

Steph Huang: Nothing Old Under the Sun

by Ellen Mara De Wachter



Washing, peeling, chopping, salting, oiling, searing, mixing, kneading, baking: cooking involves myriad processes to turn ingredients into meals. Like the cook, the artist is concerned with a range of techniques, methods and skills to transform objects, raw materials, experiences and ideas into works of art. For Steph Huang, as for many creatives, the roles of cook and artist are delightfully entwined. Huang's experience as a chef has provided her with a repertoire of foods, packaging and merchandising techniques that feed into sculptures and installations. And like any accomplished cook, Huang draws on a cornucopia of skills for her art, including printing, glassblowing, casting, welding and woodwork.

If gathering ingredients is the primary act of cooking, collecting—objects, images, sounds and ideas—is the initial step in the creation of art. For Huang, this involves the *dérive*, a practice developed in the mid-20th century by the avant-garde art group The Situationist International. The *dérive* is a way of drifting through the city, with a curious and relaxed demeanour, guided by serendipity, personal associations and the imagination rather than the political or ideological meanings imposed on particular spaces and things. The *dérive* led the Situationists to another practice, *détournement*, which involved the deliberate subversion of items from their existing functions and ideologies. For Huang, embracing the *dérive* means that 'all my ideas are from passing by'. She picks up objects during her movement through the city, attracted by 'their shape and material rather than their use or meaning'. She holds onto these things, saving them for the moment when she can re-use them in unexpected ways, so they add the right form, colour or flavour to one of her works.

Over the past few years, Huang has frequently drifted through the street markets of London, Paris and her native Taiwan, absorbing elements of vernacular style and informal architecture, noting context-specific language, gestures and relationships, recording sounds and of course, sampling the foods on offer. Her wider passages through the city, on foot or by bike, have also yielded ingredients for her art, in a manner that harks back to the word's original Latin meaning: 'ingredient' comes from 'in gradi', meaning 'walking into'. As she criss-crosses the city, she walks deeper into the possibility of new works that transform the ingredients she picks up along the way: abandoned fridge racks, miscellaneous food containers bearing colourful illustrations, or the eye-catching design of a piece of street furniture.

Huang's exhibition, 'There is nothing old under the sun', is titled after a collection of writing by Italian photographer, Luigi Ghirri. The title of Ghirri's book is originally a quote from Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, while Borges's line is itself a reversal of the oft-cited Biblical assertion on the immutability of human nature, taken from Ecclesiastes. In Huang's work, as in culture more generally, objects, images, references and histories are continually reflected, distorted and renewed in the hall of mirrors of influence, translation and creativity. This can generate a multitude of new meanings and connections. In *Bubbling Up* (all works 2024), for instance, Huang remade a carriage lamp she noticed hanging outside a pub on the bank of the River Thames, attracted by its dolphin motif. Huang's abstracted version of the lamp encloses two bubbles of blown glass, which call to mind the medieval technique of blowing glass within a metal frame so that it bulges out between the bars. These transparent glass voids also evoke aspects of Zen philosophy and aesthetics, in particular the emphasis on emptiness or nothingness, which is valued as a space of potential rather than seen as an

absence or lack. Gaps and openings in Zen gardens and sculptures, or unpainted areas in paintings, provide space for the wandering eye to pause, opening up the aesthetic, philosophical and existential potential of art.

Huang's hunt for ingredients often takes her beyond London, the city where she now lives. In 2021 she spent time in Taiwan, seeking a glass-blowing master artisan from whom she could learn. During the 20th century, Taiwan was a global centre for glass production, an industry driven by the Japanese occupation, which lasted from 1895 to 1945, and fuelled by the plentiful local supplies of sand and natural gas. In *I Am In A Pretty Pickle*, two pimpled glass gherkins, hand-blown by Huang, nestle on a swathe of green gauze suspended across the opening of an empty catering-sized tin of sweet and sour gherkins, which reverberates with the recorded din of a street market and the juicy noise of someone chomping on pickles. Since acquiring glassblowing skills, Huang has made a range of glass foods including pert cherries, a chubby mortadella sausage bulging out of its string casing (like those medieval lamps) and delicate, pink-tinted prawns. These brittle sculptures and the foods they mimic are intrinsically vulnerable to damage and decay; as Huang notes, 'food is perishable but so is glass.' Delicate and impermanent they may be, but their aphrodisiac and sexual connotations make Huang's glass prawns, cherries, gherkins and sausages refreshingly life-affirming.

The sculpture *Every Day Seems a Little Longer* consists of a low display unit painted a raspberry-yoghurt shade of pink, on which Huang has balanced a collection of elements: a pair of refrigerator racks found on the street, two stacked glass bubbles, and a cluster of aluminium cans whose labelling Huang has meticulously scraped off. This work is echoed in another part of the gallery by *A Regular Arrangement*, for which Huang joined two vertical sheets of wood painted a slightly different shade of pink and perforated with oval openings, to form a corner. This scene is interwoven with long bronze branches punctuated by strange leaf-like forms. These distorted casts of scallop shells were initially made as wax replicas of shells Huang gathered on a fishing trip, malleable duplicates which she held in her hand and 'folded in an unconscious way'. With undertones of animal, vegetable and mineral, these ambiguous objects, hard as shells yet softly folding in on themselves like collapsing leaves, evoke multiple natural environments: sea, forest, art gallery. Their vulnerability and implied deterioration calls to mind the traditional Japanese aesthetics of *wabi-sabi*, which encompasses the beauty of transient things (*wabi*) and that of patina and ageing (*sabi*). In *wabi-sabi*, imperfection is embraced as a key component of beauty. The budding flower, the shrivelling leaf or, as in Huang's works, a range of discarded objects found on *dérives* through the city or at sea, are treasured for their capacity to convey the transience of all things. In the studio, Huang embraces their imperfections, using these items as ingredients for new works, sometimes replicating and subverting them with creative idiosyncrasies, and above all retaining traces of their original forms while transforming them into something new under the sun.

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer and coach based in London. She is the author of 'More Than The Eyes: Art, Food and the Senses' (Atelier Éditions, 2024) and 'Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration' (Phaidon, 2017). Her writing has featured in numerous books and publications, including *frieze*, *Art Monthly*, *Art Quarterly*, *The World of Interiors* and *The White Review*. As a Relational Dynamics coach she works with artists, writers and creative professionals, providing a space within which people can develop clarity around their goals and work towards achieving them.

This text was commissioned by Standpoint on the occasion of Steph Huang's Mark Tanner Sculpture Award exhibition 'There Is Nothing Old Under The Sun' 17 May - 29 June 2024.