

Jennifer Tee

Local Myths

Eastside Projects, Birmingham
25 September – 6 November

Jennifer Tee's first UK solo show is subtle and intriguing, with works in an unlikely spread of media from ceramic, marble and textiles to graphics and photography. They each occupy space with a poise and presence usually associated with postminimalist sculpture, but there's a lot more going on here: Tee has a way of cutting across installation, performance, graphics and photography, as well as historical time-zones. Without any didactic references, the works resonate with indigenous cultures across several continents.

Eastside Projects is not some industrial-strength white cube, but a multifaceted intellectual venture embedded in a fractured yet evolving local urban culture. 'Eastside' is itself an extracartographic myth, a name with only urban narratives to give it substance. Tee, like other artists responding to the invitation to work here, will leave behind a work – a totemic 3.5m-high column of Carrara marble, into which is carved the legend 'Local Myths' (*Local Myths*, 2010).

The term 'myth' today is horribly overdetermined, but here it finds some unexpected depth. The show is framed by large billboard images, one on the Eastside building frontage, the other serving as a backdrop within. Collectively entitled *Star Crossed* (2010), they feature black-and-white stills of a female dancer in an array of angular, choreographed poses, superimposed with geometric shapes that echo the shape and vibrant colour of hexagonal pieces of hand-dyed wool on the gallery's floor. Above one of these is a mobile, with three suspended tourmaline crystals and ceramic birds in upward flight (*In Origin*, 2009). While they look at first glance like readymades, it becomes apparent the extent to which the objects have emerged from travelling, research, discussion and intense thought invested in some concealed narrative.

Falling Feathers (White), 2009
18 porcelain feathers, wooden octagram construction, black rope,
280 x 140 x 120 cm



The surface detail of the works evokes a tactile sensibility and interest in elemental materials outmoded in contemporary art; and their spatial distribution has something of the typographic – almost the hieroglyphic – about it.

Two versions of the work *Falling Feathers* (2009) comprise 18 oversize porcelain feathers suspended from a wooden octagonal frame, each side strung with yarn. North American? Symbolic? Authentic? Some of these aspects are like anthropological finds: striking images that belong to some ancient symbolic order. On coming through the door, you find yourself at an oblique angle to a line of what look like tribal ceramic vessels, two of them displaying regular fresh flowers. These are coiled stoneware vessels, all from 2010, and range from containers of basic substances to funerary vases, with names such as *Replacing*, *Healing*, *Hair*, *Heart*, *Liver*, *Ovary* and *Ancestral Sacrifice*: titles impressed into the ceramic surface. Tee, evidently, is not afraid of durable metaphysical questions concerning the limits of human existence, and how natural materials were the means through which mythic belief and narrative have been materialised and become formative of a local economy.

After a while, you become aware of walking in circles around the exhibition and, accordingly, of experiencing a mild feeling of ritual repetition. In peripheral vision, a photographic image of Tee's left hand draws you back into cultural real-time, dispelling any sense of tribal romanticism. Yet 'community' is a subtheme here, made apparent in some of the works' collaborative origins: the ceramics made with Jackson Li from Jingdezhen, the textiles with Sahara Briscoe from New York and the graphic design of the accompanying publication with Amsterdam-based Richard Niessen. *Jonathan Vickery*