

Revolution Rising

The clamor and tumult and the odd silences of revolution are at the very heart of Suki Chan's A Hundred Seas Rising. Her recent work speaks to revolution far beyond the United Kingdom to the furthest ends of the earth. The voices that interpret revolution in her work are voices to which one should pay attention.

By Marius Kwint

Hong Kong-born artist Suki Chan's installation at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, England, is visually modest but sonically impressive. It consists of 100 old-fashioned English school desks arranged as a classroom in the gallery's restored brick interior. Loudspeakers contained within the desks utter a hubbub of differing interpretations of revolution. If you bend down to listen, you might be lucky enough to get the one with the avuncular and (to English people) unmistakable

tones of veteran socialist politician Tony Benn, reflecting on a lifetime of pragmatic struggle: "my mother was a very religious woman and . . . taught me to support the prophets against the kings. I have done all my life and it's got me into a lot of trouble. The word revolution implies a lot of bloodshed but it is actually a way of describing different methods of doing the things we do to improve conditions and I think therefore if you use the word revolution you can frighten people."

Or you might catch the eminent

artist Richard Wentworth, always fascinated by language, musing on the pleasant fall of the word on the ear: "My idea for a revolution is soft. I think all the words that come into English that end in 'tion' are really interesting. And the central one is education, which really just means growing up and becoming wiser and realizing that you're in a context with other people and probably by the time you've worked it all out, you've died and it's all over." Most of the voices are, however, of private (though nevertheless perceptive and well



Suki Chan, **A Hundred Seas Rising**, 2012, 100-channel sound installation, 40 mins loop. Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth on May 4 through September 2, 2012. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

informed) citizens responding to Chan's straightforward questions such as: "What would you like to change?" Periodically, the voices crescendo in great waves that make the individual discourses inaudible, washing out of the gallery space into the lobby and nearby café.

The gallery and its surrounding area are part of a textbook postmodernist redevelopment of an old harbor area and naval buildings now turned over to retail, leisure, and the consumption of culture and history, known as Gunwharf Quays. Obsolete torpedoes ornament the piazzas around tapas bars and French-style cafés and signs inform us that these weapons were manufactured locally and are of the kind that the Royal Navy used to sink the Argentinian cruiser General Belgrano during the Falklands War of 1982 (though no mention of the 323 young lives thus lost.) The sleek yachts of the rich are moored hard by, while out to the south stretch the waters of the Solent: the aorta of Britain's great naval heart, whence its forces were sent to suppress threats to empire wherever they arose.

Suki Chan was schooled in England and graduated from the leading fine arts program at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 1999. She completed her MA in Fine Art at Chelsea School of Art in 2008. Her recent solo shows have included *Utopia on the Horizon*, Tintype, London; and *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk*, a video installation shown at Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of London. Her work at Aspex was developed specifically for the site under the advice of gallery director Joanne Bushnell, in partnership with the Creative and Cultural Industries Faculty at the University of Portsmouth and Quay Arts on the nearby Isle of Wight. It is funded by Turning Point South East, Arts Council England, Portsmouth City Council, and part-funded by the European Union.

The title and concept of *A Hundred Seas Rising* reflect Chan's dual cultural heritage since it is a combined reference to both the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1950s China and the great Victorian author Charles Dickens's description of the French Revolutionary crowd in 1789 as an overwhelming sea. This year is the bicentenary of Dickens' birth (he was born in Portsmouth in 1812) and he remains as globally popular and influential as ever, not least in China and India, where rapid industrialization has produced social conditions comparable to those of 19th-century England.

"The sea has always been an inspiration for me," Chan says, "and the chapter, 'The Sea Still Rises,' from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* aroused my curiosity. . . . It



Suki Chan, *A Hundred Seas Rising*, 2012, installation view at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth.

seems to draw potency from the destructive forces of nature, a theme propelled by Romanticism but which in recent years many have come to experience first-hand across the world. When I first described *A Hundred Seas Rising* to a friend, she exclaimed that the experience would be like physically being in one of my filmed murmurations [the collective noun for starlings.] I pondered about this connection afterwards. I had always wondered what those starlings were doing at dusk as they gathered together in their thousands: perhaps this was their public space for debating issues that came up during the day, before they each retired to their respective girder under the pier for the night. Filming has taught me that everything changes, even when we stand still, lock off the camera, and focus on a static subject, the scene changes, because light is constantly moving as the earth revolves around the sun."

Chan explains: "The idea of *A Hundred Seas Rising* developed quite rapidly in Spring 2011, soon after the first stirrings of the Arab Spring, before the riots in London that spread to other large cities in the UK and the worldwide Occupy movement. The French Revolution affected the minds of people in the most fundamental way, so I wanted to know if people's ideas had changed due to the recent events and their questioning of the *status quo* and value-systems. At the same time, I wanted to look back into history and started to research other revolutions. In my research I came across the Hundred Flowers Movement in China in 1956, a political movement that was inspired via Mao from an old Chinese poem: 'Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend.' The policy was designed to promote an open and liberal approach

to the ideological criticisms of the public, encouraging the flourishing of the arts and the progress of science. Just as the sea has a dangerous undertow, six weeks into the campaign, threatened by the overwhelming criticisms of the public, Mao ordered a halt to this movement and began instead to persecute those who were critical of the government and its ideology. The resulting Anti-Rightist Movement led to a loss of individual human rights."

Chan's work remains bold in the British context, too, because revolutionary ideas have seldom had much of a public hearing in these islands over the past 200 years, especially since the French Revolution terrified the British ruling classes during the closing decade of the 18th century. Until 1968, any hint of such seditious talk was censored from the English stage and offending writers and actors were liable to imprisonment. Republicanism, let alone revolution, remains a despised concept in the mainstream media, where there is little rational debate about democratizing the constitution. Convulsive change is portrayed as somehow alien to British traditions and identity, which are supposed to tend more typically only toward gradual reform.

However, the prospect of seizing power from below has not always been so foreign to the British people. The 17th century and the period of the so-called Civil War (which the Marxist historian Christopher Hill described as the English Revolution) produced a ferment of anti-authoritarian ideas that were widely circulated and debated from street to chapel and Parliament and which helped to sweep away the monarchy for nearly two decades. The examples of the Levellers during that period serve to inspire and inform many radicals to this day.

Early modern cosmology tended to regard time as cyclical and the fortunes of men as a wheel subject to natural 'revolutions,' so the term might have quite positive connotations to many. For example, the landing and accession of King William III and Queen Mary II in England from the Netherlands in 1688 was called 'the Glorious Revolution' in order to legitimize it in the popular mind. Only following the examples of the American and French Revolutions many decades later, and the rise of class politics with the Industrial Revolution, was the concept redefined as involving a much more total upheaval and renewal of society, often with overtones of terror and violence.

Charles Dickens reflected this modern view of revolution in his historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, of 1859, about Paris and London. Dickens was famously sympathetic to the plight of the working classes but shied away from endorsing collective overthrow of the entire system. In his novel, he portrayed the revolutionary crowd as a chaotic force likely to engulf the virtuous as well as the vicious. In Book II, chapter 21, he describes the Parisian crowd storming the Bastille: "With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France

had been shaped into a detested word [the word *Bastille*], the living sea rose, wave upon wave, depth upon depth, and overflowed the city . . ." The corresponding illustration by Hablot Browne in 1894 showed one of the unfortunate protagonists swept along while some individuals are trodden fatally underfoot by the mob of half-starved, crazed revolutionaries, their caricatures clearly derived from Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray's caustic satires of bestial Jacobins and Sans-Culottes in the 1790s.

Research by the historian E.P. Thompson has stressed that much popular protest and use of force during this period was actually much more disciplined and morally conscious than the stereotype of the unruly mob would suggest (and it is unlikely that mere hoodlums would have been able to subdue a fortress such as the Bastille.) However, Dickens's aquatic metaphor fitted his ambivalent attitudes toward demagoguery. Water is, of course, the stuff of life itself, and mastery of the seas and waterways was the basis of national mercantile prosperity and naval power, and therefore much celebrated in songs, stories, and pictures. But, as in many societies lacking the relative security of modern engineering and sanitation (or the widespread ability to swim,) water

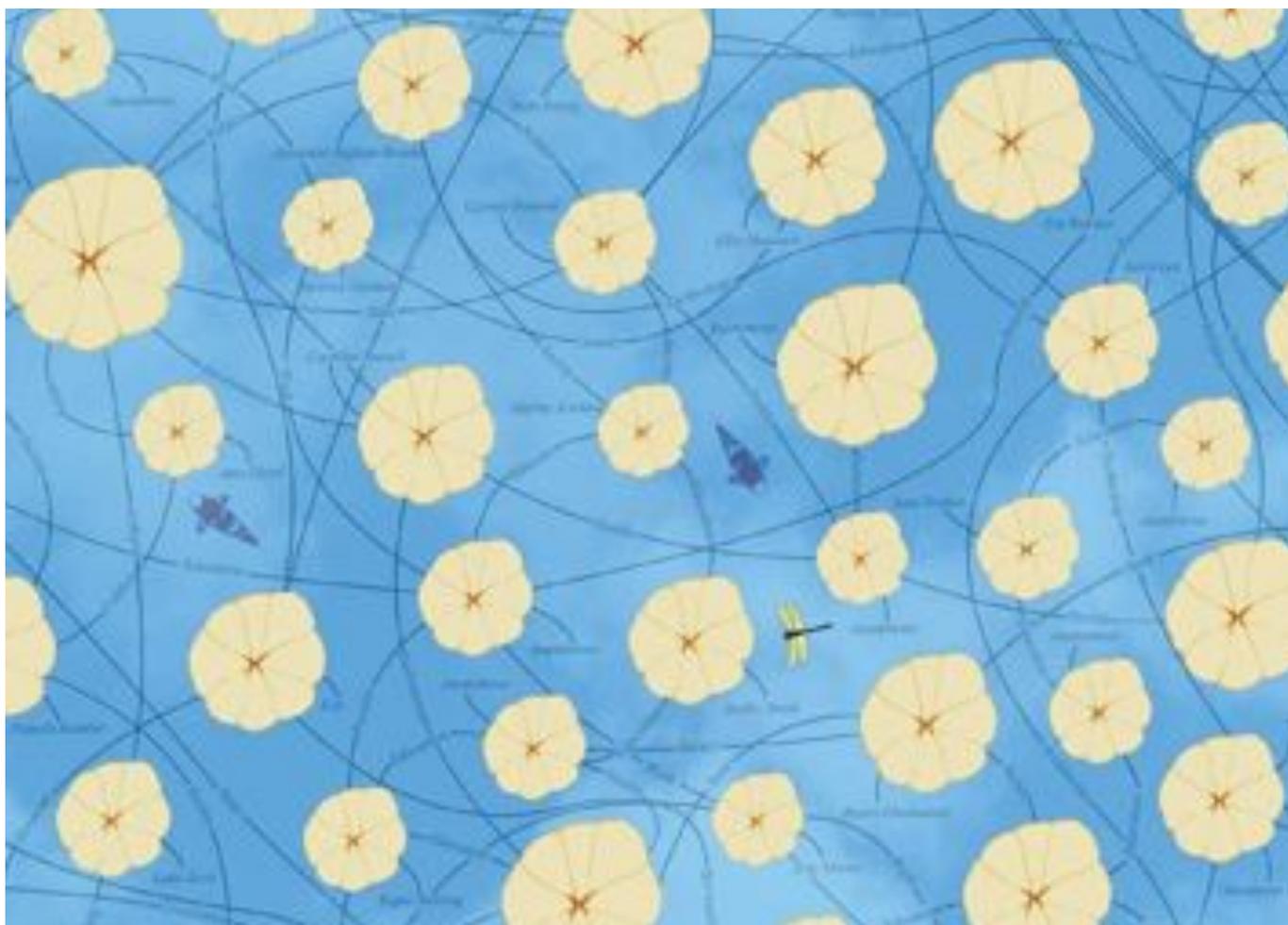
was also an object of fear. The treachery of water was all too often witnessed in disastrous storms, shipwrecks, and floods, to say nothing of cholera, that water-borne pestilence of the early industrial city.

The Romantic art of the 19th century often portrayed the sea as an aspect of the sublime: a means of entertaining audiences with the thrilling prospect of destruction and dissolution by ineffable and unbridled nature. Images of shipwrecks or those in peril on the sea conveyed not only a real fear of natural hazards but also represented humanity in turmoil, as revolutionary nationalism swept throughout the European continent and elsewhere. Perhaps the most famous of these images was Théodore Géricault's grand Salon painting of *The Raft of the Medusa* of 1819 (Louvre), depicting the desperate survivors of the wreck of a French frigate off the coast of Africa—an incident that Republicans blamed on corrupt management by the restored monarchy. It showed at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London, to considerable public acclaim for six months of the following year, reportedly accompanied by actor-supplied sound effects of the victims' groans.

English painters of the period, including J.M.W. Turner and Clarkson Stanfield (both of whom visited Portsmouth



Suki Chan, *A Hundred Seas Rising*, 2012, installation view at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth.



Suki Chan, *A Hundred Seas Rising* (detail of data visualization by University of Portsmouth students Benjamin Dempster and Richard Skene), 2012. The visualization represents a lily pond, with the size of each of the 100 flowers proportionate to the age of the speaker. The roots between show the connecting themes of their contributions.

for its picturesque maritime scenes,) became proficient at depicting heaving swells that might have a disconcerting effect on the viewer's sense of *terra firma*. Turner went on to push oil paint to the limits of pictorial representation in his *Snow Storm: Steam-boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842, Tate) showing the little vessel merging with the swirl of light, cloud, snow, smoke, and water around it as it puts up distress flares off the Thames Estuary.

As the Hong Kong-based art historian David Clarke has recently pointed out in his book *Water and Art* (2010), the propaganda art of revolutionary China in the 20th century tended to stress, by contrast, hydrological victories over inland waters that were historically the cause of disastrous floods—a program symbolized by Mao's celebrated swims in the Yangtze in the 1950s and 1960s, and depicted with subtle scepticism by the traditional watercolor painter Fu Baoshi, amongst others. Since the death of the Great Helmsman and relative liberalization in the 1990s, much cutting-edge Chinese contemporary art has featured performances with water as both

fascinating medium and freighted signifier.

"Despite the failure of the *Hundred Flowers Movement* in China," Chan reflects, "I became intrigued about the process by which people's consciousness rises up against a particular order and how individuals, though small and seemingly insignificant, can together assert a great force. I didn't set out to reflect the collective memories and perspectives of a cross section of the public living here in the UK in 2012. I was interested to start a dialogue and the process snowballed from there. Thus I started *A Hundred Seas Rising* with many questions. These questions in turn have led to more questions. Often, as an artist, one tries to be succinct within the realm of an artwork. This project is unique in that it's not a distillation of one idea, nor is it one grand narrative at the expense of others but hopefully is one idea, which allows other ideas to exist on equal footing—in its multiplicity and its difference, on an epic proportion."

Chan's erudite and insightful work indeed poses pertinent questions, and highlights the ironies and difficulties of revolutionary politics. The arrayed school desks make up a 'class'—that other taboo

term in polite discourse today. Together, they frustrate the gratification of bourgeois individualism and intellectualism by periodically sweeping up the single voices in swelling, babbling waves of sound: physical, irresistible forces that are, ultimately, the only way to effect real change, turning thought into deed, and word into action. Is it, then, betraying the nature of revolutions to appoint single leaders? Does the revolutionary conserve her strength for the big wave or constantly agitate and try to create one? Such problems are what confront the Occupy movement and the wider global struggle against austerity and capitalism today. What is sure is that Chan's work is timely, because if ever a mass movement was needed to break the stranglehold of a few on the futures of the vast majority, it is now. Δ

Note: A book of *A Hundred Seas Rising*, including selected transcripts of the interviews, is published by Aspek.

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