



MINING THE ARCHIVE:

Connecting concept and narrative in the work of Will Kwan

By Laura Legge

Twenty-eight national flags, captured in the moment of burning, litter the blank walls of a gallery. The institution of the state, disrupted by this destruction of its icons—coded as radical, anti-state, extremist—is the subject of an important interrogation. How are nationalisms constructed by media? How does transnationalism layer the process of patriotism? How does material culture become iconography?

This interrogation is staged in Will Kwan's *Flame Test* (2009), a photographic series incorporating the photo archives of Reuters, the Associated Press, the European Pressphoto Agency and Agence France-Presse. Images printed on flags echo the fragmentation of nationalisms through the symbols of empire. Kwan's recent works represent this engagement with the notion of nationalism—the ways in which it is catechized through its images, as well as the ways in which globalization complicates this notion.

Kwan's personal narrative connects the conceptuality of his themes to the execution of his installations. Born in Hong Kong and raised in Toronto, Kwan cites ties of identity and family as rendering other places both captivating of the imagination and seductively unknown. "Every artist responds to their personal connection to their subject matter," Kwan explains. Kwan's engagement with this migration is largely expressed through his interest in material culture and its means of travel, exploring what is ignored in the processes through which material objects become iconography. Says Kwan, "I am interested in unpacking myths of universality; these forms that circulate, visual culture that we see everywhere. Flags, clocks, envelopes."

Kwan's work *Clocks That Do Not Tell Time* (2008) presents the symbol of the clock as a signifier of the thematic preoccupations of time—its anxieties, its locations, its implications. The installation is comprised of a wall of clocks that correspond to sites of local economy, such as industrial parks, military operational headquarters and mines. The time set on the clocks is consonant with the time in the gallery or, alternately, the external locations themselves, establishing a dialogue between the two spaces.

For Kwan, these pieces constitute a body of work that he refers to as "visual representations of research". Kwan completed a visual and performing arts BA at the University of Toronto Scarborough, an interdisciplinary degree, followed by an MFA at Columbia University in studio art, which he cites as his most standard art education. This process of learning has strong bearing on Kwan's process, both material and thematic: "Having a humanities education on culture, politics, representation, really influenced the way I think about art and myself being an artist." Combing through archives, compiling found material, Kwan represents a scope of art beyond the studio. He visualizes his work more as an interdisciplinary ordering of objects, collection of records, emblems and histories, ultimately arriving at a visual rendition of these studies.

In Kwan's piece *X-ray Yankee Zulu* (2009) this visual research occupies the field of linguistics, engaging with the project of disentangling the political and cultural meanings embedded in language. The piece consists of two neon spirals of text reading "weapons of mass destruction" and "improvised explosive device" in the NATO Phonetic

Previous: Will Kwan, *Shanghai Concession Camo (la longue durée)*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist. **Below:** Will Kwan, *Shanghai Concession Camo (la longue durée)*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.



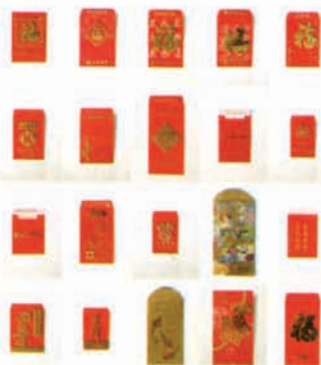
Alphabet, a technical alphabet in which letters are assigned whole words for clearer radio transmission. Layering the technical use of this alphabet with the creative use of materials and forms, Kwan creates a space of ambiguity in which the political events that his text refers to are obscured by visual ambivalence.

A lecturer in Studio Art at the University of Toronto Scarborough and an associate graduate faculty member of the Masters of Visual Studies program at the University of Toronto, Kwan has shown his work in urban centres internationally: Shanghai, Miami, Montreal, Poznan, Toronto, Prato, Venice, Leeds, Salzburg, among other places. In the upcoming year he will be artist-in-residence at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. It is Kwan's engagement with travel that he cites as a major space of education, his catalogue of migrations and movements. "I am interested in how images get translated into different cultures, forming different visual hybrids," he says. "I work to reveal how icons are transmitted across space."

The icon of the envelope accrues loaded meaning, both as an overt symbol of cultural appropriation and as a covert representation of the scope of corporate ambitions, in *Endless Prosperity, Eternal Accumulation* (2009). The piece consists of eighty photographs of *hongbao*, red envelopes in which the older generation gives money to the younger generation as a tradition of Chinese New Year, and more recently appropriated by transnational

financiers to interact with Chinese clients. For Kwan, the abstract tropes of banking and finance occupy a space of particular interest. "A concern of my work is the idea of money as abstract and over-determined with meaning," he explains. "In [*Endless Prosperity, Eternal Accumulation*] I am looking at multinational corporations with operations globally infiltrating culturally specific material." In this piece, Kwan explores this infiltration as both a straightforward act of appropriation and as a node in a broader tradition of imperial aspirations, conflating the corporate interests of multinational financiers with references to colonialism and chinoiserie. The images form a figurative map of Chinese Diaspora spaces, both financial and cultural.

Kwan's work is situated at an important moment in the era of globalization, and his engagement with the abstract notions of global economy and transnational systems of commerce, culture and community is highly relevant. In working with archival material, Kwan occupies a space on a geopolitical continuum of events, connecting conceptual historical processes to contemporary visual practices. ♡



Will Kwan: Multi-lateral

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Justina M. Barnicke Gallery
www.jmbgallery.ca

Above: Will Kwan, *Endless Prosperity, Eternal Accumulation*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist. **Below:** Will Kwan, *Flame Test*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

