

# TIFFANY CHUNG

## Exodus

When great human achievements of art, science and technology have resulted in ruins, simplicity is the key for survival. The end of humankind is similar to its beginning.<sup>1</sup>

The medium of glass is ancient and elemental: evocative of earth, fire and breath. Glass is one of the oldest manufactured materials, first found moulded into beads in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and later used for delicate vessels in Rome. Vietnamese artist Tiffany Chung's recent works draw on the distant past and mythological narratives, using thousands of glass figurines, to evoke a future vision.

Chung's diverse oeuvre deploys the associative qualities of conceptual art with a concern for pressing social issues, including the significant influence of conflict, migration and environmental degradation. In contrast to works by many contemporary Vietnamese artists who are exploring traumatic historical narratives, Chung's work is polished and glossy, even often saccharinely beautiful, despite her politically-engaged approach.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of overdevelopment and environmental catastrophe are often satirically presented through an exquisite veneer of contemporary consumer culture. Seen in this context, Chung's *roaming with the dawn – snow drifts, rain falls, desert wind blows* 2012, embodying perceptions of migration, evolution and progress, raises questions about our relationship to an environment amid rapid change.

Chung has long been fascinated with maps, not only for their graphic possibilities, but also for what they say about our connections with the past and our visions of the future. Over the past few years, she has produced a series of embellished maps that evoke both the utopian visions and harsh dislocations of our rapidly developing world, charting the movement of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Tibetan refugees and asylum seekers, Japanese victims of the atomic bombings of World War Two and communities displaced by the Cold War and the Berlin Wall.

Chung has more recently opened up her work to a wider field, beyond specific events, to an allegorical narrative addressing a universal effect. In her work for APT7, *roaming with the dawn*, audiences see a world in miniature. From a bird's-eye view, we happen upon a low-slung plinth, organically shaped like a flowing stream, a curvy stretch of road, or a narrow path along a cliff, holding aloft thousands of small animals crafted from clear glass. Including both exotic and ubiquitous species, such as elephants, giraffes, roosters and rats, this varied parade appears to be en route to making Noah's Ark or Doctor Doolittle's menagerie complete. Chung commissioned a glass artisan in her home town of Ho Chi Minh City to construct the animals, and they recall the familiar spectacle of a glass worker in a shopping mall, hand forming and blowing objects over an open flame, as gifts for children.

The collection of a myriad of animal figures suggests an event biblical in scale. The whimsy and beauty of these dainty glass animals belie their allegorical potential, where the world has reached a point of no return, where differences are subsumed in favour of a common task or objective. The tide of animals, including hippopotamuses, tigers, rhinoceroses, cows, donkeys, sheep and pigs, moves together as a great migratory pattern. But, are they fleeing or following a call to a promised land? Are they stampeding or roaming? In their multiple specificities, the jumble of creatures suggests equivalence brought on by circumstance.

Tiffany Chung herself is part of the enormous Vietnamese diaspora formed over the last 40 years. Born in 1969 during the Vietnam–American War, she was two years old when her father, a helicopter pilot in the South Vietnamese air force, was shot down, captured and interned.<sup>3</sup> When the war ended, the family immigrated to the United States, where Chung studied art in California, returning to Vietnam in 2000 to become a prominent artist in the vibrant and expanding Vietnamese contemporary art scene.

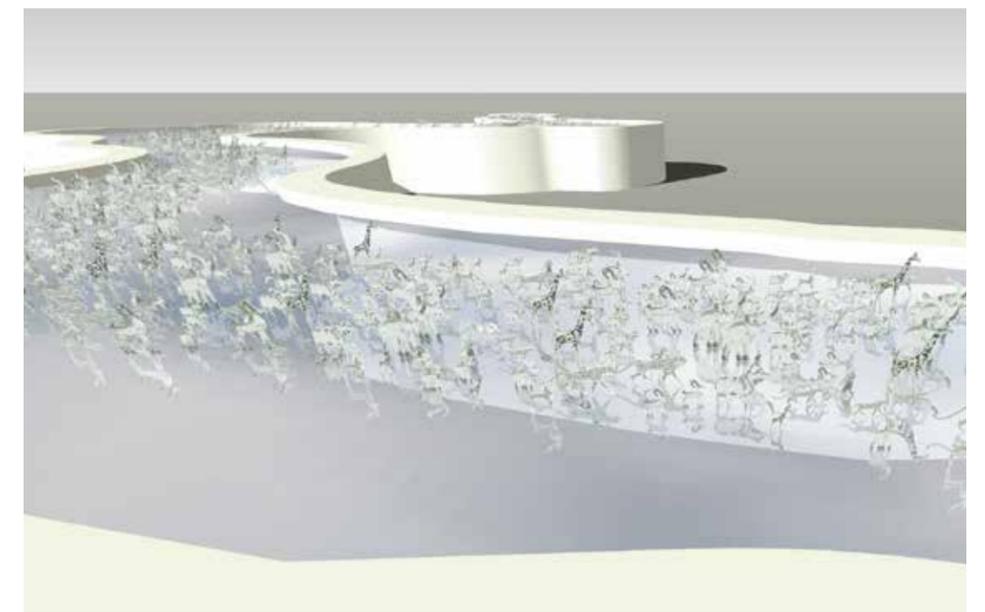
The movement of communities in large numbers, such as Tiffany Chung's own, most often occurs as a result of serious social and political collapse. But here she has transformed painful narratives into objects of beauty and wonder, albeit freighted with the implication that, in the larger scheme, we may find ourselves thrown together to ensure our collective, and possibly desperate, survival.

### Angela Goddard

<sup>1</sup> Tiffany Chung in 'Exploring the past, present and future at MCAD', Carmela G Lapeña, *GMA News*, <<http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/260590/lifestyle/design/exploring-the-past-present-and-future-at-mcad>>, viewed 18 July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Viet Le, 'All work, all play: Of workers and cosplayers, or POPaganda: The art of Tiffany Chung', *Tiffany Chung: Play* [exhibition catalogue], Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, 2008, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Presentation by Tiffany Chung, *Asia Art Archive in America*, 7 November 2010, <<http://www.aaa-a.org/2011/11/01/presentation-by-tiffany-chung/>>, viewed 19 July 2012.



TIFFANY CHUNG  
Vietnam b.1969  
*roaming with the dawn – snow drifts, rain falls, desert wind blows* (detail and artist's impression) 2012  
4000 glass animals, wooden plinth / 50 x 1000 x 700cm (installed, approx.) / Commissioned for APT7 and the Queensland Art Gallery Collection / Purchased 2012. Queensland Art Gallery / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Artist's impression image courtesy: The artist