THE CHINESE FORTUNE COOKIE SERIES

A Thesis

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by

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"A search for the mythical sense, the essential core of that history... That dusky, allusive atmosphere, that aura that thickens around any family history, can only occasionally disclose to a poet its second, mythical face: an alternative, a depth in which the secret mystery of blood and race is hidden... These mythical elements are inherent in the region of early childish fantasies, intuitions, fears and anticipations characteristic of the dawn of life."

-- Bruno Schulz
Sanatorium under the
Sign of the Hourglass.
"A story is told according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by, used to have a notice posted on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: The Poet is Working."

-- Andre Breton

Manifestoes of Surrealism
The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series represents a year's focused exploration based on a narrative theme derived from my thoughts on the frailty of human existence. From my experiences and the influence of other artists, I have created drawings that carry with them a sense of universality (fear, anxiety, hope and celebration), while expressing my personal mythology. The drawings are intimate in size (8" x 10" and 11" x 14") and many in number.

I was born in West Germany in a region dominated by local legends incorporating mythical creatures and by the festive surroundings related to the production and consumption of Rhine wine. At the age of seven, my mother remarried to an American soldier and brought me to the United States. Thus began a series of trips and excessive relocations that would continue into my adult life.

Early in my life, I began to rely on my imagination to substitute for the stability and consistent companions I needed. I would spend frightened nights in my fortress (the bed) making up adventures involving chimeras, incubi and succubi, created out of dark shadows posed around my room. As my imagination began to develop, it also began to manifest itself outwardly. I was quick to show interest in writing and drawing, giving form to my imaginary life in a tangible way.
By ten years of age, I began faithfully keeping a journal depicting fantastic worlds and situations mixed with ordinary daily circumstances concerning my life.

While traveling in Europe as a teenager, I was exposed to the works of Salvador Dali. Although I had missed a major exhibition of his art work in München, West Germany (1974), I experienced the aftermath: an entire city filled with Dalian1 frenzy (art, reproductions, books, films, essays, etc.). There it was, my imaginary world, captured by another. The surreal "feeling" (isolation, alienation, futility of effort, frozen time, loneliness) had already been with me for years. I realize then that I was not alone.

J. G. Ballard's introduction in Dali (1974) throws light onto the motivation behind Dali's work, while it also caught in words what had become the intricacies of my thoughts:

The uneasy marriage of reason and nightmare which has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an increasingly surreal2 world. More and more, we see that the events of our own times make sense in terms of surrealism3 rather than in any other view—whether the grim facts of death-camps, Hiroshima and Viet Nam, or our far more ambiguous unease at organ transplant surgery and the extrauterine foetus, the confusions of the media landscape with its emphasis on the glossy, lurid and bizarre, its hunger for the irrational and sensational. The art of Salvador Dali, an extreme metaphor at a time when only the extreme will do, constitutes a body of prophecy about ourselves unequalled in accuracy since Freud's 'Civilisation and its Discontents.' Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our fears and longings, and our need to pursue our own psychopathologies as a game—these diseases of the psyche Dali has diagnosed with dismaying accuracy. His paintings not only anticipate the psychic crisis which produced our glaucous paradise, but document the uncertain pleasures of living within it.4
Specific works of Dalí's with which I felt a particular kinship were *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (the contemplative figure waiting for your "shift in seeing" to be recognized and singled out); the loneliness of a peopled yet barren landscape in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*; and a painting (that I cannot accurately name because I have not seen it since 1974): *Gravida Finds Something Human Like Again*. The latter painting had the most powerful effect on me; it depicted a lone woman clinging, weeping onto the shoulder of a vertical boulder vaguely resembling a human, the "head" containing an empty hole. The background is a vast, barren wasteland. She, too, sought refuge in an imaginary companion.

My second significant influence was Max Ernst and his picture novel entitled *Une Semaine De Bonte* (1976). The quiet horror (Fig. 1) and night visitations by strange creatures (Fig. 2) portrayed by his clever use of montages stoked my imagination. Bird people were quickly inducted into my nightly entourage; dreams of flying prevailed.

In Ernst's *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, the montages possess supplementary sentences or parts of sentences that add a twist (and/or perplexity) to the reasoning behind the constructed images (Fig. 3). Trying to link the secret connections and connotations between the montages and sentences was like trying to solve a puzzle which would keep me intrigued for hours. This tactic appears in the choice of titles for my drawings.
Duchamp impressed me with his intellect and humor. I appreciated (and still do) his unwillingness to expose the meanings of his work directly (as in the piece entitled The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors), but rather through the viewers participation in research (analyzing the contents of Duchamp's Green Box for example). To appreciate the full humor within his illustration (Fig. 4), Woman Hack Driver, one must rely on a fair grasp of the French and English language (words, or parts of words are evident in this print) as well as the social mores of the time to discover the sexual humor behind the abandoned, parked carriage. This "homework" (so to speak) adds depth and layers of meaning to his work.

Saul Steinberg's drawings (published almost regularly in The New Yorker) influenced me with his wit and humor (Fig. 5), the folly of the human condition (Fig. 6), as well as the use of expressive line quality as a direct method of communication (Fig. 7).

There is also a grim side to his universal self-transformation. Becoming someone else is a crisis situation. Steinberg's drawings are full of figures on the edges of precipices, statues falling from their pedestals, solitary individuals staring into voids. Like Duchamp, the audience's education and perceptiveness helps in understanding the nuances of Steinberg's humor.

The innocence of Winsor McCay's cartoon strip Little Nemo brings me back to where I started: the sincerity of a child in its night fortress engaged in adventures with make believe
companions (Fig. 8) sometimes scared by the world and all the horrible things that infiltrate a child's mind.

Edmund B. Feldman's description of the child artist in *The Artist* explains what was also my motivation for early attempts at drawing:

Of course, child artists also feel rage and fear. The artistic act is very often their principle means of coping with these emotions. But once they have made an image of a person or thing, they have in effect named it and reduced its threatening power; they share with prehistoric artists a sense of control over what has been successfully reproduced.8

As I grew older and became influenced by other artists, I began to copy their techniques. Dali's influence led me into briefly exploring painting, while Ernst's *Une Semaine De Bonte* had a more significant influence in my search for technique. The montage technique became a great exercise in uncovering my subconscious thoughts (analyzing the juxtaposition of unrelated objects), creating ambiguous situations (taking figures out of their original context) (Figs. 9 and 10), developing my personal mythology at a quicker pace (in an average four hour session I could create thirty-five or more photo images), and developing an eye for composition (the flexibility of moving around the cut-out shapes to create a variety of viewpoints and compositions).

After creating hundreds of photo montages, I began to miss the "activity" of drawing, the energy of mark making, and the surprises available by mixing artist's tools (inks with pastels, glue, cray-pas, etc.). By mixing the urgency of
photomontage with the meditative qualities of line drawing, I began to extend myself to making large mixed media drawings based on my individual photomontages. Two basic flaws in this method quickly challenged me: the drawings were not necessarily an improvement on the photomontage and the expediency of creating was lost, leaving me apathetic towards the piece before I'd finished it. I discovered that for my artwork to project any sincerity, I had to feel sincere/excited about it during every step of its process. My moods changed too quickly.

After a year's bout exploring a combination of mixed media drawing, montage, and assemblage (in various sizes), I found my mind as jumbled as my studio. I threw everything out. "Simplicity for the sake of sanity" became my motto. Looking toward Steinberg and McCoy's simpler and more direct line drawings, I began again with this most basic of art forms. This time I made a concentrated effort to explore, fully, one theme and technique. Small in size (averaging around 9" x 11"), the Chinese Fortune Cookie Series projected an intimate and personal quality that supported the nature of my psychological/visual narrative. The media's expediency (pen and ink) was finally compatible with the rapidity of my changing disposition.

The figure in my series of drawings has its origins in a series of episodes (Fig. 11), circa 1986, aimed at my whining about the complexities of being a human. In its early stages,
the figure represented me, (dubbed "Booth Philosopher), comic strip style (Fig. 12), adorned in a two-pointed hat (thinking cap) and a pair of sunglasses (anonymity so that I may feel free to speak). Thus dressed/drawn, I was ready to voice my concerns and conclusions to the world, keeping in mind the vast audience a successful comic strip addresses. The Booth Philosopher's cartoon-like facial expressions were meant as an emotional cue while the total visual presentation was flat, decorative with a hint of surrealism merely evident by a horizontal line dividing the negative (or background) space.

As the Booth Philosopher developed, I shortened my writings (usually shown as a speech balloon) into adages or boiled down versions of my journal conclusions that I had kept for years. After hundreds of these flat images, I began to "throw cut the kitchen sink" visually as with the words. The facial expressions were the first to be eliminated, replaced by the movement of the ear-like appendages that had evolved from the two-pointed thinking cap and a rectangular hole (reminiscent of Dali's **Gravida Finds Something Human-Like Again**), where the face belongs serves as an enigmatic "you fill in the blank" prod while simultaneously creating a feeling of emptiness and alienation. The Booth Prophet (the name for the more "mature" stage of the Booth Philosopher) gained a human body to bear human empathy. Formal issues such as line quality, color, texture, figure placement, all combine to help
support the mood of these explorations into the human condition.

This new hybrid version of The Booth Philosopher would usually spend night hours tormented by life's questions, contemplative thoughts, bewitching images, or antagonized by its private hell. Staged in the confines of the bedroom, the bed itself becomes an important supportive element in The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series\textsuperscript{10} because of what I view as its direct relationship to the human being. I believe the bed acts as a surrogate womb, nurturer and life long companion transgressing all cultural and sociological situations. As babies, we were born in beds. As adolescents, we entertain adventures under the cloak of night in the privacy of our beds (Fig. 13). When traveling, we pine for the comfort of our own bed. As adults, we play at propagating our species in beds. In fact (speaking as an average American), we spend half of our lives dreaming/slumbering in these pieces of furniture. During our weakest and most vulnerable moments, we prefer to retreat to our private fortress. Eventually, most of us will greet death in a bed. Accordingly, "the bed" has become one of the stronger recurring images in this series of vulnerability and the human condition.

While supporting the figure(s) and the bed(s), I see the background or negative space functioning also as the major subplot. Manipulated like the shadows in a dark bedroom, the technique I employ (playing hide and seek with spontaneous line
gestures) ensures me fresh images that arise unpredetermined from my own subconscious mind. Although I plan the position of the figure in relationship to the bed and room, the shapes in the negative space have a will of their own. At times, I've searched in vain for male figures while I am blatantly stared in the face by breasts and vaginae. When looking for female symbols, I only find stuffed animals. These unexpected results keep the drawings alive, fresh and amusing to me. The jet black india ink adds a confident and aggressive air.

While the use of color is not a consistent issue (more often used to enhance the value or texture of the vigorous black line quality), there is a strong concern with value contrast. Light and dark areas usually switch roles as the compositional elements move generally top to bottom, left to right creating a balance and solidity within the pictorial situation. Similarly, the figure (a human body with a Booth Prophets head) often switches passive/aggressive roles in relation to the circumstances (night visitations, things hiding under the bed, etc.). At the very least, the figure will portray a quiet curiosity or pensiveness. Value takes on a dramatic overture as well as helping to organize the hierarchy of events.

The use of horizontal line movement breaking up the negative space in the case of the earlier Booth Philosopher drawings has been reassigned as a horizontal bed or floor/wall plane usually complimented by a strong vertical line or space.
These hard divisions of composition add weight and studied stability to the incorporeal spirits and situation.

The final element of The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series is that of the Chinese fortune itself. Originally, the comic series sprung from an entertaining game among friends and myself: We discovered that no matter what a Chinese fortune stated, if one tacked on the two words "in bed" at the end, the adage would instantly transform into a piece of decadent humor that always made sense. This silly game led me to consider using Chinese fortune slips as a measure to reveal situations involving the human condition. I perceive the fortunes as adding a twist to the immediate visual interpretations of the pen and ink drawings.

In Fig. 14, the image speaks of two lovers in a bed, one tentatively pursuing the other figure which is scrunched to the end of the bed. The image is not threatening, if joyous; just tentative. The negative space confirms sexual overtones (looming phallus). The title (a Chinese fortune YOU WILL BE SINGLED OUT FOR PROMOTION) suddenly transforms the situation into one of social comment, i.e., sexual harassment related to job duties.

In another instance, the fortune offers a deeper meaning to the dance of a couple of bringing a more universal (applicable to more then mere dancing situations) overtone to the scene by stating TO LEAD ONE MUST FIRST LEARN TO FOLLOW
(Fig. 15). Black humor and cynicism (Fig. 16) are also evident when employing these little fortune slips.

In general, the mass produced fortunes help me discover new relationships and meanings (as I search for their visual mates) in the works on paper. Sometimes I am surprised at their uncanniness. The fortunes are the last step in creating the individual members of The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series.

During the course of development regarding The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series, I suspect there will be times when no fortune will seem appropriate or likely to add a significant or challenging twist. Perhaps the title (as in the beginning of the Booth Philosopher comic's expression) is analogous to "canned laughter", so to speak. During these instances, I may prefer to allow the work to stand alone. The silence becoming the enigma. I hope to shift the viewer into my "state of mind" (as Dali's work once shifted me) so they may "fill in the blank" according to their personality/experiences and the prescience I have set up through the use of repetition.

By staying true to a consistent theme, I have had the chance to dwell in the same world for a substantial period of time and therefore be more sensitive to the details and fluctuations of all aspects of the series and its components, physically as well as spiritually. In this way, I hope to exploit and exhaust all elements of The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series before moving on to my next theme.
Having created some forty-odd renditions of the Booth Prophet in all its variations, I have determined that each drawing is judged on its own merits. Some pieces may focus on theme while others are preoccupied with formal issues, disturbing realizations (employed by the fortune slips), or a combination of several concerns. As a body of work, The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series is contained by works representing birth and death. The last panel, TO GO IS TO RETURN (Fig. 17), hints of a continuation: resurrection.

The early comic strip-like Booth Philosopher and its knack for getting published,\textsuperscript{11} thereby exposing it to a larger audience, will, I predict, open the door for its more mature but brooding twin, seen in The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series. Mark Groening, with this syndicated \textit{Life in Hell} comic strips, Lynda Barry published regularly in \textit{Esquire} magazine, and Garry Trudeau, known for the comic strip \textit{Doonesbury}, have all been exhibited in galleries and (Trudeau's case) museums.
"Myths are public dreams. Dreams are private myths."

-- Joseph Campbell
FOOTNOTES

1A word Dali uses to describe his world and all that it contains. I first heard this term in a film entitled Salvador Dali, Soft Self Portrait by Pacific Arts, 1969.

2Surreal: having the intense irrational reality of a dream.

3Surrealism: the principles, ideas, or practice of producing fantastic or incongruous imagery or effects in art, literature, film or theater by means of unnatural juxtapositions and combinations.

4Dali, Dopagne.

5Similarly, my drawings in The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series often require a "shift in seeing" to discover all the hidden elements involved (mythical creatures, chimeras, etc.).

6Saul Steinberg, Rosenberg.

7"Little Nemo in Slumberland, by Winsor McCay, (which) was the first strip to break away from humor tradition, introducing fantasy as a genre. McCay's artistic style on Nemo was a curious cross between Art Nouveau and Surrealism. Each episode told of the adventures of a little boy called Nemo after he went to sleep at night, in the region of his dreams called Slumberland." How to Draw and Sell Comic Strips, Alan McKenzie.

8The Artist, Feldman.

9A Booth Philosophy adage that grew into a political/social comment. The term "Booth Philosophy" stemmed from a job situation that dominated my undergraduate years at The Ohio State University. Working at campus parking garages as a booth attendant, I would spend my idle time staring beyond my glass and metal booth deliberating on life and the human condition. My conclusions were jotted down on bits of booth paper (receipts, register tape, etc.), then transformed into cartoon-like panels centered around the "Booth Philosopher" or its more mature sibling the "Booth Prophet" (shown as the figurative character in The Chinese Fortune Cookie Series).
Named after actual Chinese fortunes that serve as the titles for most of my drawings. In some cases, I have included my own (fake) fortunes.

9Hoot, Columbus' Cartoon Newspaper.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES
"... upsy-daisy! Upsy-daisy!...

Fig. 3.
Fig. 5.
Gracious! Will we ever get to the top of this row? I'm getting tired of this!

Fig. 8.
Fig. 9. Wilmington, 1985
Fig. 10. Pleasure/Pain, 1985
Fig. 11. The Booth Philosopher, c. 1986
Fig. 12. The Booth Philosopher, 1987
Oh! What a horrible feeling. What the bed is rocking. Oh! It's going to tip over. Mercy!

Land sakes alive. What all this bed is doing. It's tipping over. Someone help me. I must get up.

Well! If this isn't peculiar. Goodness gracious! What shall I do? Should I go? Someone help me. I must get up.

Oh! My head. What is it? Oh! What is this? Am I so sick? What will become of me?

I'm dying. Goodbye. Farewell to all. I did not want to go this way. Adieu! Fair Earth and all.

Oh! Help me on! What would my intended say if he should see me up here? I'd rather die. My head is bursting. Help! Help! Oh! Save me!!!!

Pshaw! How ridiculous! Who'd think melted cheese would cause such a dream? Well I'm glad it was a dream. Gracious!

Fig. 13. Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend by Winsor McCay.
Fig. 14.
Fig. 16. YOU WILL ENJOY GOOD HEALTH, YOU WILL BE SURROUNDED BY LUXURY.