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Kai Chan *Rainbow Lakes*

Gil McElroy

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[See table of contents](#)

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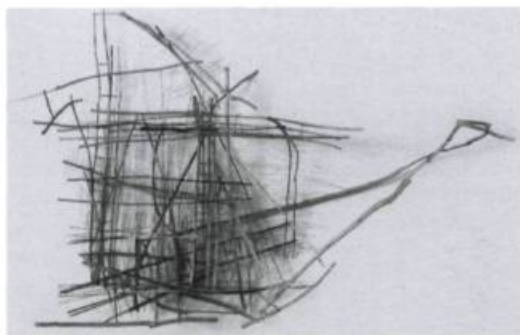
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Kai Chan: Rainbow Lakes

Toronto-based artist Kai Chan recently received the 26th Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Fine Arts, confirming his status as one of the major figures in contemporary Canadian art. It should also allow him to finally break entirely free from, and work well outside of, that tedious debate about the distinctions between art and craft that has enveloped his work to date (and that still mires that of so many other artists in an aesthetic slough of despondency).



KAI CHAN, *Rainbow Lakes*, 2002. Photos: Courtesy of Museum London.

Rainbow Lakes, then, an exhibition of Chan's recent work currently circulating and organized jointly by the Art Gallery of Mississauga, the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, and Museum London, arrives at just the right time, elegantly arguing Chan's place as a sculptor to be reckoned with. The range of work here manifests his truly singular approach to the sculptural. Here are pieces that work both sides of the blurry line between representation and abstraction, relying on a small but effective palate of materials that ranges from thread, nails, and toothpicks to bamboo, dried garlic stems, and pieces of cinnamon.

As Chan's choice of materials undoubtedly demonstrates, his work is marked by a condition inclusive of structural vulnerability and material delicacy. It denotes an obvious rejection of the macho aesthetic that has come to typify modernist sculpture, preferring instead a lightness of aesthetic touch and a fundamental exploration of the tenuous and provisional nature of things. By way of example, *In Two Oceans* (2001), a wall-mounted construction (as are all the pieces comprising this exhibition) of bamboo, wire, and paint, is both the most architectural as well as the most representational of the self-contained sculptural works shown here. At first glance, it resembles nothing so much as a scale model of a rickety suspension bridge, the gentle (albeit, awkward) trajectory of its frangible, box-like span—narrowed at either end, but bulked up in the middle with the addition of a short secondary section set on top—hinting perhaps at some chasm beneath. But this span—however interim and subject to irresistibly entropic forces it might be (and is)—links nothing at all other than the metaphors, associations, and allusions we may bring into aesthetic play. And that is enough.

The provisional quality of Chan's work relates, of course, to the temporal dimension so much an integral part of his sculpture. *Moon in Water* (2001) perhaps most overtly exemplifies his exploration of the accents, stresses, and narrative

possibilities of time. The piece—a large rectangle framing intertwined and complex networks and grids of bamboo and balsawood sticks—bears a passing (and undoubtedly unintentional) resemblance to a "stick compass," the star chart made of sticks of wood employed by Polynesian navigators until the twentieth century. Despite the fact that the likeness is merely accidental, the tangibility of the analogy holds up under scrutiny (rather well, I think); across the centre of the work, Chan has set seven large white disks that argue a celestially legitimate reading as snapshot-like or time lapse iterations of the passage of the moon across a night sky. (There are, in fact, three separate sets, each of seven white disks, but two are smaller and arranged on either side of the central group at right angles to it.) Time passes, and is so noted.

At over three metres in length, *In the Bathtub* (2001) is the largest piece of the exhibition, a work that extends Chan's signature use of natural materials with the incorporation of found objects (like piano keys). One could say that it insists upon a linguistic-like apprehension. Because of its scale, its extended horizontal figure, and its utter non-representationality (there are no moons or bridges to fall back on), a reading of the work as a narrative, sentence-like structure intended to be read linearly—all semantically encompassed below a fine, elegant arc of wood suspended above the main body of the piece and which traverses it from one end to the other—is as legitimate as any other interpretive approach.

Portrait of a Young Man, dating from 1999 and so the oldest of the works included in *Rainbow Lakes*, teeters precipitously at the verge of abstraction. Without even the aid of a title, the very verticality of the work's structure, here in the midst of so much emphasis on the horizontal, eloquently argues a cogent relationship with the figure. From a fine network of hair-like extrusions set along a central vertical stalk, the work rises up into a body of material complexity, amalgamating with

pieces of larger stalks until reaching a cross- or crucifix-like shape of two cinnamon sticks, whereupon the work tilts—as would a neck and head—slightly to the right and rises upward again with four interconnected wooden stalks. It's a slippery piece, sliding from representation to abstraction and back again, always eluding any attempt to fix it down and assign it one interpretation.

Chan's self-contained sculptures are contrasted with what I will call, for the sake of some sort of distinction, a series of wall-mounted sculptural drawings, pieces made of thousands of coloured toothpicks held together in intricate webs of thread to form representational things of a two-dimensional inclination: *Deep Blue Sea* (2001), a pair of trousers splayed wide open; *Four Intimate Pieces* (2001), pairs of underwear; and *Rainbow Legs* (2001), a section pair of trousers. These pieces (there are actually five in total) occupy the most identifiably representational end of this exhibition's spectrum. At the other abstract (and fully sculptural) end, are works like *Homer* (2000), a sculpture of dogwood, bamboo, and wisteria that co-curator Robin Metcalfe argues in his catalogue text "resembles a high-masted ship;" and *Moon in Water* (2001), which he suggests "recalls one of the ancient Greek triremes that carried Homer's hero, Odysseus, so far from home." I don't see it—visualizing (as the human condition inevitably forces me to do when confronted with the abstract and non-referential) instead something silly, like an odd kind of winter sled in the construction of the former work, for example—but no matter, that's okay. "Away we go," wrote the late American poet Jack Spicer, "with no moon at all." Like Spicer, I prefer to find my own way through the metaphoric darkness, and in the end, I much prefer the enigmatic encounters, the rendezvous with the unfamiliar and unfixable, that Kai Chan offers. ←

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