. A Eurasian scops owl, small and superbly camouflaged, is perched on her bare arm with claws sinking into her flesh; Beynon was attracted to the owl's unique

transcultural and hybrid identity. Another carved owl is rendered as an amulet necklace, derived from one that Beynon purchased for her son on a recent journey to Brazil, as it is both protective and symbolic of knowledge while referencing the Orixá spirit and African deities. An inverted bat is suspended on the perimeter of the picture plane, providing a linguistic inflection and word pun, as 'bat' sounds like 'luck' in Mandarin. The female figure bears a tattoo on her arm – the talisman of the Messenger of the Nine Heavens, a shaman who can cure epidemics as he performs a ritual fire-dance.

With an ebullient palette, Beynon's gleaming canvases are embellished and laden with protective charms, talismans, Chinese characters, flora, animals and mythical beasts.

I'm interested in how charms are included in daily life and form an intersection of notions towards protection, luck, the spiritual, the mystical, superstition, iconic imagery, ornamental and personal symbolism.

Her elaborate compendium of charms and calligraphy is derived from the early Ming dynasty Taoist canon – *Tao-tsung* (published in 1436) – which contains texts, diagrams, and esoteric and occult art. Her repertoire of symbols is distilled from disparate sources including graffiti, animation, her grandfather's scroll paintings, family heirlooms, fashion and travel.

Beynon's large paintings are contrasted with a constellation of circular and oval canvases depicting individual objects. While in China, Beynon ate a scorpion after being told it promoted good health and strength; it has now taken up residence as a single, ornate image. The stylised Chinese character for *fu*, representing good fortune and blessings, which appears on another panel, is adapted from a small, carved jade pendant passed down as a family heirloom. Here too is a carved Welsh love spoon with cut-out hearts given by her parents as a token of affection from a journey to Wales. Encrusted in tiny Swarovski crystals, Beynon evokes childhood visits to her maternal grandmother in Kuala Lumpur where she was given '... an old "Jewel Setter" from the '50s, which is a set that included tools for attaching rhinestones to fabric and clothes, which I used on dolls' clothes and later on some of my own dresses'.

In this exhibition, a backdrop of coloured walls adds an ambient layer as Beynon has deftly created an ensemble environment. In doing so, she conjures visual trajectories through history, biography and travelogue. We are enticed into an auspicious world of transcultural rhythms, beckoned by a pair of guardian goddesses who protect the gallery entrance.

Natalie King

Natalie King is a curator, writer and broadcaster based in Melbourne.

NOTES

All quotes from Kate Beynon are from correspondence between the artist and author, May–June 2008.

1 Shaun Tan, *The arrival*, Lothian Books, Melbourne 2006

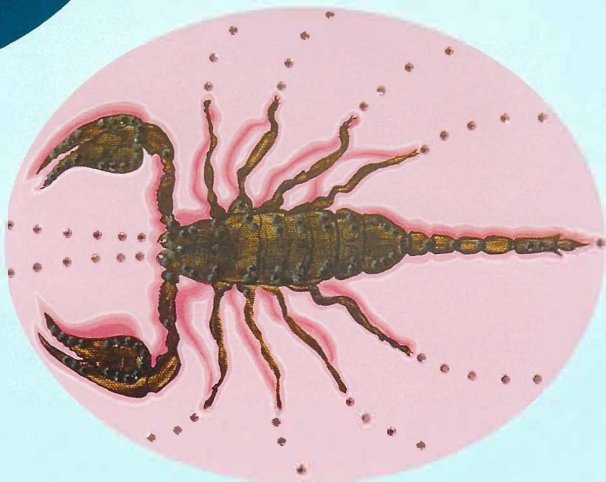
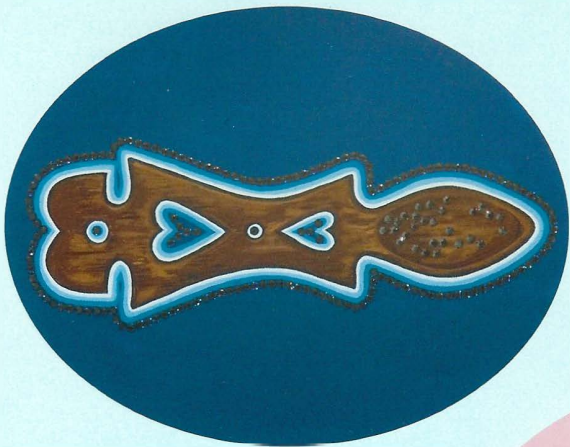
2 Ien Ang, *On not speaking Chinese: living between Asia and the West*, Routledge, UK 2001, p viii

3 Yinka Shonibare quoted in Raphael Chikukwa & Michele Robecchi, 'Profile: Yinka Shonibare MBW', *Contemporary*, issue 88, www.contemporary-magazines.com/profile89.htm [accessed June 2008]





above: Dragon vision 2008 [detail]
left: Transcultural charms collection 2008 [details]



WHAT APPEALED TO ME WAS THAT
THE STORY HAD A RESONANCE
THAT TRANSCENDED GEOGRAPHIC
AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES.

DEEPA MEHTA, FILM DIRECTOR/WRITER, 1996

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READING.VIEWING.LISTENING LIST

by Kate Beynon

- *Spiritual jazz: esoteric, modal and deep jazz from the underground 1968-77*, reissued by Jazzman Records, London 2008
- Mat Johnson, *Incognegro*, graphic novel with art by Warren Pleece, DC/Vertigo, New York 2008
- Fernando Meirelles & Katia Lund, *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*, colour, 124min, Brazil, 2002 (based on the novel by Paulo Lins)
- Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited away*, colour animation, 125min, Japan, 2001
- Michael Morgan, aka transistor cricket, sound & visual artist: www.transistorcricket.com, www.myspace.com/transistorcricket
- M Pablo, husband, artist, collaborator, confidante, moral support, father of Rali & Soul: www.pabink.biz
- Yinka Shonibare, artist: www.yinka-shonibare.co.uk
- Shahzia Sikander, artist: www.shahziasikander.com
- J Stewart (ed), *Paul Robeson: artist and citizen*, Rutgers University Press in conjunction with the Paul Robeson Centennial Project, USA 1998
- Vivien Sung, *Five-fold happiness: Chinese concepts of luck, prosperity, longevity, happiness and wealth*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco 2002
- Wong Kar-wai, *In the mood for love*, colour, 98min, Hong Kong 2000

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BIOGRAPHY

Kate Beynon was born at 9am on 9/9/1970 in Kowloon, aka 'the City of Nine Dragons', Hong Kong. In 1974 her family migrated to Australia from the UK. Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1993, Beynon has worked in a variety of media including craft materials, textiles, video animation, works on paper, installation and painting. She has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally, including *Upstream: 400th anniversary of VOC in Amsterdam and Hoorn*, 2002 and *Global feminisms* at Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007. Beynon's travels have informed her work and interest in 'transcultural life'. Her 20-plus solo exhibitions have included *Mixed blood for migratory paths* at the Physics Room, Christchurch, 2005 and *Espirito transcultural/Transcultural spirit* at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 2007. In 2004 Beynon had a residency in Harlem, New York. She has an ongoing interest in linguistics and languages.

LIST OF WORKS

Auspicious charms 2008
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on linen & canvas; main panel: 170 x 170 cm; small panels: dimensions variable

Dragon vision 2008
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on linen & canvas; triptych panels: 170 x 170 cm each; small panels: dimensions variable

Guardian goddess 1 & 2 2008
both acrylic & Swarovski crystals on canvas, 50.5 x 40.5 cm

Guardian lion-dog 1 & 2 2008
both acrylic & Swarovski crystals on canvas, 40.5cm diameter

Transcultural charms collection 2008
acrylic & Swarovski crystals on canvas multiple panels: dimensions variable

Kate Beynon thanks Mike, Rali, the Beynons, Soul & Barbara McKenzie, Sutton Gallery, Michael Morgan, Natalie King
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