

She lives by herself among strangers in a land where she was not born. She speaks the language fluently, and yet she does not

Liyen Chong, Fig. ii: Notes, from A Humid Day

From merchants to spies, French theorist Paul Ricoeur observes that there has always been a need for translators.ⁱ It is this thorny task, the complicated pursuit of imparting meaning, that Liyen Chong's project A Humid Day is occupied with. Much like the intermediary task of translation, the climate condition of humidity exists in a state of 'in-between'. We might imagine vaporous drops suspended in the air, the atmosphere holding an immaterial density, sultry particles filling the space between people and objects. In a state of constant transition, humidity has an exotic air of possibility.ⁱⁱ It is the air that is taken when meanings are exchanged, sensibilities passed between strangers, a thought conveyed between host and guest, manuhiri and tangata whenua, immigrant and native, inside and out. Ricoeur speaks of words and sentences that take to the air, that "flutter between men like elusive butterflies."ⁱⁱⁱ The communication of meaning, that sticky task of the translator, is the obscure yet pleasurable, intriguing but always impossible exercise of pinning these creatures down.

She is lost amongst objects who tell her what or who she is. Pieces of packaging and books become surfaces inscribed with her stream of consciousness.

She is a certain type of object herself, caught up in conversation with a world of other objects.

Engaging with a particularly pervasive realm of contemporary communication A Humid Day participates in the ever-expanding drift of data that filters through our daily lives. The papery stuff of commercial packaging, commodity information and advertising is the basis of a book, a series of replicated product packets, postcards, forms, pamphlets and, of course, a website. Chong has an eye for the most ubiquitous and prosaic of graphic designs. The accumulated aesthetic of A Humid Day's various 'bits and pieces' has a neat and tidy appeal; the crisp lines, pop colours, quickly discernable maxims and slick typographies offering the cosy familiarity of advertising. These works acknowledge the kind of orderly satisfaction that can be found in a perfect collection of stationery items or the neat compartments and packeted utensils of an airline dinner tray. But it is a period of brief relish, perhaps a fifteen-minute flash, before this stuff is no longer needed. Also occupying a transitory space, consumer material exists only to attempt a communication of sorts,



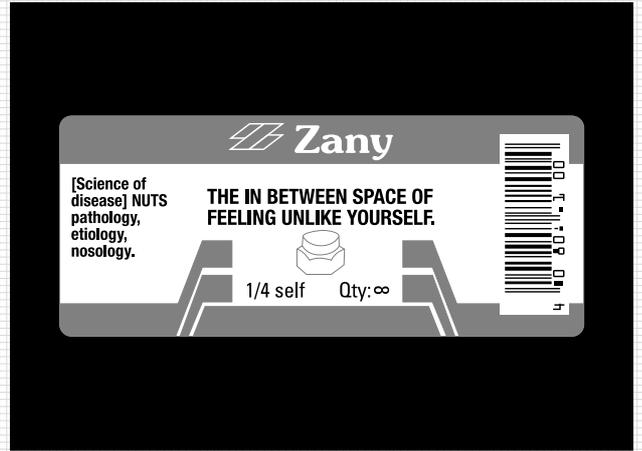
to enact a quick visual transfer of data. The toothpaste packet is thrown away, the vodka bottle emptied and the postcard sent off in the mail. Omnipresent yet ephemeral, their worth lies in the space between the push of advertising's global visual culture and its subjective reception by individuals.

She lets imagination run away with her reality.

In many ways, Chong's project involves taking the bland and ubiquitous character of consumerism's visual culture and coating it with a discussion of subjectivity and identity. In the artist's hands, this mass of commercial stuff becomes a surface for inscription. An assortment of personal observations, anecdotes, fantastic absurdities and difficult questions are folded into the lucidly communicable intentions of these graphic designs. This daily detritus is made to wear another's clothes, to accommodate another language, a series of foreign elements and observations judiciously selected by the artist. In some instances, it appears as though Chong's packaging has become a canvas for Surrealist word games and, in others, a means to make shrewd cultural critiques and theoretical observations. We might conclude that the stuff of our recycling bins has been tipped down the rabbit hole when a bottle of vodka obliges its drinker to Learn how to speak incoherently and the label of a packet of hardware nuts reads The in-between space of feeling unlike yourself. Perhaps it is also the experience of the immigrant that is being played out in these papery vessels, the thought patterns of someone who exists between here and there. We are presented with a certain visual and linguistic twisting, the result of a movement between different communities of thought, between different cultural practices and languages.

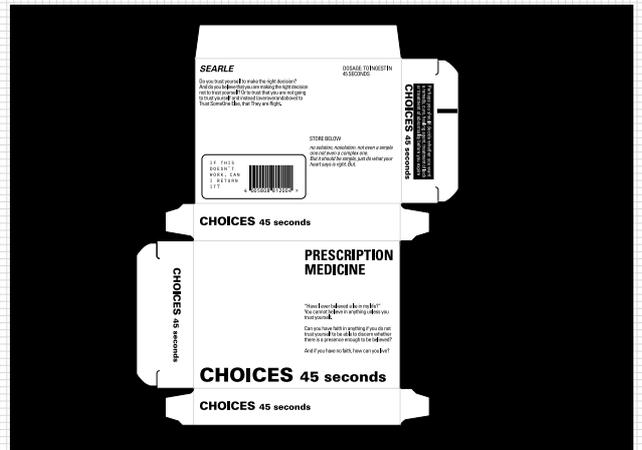
She is the object of our attention.

Indeed, for Ricoeur the capacity to engage with the unfamiliar and the strange is an attribute of the translator's efforts. "We are called to make our language put on the stranger's clothes at the same time as we invite the stranger



TOP LEFT Work in Progress: typed notes being organised for A Humid Day
 TOP Work in Progress: Pharmacy Store Section of A Humid Day
 ABOVE Work in Progress: Study Section of A Humid Day

into the fabric of our own speech.”^{iv} Translation is a process of playing host to that which is alien and Chong's work delights in all of its possibilities. A Humid Day makes use of the absurdities arising from this messy in-between space, of intriguing mistranslations and slips that occur in the exchange of different languages and means of communication. Like the tricky process of making a perfectly aerated sponge cake, Chong delicately folds these possibilities into our everyday culture of consumerism. The first page of rouge-red passport states: For Myself, One Who Belongs Nowhere, And Who Wishes To Belong Everywhere. Who is Everyone. Translation is the most everyday of tasks. It is the passage of our subjectivity; how we live in the world and interact with others that do too. Perhaps the immigrant's experience, the fascinating path of constructing and dismantling meaning, is one for us all.



TOP Installation shot: Items on the "kitchen table" of A Humid Day, SoFA Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand 2003
 MIDDLE Fig. 13.6 Nuts, from A Humid Day
 ABOVE Fig. 14.4.1 Prescription Medicine, from A Humid Day

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ⁱ Ricoeur, P. (2006). Sur la traduction. On translation. London ; New York, Routledge, p21
ⁱⁱ These thoughts on humidity are indebted to Juliana Engberg's catalogue for the 2001 exhibition Humid. Engberg, J., A. Australian Centre for Contemporary, et al. (2001). Humid. Melbourne, Vic., Melbourne Festival.
ⁱⁱⁱ Ricoeur, p31
^{iv} Kearney, Richard in the "Introduction" to Ricoeur, P. (2006). Sur la traduction. On translation. London ; New York, Routledge, pxi

