

Beatrice Glow: *Rhunhattan [Tearoom]*

Sunroom Project Space, Wave Hill Public Garden and Cultural Center, Bronx, NY, USA, 15 September–25 October 2015.

Beatrice Glow's *Rhunhattan [Tearoom]* combined two main elements: the tea wares rendered bloody through optical effects and the sweet fragrance of spices—both precious merchandise during the colonial trade that connected continents. The tearoom was installed at the Wave Hill Public Garden and Cultural Center's Sunroom Project Space, a well-lit area with large clean windows in a Federalist-style building overlooking the Wave Hill Garden in the Bronx, New York. The tranquil green of the garden contrasted with the tea set painted in a colour described by the artist as "bloody red," a reference to violence and conflict during the trade wars in the seventeenth century as well as the past and present exportation of goods in the global economy. The teapots, cups, spoons, and plates were displayed on top of two vitrines, together with scented terracotta nutmeg seeds. The readymade pottery was imported from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Turkey, and coated with digital decals and paintings done by hand; the motifs included nutmeg, mace, and images of the spice wars drawn from historical documents. Inside the vitrines beneath the tea sets, Glow's ink drawings juxtapose historical maps of two islands: Rhun, an island in Indonesia, and Manhattan, called New Amsterdam by the Dutch. The delicate visual experience was enhanced by the olfactory dimension created by nutmeg, mace, cloves, patchouli, frankincense, ylang ylang, and black pepper from India's Malabar Coast—spices that were coveted during maritime trade, and which, in Glow's words, provided "a scent of colonial commerce."

The delicate tea set and the sweetness of the scent seem to invite visitors to sit down and rest. However, as one drew closer, sensual and harmonious sentiments were overshadowed by violent images of colonial history, wars, and conflicts over trade. The story about the relationship between Rhun and Manhattan encouraged varied threads of thoughts about material culture and globalization. The histories of the two islands are very different though linked: New Amsterdam (Manhattan) was referred to as a fertile land in countless sources, which encouraged the Dutch to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World in search of a better home. New York under the Dutch functioned as a main port of trade with other colonies and Europe. When the English and the Dutch fought over trade routes in the seventeenth century, Rhun became a contested spot because of its coveted nutmeg trees. This dispute ended in the Treaty of Breda which resolved that Manhattan would be ceded to the English and Rhun to the Dutch.

Sharing a colonial past, the two islands were once connected through sea routes through which Dutch presence spanned from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Islanders were bound by similar fates: they were prone to occupation by the Great Powers during the Age of Discovery (who were also the gatekeepers of production and consumption). Islanders were conquered, obscured, and silenced in historical records. Likewise, landscapes of islands were often reduced to colonial cartographies or stereotyped images. This situation was indicated through the decoration of the tea wares. Landscapes on the Banda islands were turned into repetitive motifs such as volcanoes; representations of soldiers who fought in battles remained anonymous, their faces playfully substituted with nutmeg seeds. Islands were quickly forgotten because their strategic value changed with time and world politics. Islands were deemed uncivilized, and only the cultural legacies of colonizers are fully passed down. Indeed, in this tearoom no individualized images of the original island dwellers were shown; instead, the stories of islands were conveyed through trade goods consumed by the islands' conquerors.

Rhunhattan [Tearoom] involved multiple layers of histories. The first lay in from the centuries-old production technique of exporting porcelain across continents. Glow's arrangement of the decorations on the tea sets was inspired by Delftware. From a historical perspective, the motivation for developing Delftware came partly from the European admiration of Chinese Blue and White, produced in Jindezhen in China. Its aesthetic achievement culminated in the seventeenth century. The Dutch created their own version of Blue and White, and Chinoiserie became a hybrid of European and Chinese motifs made with their own distinct material and techniques. If traced further, the blue glaze for the Chinese Blue and White, which peaked in popularity during the Ming Dynasty, contained (according to some sources) cobalt blue brought to China by Arabic traders. Intriguingly, instead of applying cobalt blue—which would be more expressive of this history—Glow adopted nutmeg red for the “glaze,” transferring the materiality of one trade good to another. Redware was not uncommon in Chinese productions and Delftware. In *Rhunhattan [Tearoom]*, the red glaze became reminiscent of the visually more violent “colonial red” in the artist's collection of colonial colours.

The second layer resided in the contemporary recreation of this material culture. For Glow, a second-generation Taiwanese immigrant in the US, uncovering the roots of interwoven Asian American identities in global discourses has been a common thread in her artistic practice. For centuries, porcelain products were a canvas for communication, stereotypes, and misreadings, showcasing Chinese imaginaries of European court culture, while Chinoiserie from Europe reflected European ideas of China. Glow's identity as an Asian

American artist keeps her at an ambivalent (if intimate) distance from this history. Replacing Chinoiserie motifs with imagery of world conflicts, her narratives through the European material culture of export porcelain are reinterpretations.

Thirdly, trade routes and colonial fates bounded the two islands. Although Rhun and Manhattan could hardly be more different, they became mirror images of one another, reflecting the constant shift of territories and global economic centres. These three layers constitute a narrative—a presumably lost history—that deserves further research. It could be said that this project evoked this lost history, and drew our attention to the politics of archives.

Islands are surrounded by water, where techniques, goods, and boundaries are exchanged, produced, reinvented, and disseminated. Glow has created a thread in her recent works that connect islands, circulation, and migration through the vast ocean. In *Retracing Coolie Geography* (2008–2009), she worked with members of the Chinese diaspora in Peru to trace the historical, collective memory of Chinese coolies in the region. In *Migratory Museum* (2013), she presented the audience with objects of Chinese/South American entanglement, including a family tree from the Tang dynasty to today, bamboo stalks and ginger root from Chanchamayo, abandoned railroad screw spikes from Ticlio, a found jewelry box with a wooden carving of Chinese women depicted according to South American stereotypes, and a Spanish dictionary of the Chinese language. Through this work Glow activated the lost history, and allowed participants to reimagine the history with her. Her *Floating Library* (2015) on the Lilac Museum Steamship was a place for communal culture production and civic engagement, involving a book collection, archive, art works, music, live performances, and intellectual exchange.

It is always a challenge to evaluate an art project that includes anthropological findings as part of the process of creation. For *Rhunhattan [Tearoom]*, Glow recreated—instead of assembled—an archive of colonialism for the tearoom. In order to shed new light on colonial discourses, many questions remained unanswered. Her principles of inclusion and exclusion revealed a politics of “lack” in traditional colonial archives. The image of Rhun became more vivid in the recurring, artistically remade nutmeg seeds and mace; however, its people are still silent, solely represented through the narratives of the colonizers. In contrast, because of the greater differences between the original living conditions of the seventeenth century and those of today, Manhattan’s image was more difficult to present in colonial history. Almost nothing on the present-day island of Manhattan can be associated with the Lenape Indians whose traces were totally wiped out after Dutch colonization. Another gap became apparent when both histories are objectified: our imagination of the two islands derives

neither from life evidence, relics, nor the remaining sites, but the trade goods and colonial records written in Western languages. Glow must have thought about this; in the next phase of this project she seeks to swap the landscapes of the two islands through augmented reality and virtual reality technological platforms, bringing the two sites into an even more intimate dialogue. Visitors will eventually be able to compare the current landscape of both islands, begging the question of what might have occurred had their positions in colonial history been swapped. Today, New Amsterdam has disappeared under the skyscrapers of New York. Its “islandness,” once an ecological wonder, has long been forgotten as it transformed from a colony to a global economic, cultural, and political capital. Rhun remains an island, frozen in the past; as trade routes changed, its economic and geopolitical value diminished, and it became the complete “other.” Its feminine, exotic, temporal nature is inscribed in the fragrant nutmeg and bloody china of Glow’s tearoom, waiting to be consumed.



FIGURE 1 *Beatrice Glow, Rhunhattan [Tearoom], 2015, dimensions variable, acrylic and decal collage on ceramics, ink on paper, terracotta infused with spices, scents of colonial commerce. Photographed by Stefan Hagen, all rights reserved by Beatrice Glow. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST.*

Yu-Chieh Li

Institut für Kunstgeschichte Ostasiens, Universität Heidelberg, Germany
elise.lyuchieh@gmail.com

Yu-Chieh Li

is a PhD candidate of East Asian Art History at Heidelberg University, Germany. From 2013 to 2015 she was the Andrew W. Mellon C-MAP Fellow for the C-MAP Asia group at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She served as a co-editor of *post*, MoMA's digital platform for contemporary and modern art around the globe. Her research interests included Dada, installation art, and conceptualism under socialism. She is currently preparing a doctoral dissertation on conceptualism of the 1980s in China and the USA.