

first floor
26, 27, 28 may 1994

kate beynon

clothing for twenty daughters
and one son, 1994
calico, thread, pins, chinese silk, satin.

old poem, 1994
chenille sticks.

mother, daughter, bride, young girl,
with feet, 1993/4
photographs, photographic oil colour,
watercolour ink,
calico, stuffing, thread, pins.

history

"Better to raise geese than girls"

Kate beynon re-stages chinese cultural history through her soft sculptural forms that are at once beautiful and disturbing. Rather than presenting us with the epic or saga she seeks out incidental stories and narratives. Importance is given to moments and individuals not usually given place in the dominant histories.

These narratives focus around the fate of women, the aristocratic woman trapped by her possessions at her dressing table, girls having their feet bound in the hope of marrying well, the female baby being traded, valued ironically by her would-be husband but not by her own family. Kate's work reveals to us their stories, their pain, their entrapment, whether slaves, concubines or wives. The cultural binds are placed upon them; to gain, to break away, to transcend class, the glimmer of hope there may be for the daughter; the burden.

"When you raise girls you're raising them for strangers"

grotesque luxury

The different materials kate employs highlight the value system inherent in chinese culture.

The calico used for the babies' outfits resonates with plainness, humbleness; they are everyday outfits. they are roughly sewn like drafts or dressmaking toiles referencing women's labour.

The satin used for the singular male clothing is embossed with symbols wishing joy, happiness and luck. The male child is hoped for, cherished, treasured and dressed appropriately in luxury and blessings.

'Old poem' using furry chenille sticks connotes ideas of luxury but is in fact synthetic, contemporary. The contemporary material tells us a historical story; a woman is trapped at her jade dressing table, trapped by beauty, by culture, by luxury.

megan marshall

...just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her *body*.

luce irigaray

In recent years, 'the body' has been pivotal in feminist and aesthetic understandings of subjectivity and the workings of power. This re-thinking of morphology has opened up discussion of the interaction of sexual, racial, cultural and class difference[s].

Reconceptualising the body has involved a shift from a cartesian, materialist understanding of the body as a natural form, towards and understanding of the body as a text which is both affected and effects notions of identity. Bodies are encoded through a variety of cultural practices, including language and fashion. Thus the body becomes readable within a specific cultural framework.

Kate beynon engages with a particular historical body and its cultural identity. This body is articulated as female and chinese. While using the body as a site for negotiating her own identity, kate utilises artistic practices specific to chinese women. In doing so, a politics of reading is set up, through which meaning is

mediated by the spectator's own specific cultural identity.

The body of woman supports the economic structure of signification, and as such becomes a commodity within this structure. Societal law is ordered by the valorisation of men's needs and desires. Woman is denied access to representation, desire and origin within a hom[m]osexual economy. Woman as sexual subject is always already excluded. Her value is as object alone. She is excluded as an active participant in social relations. The female body only has value in so much that it is sexually desirable and can be exchanged between men. The subordination of the female body to male desire acts to support the heterosexual matrix.

By avoiding actual representation of women, instead using clothing as morphological tracings, kate's work denaturalises readings of specific bodies, deconstructing an *a priori* understanding of femininity as passive and unspecularisable.

sarah tutton

kylie mccrohan