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Order and chaos, the calm art of Heman Chong does not reflect the disorder in his life

Heman Chong's art is calm and organised, but his Moderation(s) programme is a study in chaos, writes Mary Agnew

Sunday, 23 September, 2012, 12:00am



Order and chaos, the calm art of Heman Chong does not reflect the disorder in his life

Heman Chong maintains a balance between erudite artistic insight and jovial self-deprecation that is as disconcerting as it is charming. Primarily a conceptual artist based in Singapore, he is also a curator and author who has received acclaim in the art world in recent years.

When we meet, Chong is attempting to get through what he refers to as "yet another laborious edit" of his latest novel, tentatively named *Prospectus*. "It is kind of like a narrative that occurs between two people. It starts at the part where they realise that they have never understood each other even after being in a relationship for nearly 10 years," he says.

The novel takes place over the course of just three hours, but has taken Chong five years to write - and subsequently rewrite. "I'm not trained in literature and my publisher keeps coming back to me to do rewrites because the book just sucks. Writing a novel is just so much hard work. It is so different from being a visual artist. With art, you tend to be able to get away with cleverly concealed comments in a way that is not true in writing. You can't cheat. It is heartbreaking because people know quickly if it is good or bad."

This delicate balancing act of art, literature and curation is a skill Chong has been honing throughout his career. "I am one of those oddballs who have developed a strategy that allows me to move between lots of things for the greater part of my life," he says.

It is with this sense of plasticity in purpose that he has approached the role of curator for "Moderation(s)", a multidisciplinary programme developed and supported by Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and the new non-profit arts space Spring Workshop in Hong Kong. "The programme will occur over a series of activities," says Chong. "I want to see them as a set of events that will have no relation to each other except that

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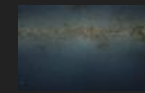
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they will involve a kind of attitude. In my opinion, this is a prevailing ethos in what we consider contemporary art practise today. It is kind of a run between the legacies of conceptual art and performance art."

The "Moderation(s)" programme started in August with "Guilty Pleasures", pegged as a "listening party" presented and developed by Singaporean performance artist Ang Song Ming, in which artist and audience presented a song each to illustrate their guiltiest listening pleasure. Cheesy electro, punk rock and other forms of aural nostalgia filled the yet-to-be-completed Spring Workshop in Aberdeen well into the night, carrying on later at a Wan Chai karaoke bar.

"You could really sense where I am coming from with the 'Moderation(s)' programme at this event," Chong says. "Throughout there needs to be a lot of involvement from the audience. They needed to come with a song and confess their deepest, darkest perception of what that song meant."

Through "Moderation(s)", Chong is creating a series of situations where things take place in a sporadic manner that seems to mimic the artist's own life. "I don't have a master plan for my life, which is dangerous because I function on impulsive improvisations. It is a complete nightmare. I don't mind making mistakes, but everyone around me does, which can be difficult. My mother freaks out about how I am living my life."

Chaos has followed Chong since birth. He was born "by accident" in Malaysia in 1977 instead of his native Singapore because his heavily pregnant mother travelled there to visit his father and went into premature labour. Singapore's strict immigration laws meant that even though his parents were from the island state, Chong was considered a Malaysian citizen until he completed his Singaporean military service in his late teens. "It was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. Every year I had to go to the embassy to renew my visa in my own country. Can you imagine?"

Chong's artistic work possesses a considerable amount of calm consideration. His solo exhibition, "Calendars (2020-2096)", shown at the NUS Museum in Singapore, featured 1,001 images or "paper calendars" that followed a singular idea of illustrating empty public spaces across the island. The work was ordered, grid-like and complete. It is as if through his work, Chong creates order amid external madness. His ideas are grand and non-specific, yet the end products of his projects are quiet and ordered - and often very beautiful.

This is the hope for "Moderation(s)" and with it the Spring Workshop. "At the end of the programme we could make a book or have an event rather than having a static situation concerning the idea about how art is being shown at the moment. For me, it is a kind of space of confluence."

In June and July next year, Chong plans to stage an event titled "Fictional Residency" as part of "Moderation(s)", and singles out Hong Kong artist Nadim Abbas as a significant participant. "He is going to represent a whole weird organic spillover between projects. We're going to ask fiction writers to come and stay with us for a month. In that month, we will be asking different writers, artists and curators to write with us for one day each. It will be a beautiful gesture to connect with the Hong Kong art scene.

"There will be no need to create a body of work - what will come out of it is an anthology of organic short stories and I think that is great."

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