

A visual conversation with an Eastern flavour

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Artwork by Rick Leong. | photo courtesy of Richmond Art Gallery

In the Richmond Art Gallery's latest exhibit, *The Transformation of Things*, local artists collaborate to explore Chinese art heritage in a modern Western landscape. Paint, calligraphy and sculpture illustrate the movement of the human imagination in the natural world.

For Victoria-based artist Rick Leong, this show began over a year ago when Richmond Art Gallery curator, Nan, Capogna approached him with the idea of a show built on Chinese visual history. They met with local artists who had expertise in traditional Chinese techniques, and developed a theme. Supported by a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, Leong worked alongside Richmond artists Winifred Lee (watercolour), Li Desheng (calligraphy) and Ping-Kwong Wong (ceramics) to take on the experience of transformation. The result is a surreal combination of West Coast Canada and Eastern art traditions.

Combining realities

A third-generation Canadian with a vivid style and a deep attentiveness to the world, Leong uses each project as the opportunity to learn and develop something new. While his work has always contained some Eastern traditionalism, *The Transformation of Things* called for a far more intentional study. He began with research into iconography and Chinese arts and crafts history. From there, Leong went to work with his trademark surrealism. He says he likes to explore the intersection of realms, namely how the subjective inner world plays with the objective outer one. His style is a leap towards the fantastical that transforms an ordinary subject into an invitation to wonder. Woven throughout his pieces are Taoist philosophies such as the inevitability of change. In this show, Leong says the resulting work is a visual language – a "hybridized vernacular – between Chinese visual culture and the Vancouver Island landscape.

"I like to think that I paint the landscape of my imagination, informed and inspired by direct experience," says Leong.

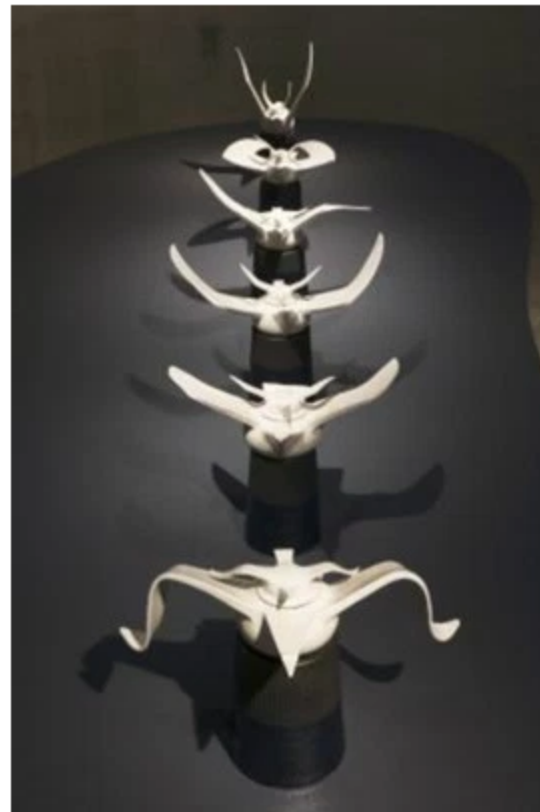
Symbolism

Leong says that his piece *Hidden Hunger** represents the urges behind personal transformation.

"In and of itself I think that the hunger, the dissatisfaction, or the need for something more is what drives us down the mountain and precipitates movement and change," explains Leong.

He says *Gold Mountain* stands as its antithesis, representing imaginary utopian desires. Leong doesn't recommend going into the show to try to decipher the language. Art, he explains, is a more powerful thing when viewed with an open mind because then it is free to interact with its surroundings.

"If you come at the work thinking that you know what it's all about, then you may miss how the art is working in a particular space, in that particular moment in time. So my suggestion is just be present with the work," he says.



Clay! by Ping-Kwong Wong. | Photo courtesy of Richmond Art Gallery.

Capogna says that beyond the obvious artistic talent displayed in this show, each of the four artists impress as members of community. They all actively teach in addition to their own art practices.

Leong expressed a mutual appreciation when he was asked to describe the best part of the show.

"I am most proud of how everything came together, to be able to work with the excellent and professional staff at the Richmond Art Gallery, the other artists – each a master of their craft – and to be able to present this work to the Richmond community. It has been an honour and a privilege," says Leong.

The show runs until Oct. 2. For more information visit www.richmondartgallery.org.

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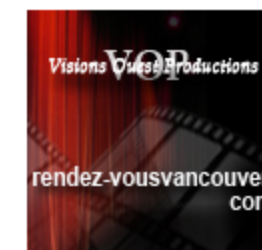
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Mailing Address:
Denman Place PO Box 47020,
Vancouver BC V6G 3E1

Office:
204-825 Granville Street, Vancouver BC

Phone: 604-682-5545
Courriel: info@thelastsource.com