



披一身藝術

Movana's metamorphosis

The accountant-turned-artist goes from magazine to book shredding to find new inspiration for her paper-based creations

By Jill Wong
Photography by Andrew Tang

The paper shredder in 陳麗雲 (Movana Chen) Chen's studio in the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC) is a humble little grey box measuring 31cm by 18cm placed inconspicuously on a low stool. It is barely visible among the surrounding piles of old magazines and books yet this tiny device plays a big role in Chen's life and work.

It was the inspiration for her signature "magazine dress", which she knits from paper strips shredded from magazines. She came up with the idea years ago when she was an accountant shredding documents as her company prepared to wind up its Hong Kong operations. "People often use highlighters on shipping documents and these produce colorful shredded paper. I thought the shredded paper was beautiful, and I brought the machine home," she says. "It's the only thing I kept from that job."

She put the idea into practice at Hong Kong Art School, where she did a part-time degree in fine art from 2003 to 2005. Over that time, her work evolved from her "magazine dress" – knitted from 60 pages of *D* magazine – to her acclaimed "body container", a shredded-paper wrapping resembling an over-sized knitted stocking that covers the entire body and in which she sometimes performs. Her latest project, *Travelling into My Bookshelf*, was recently exhibited at Shin Hwa Gallery in Hong Kong. It will move to other cities over the next two years.

"I had a busy job as an accountant, and took up fine art study in my spare time as a way to relax. I never thought my interest could end up becoming a career," she says.

Travelling into My Bookshelf has taken Chen in a new direction. Unlike her previous work which was created from shredded magazines, this latest project sends the pages of books through the little grey box. She collected about 60 books that friends of hers from around the world have read and donated to her. The exhibition's main piece is a knitted "scroll" that will grow longer as she collects more books from the people she meets during the tour.

So far, the collection includes *《部小文學》* (Selected Works of Dore) by Victoria Benedictsson, *Five Go Down to the Sea* by Eadard Blount, one of the *Carne de bori* volumes by Lewis Trondheim, *A Stranger in the Mirror* by Sidney Sheldon, *Leviathan* by Paul Auster and two *Les Aventures de Tintin*, the comic series by Hergé.

Chen is looking forward to moving beyond the body container that brought her so much acclaim. Although she still has a few more pieces to work

on from prior commitments, it is clear that her heart is in her new project. "It has been one body container after another for the past few years. I need to stop, take a rest and have a think. I feel the *Bookshelf* project is an improvement," she says, adding that unlike the body containers that are mainly knitted from fashion magazines, the books have history and meaning.

She has retained the covers of the books and made notes in her scrapbook about the ones she is using and their previous owners. "It is interesting to hear what people tell me when I ask them for books," she laughs. "Some people give me books they like, while some give me books that they don't want anymore. Someone even told me, 'No, you can't have my books. They are very precious. How can I possibly let you shred them?'"

She doesn't like reading and normally looks at pictures and skips the words, which is why she didn't have her own books to include. But after starting on the project, she tried to read some of the books her friends gave her.

"When I was toying with the idea for *Travelling into My Bookshelf*, I went to an old bookshop and bought two books. That was my first time in an old bookshop. I had intended to shred the books and knit them, but then I discarded the idea because I felt that there was no meaning to the books. That's when I thought of asking my friends for their books."

It's a knitted process, turning small presses into strips long enough to be knitted with regular-sized knitting needles. Chen's assistant cuts equal-sized pieces of paper from pages and joins them together by hand. She uses a special machine edge so that they form extended strips. She then feeds a few at a time through the shredder and out comes a small tuft of shredded paper. It is only when she has knitted a long enough piece that Chen asked her assistant to help with the shredding.

The one book that Chen often reads is her own notebook, which she keeps by her bed. She uses it to jot down ideas, make rough sketches and keep track of works in progress. However, she does not stick religiously to the initial ideas, which can keep changing as she knits the progress along. Instead, she emphasizes the dynamic processes of "deconstruction" and "reconstruction," communication and the use of material, rather than the clothes in isolation.

It takes a rare talent to spend many years on an accountant and then go on to win the opportunities and recognition that have come to 35-year-old Chen's way. She held her first solo exhibition, *Play with Artbooks*, at the White Tube

雜誌可以用來讀，也可以用來穿。將它先剪成紙條，再編織成衣裳，是對一本時裝雜誌的最大恭維

gallery at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 2005, before she formally graduated from Hong Kong Art School. That exhibition caught the eye of a curator from London, and led to an invitation to take part in the alternative fashion show *You Make Me at the Oxo Tower* in London.

Doors have continued to open for her. She was commissioned by Shanghai Tang to create a body container, which she made out of about 350 pages of Shanghai Tang catalogues, and staged a performance in it at the first Hong Kong International Art Fair in 2008 (ART HK 08), a year before 周潤發 (Chow Chun-fat) received the honor for a performance at ART HK 09. ART HK 08 brought opportunities for her to take part in bigger and more prominent exhibitions, such as the Shanghai MoCA *Envisage II – Butterfly Dream* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOMA) Shanghai, *Beyond the Body* at the Galerie Hélène Lamareque in Miami and *Two-way Communication: The Art of Movana Chen* was published by Kubrick in April 2008.

world. She worked as a designer in the late 1990s after studying at the London College of Fashion. "I didn't like the job," she says. "It was not about my own ideas, but rather that the market wanted. It was more like a merchandising job when I had to follow pre-set standards for color, fabric, style and so on. I did that for two years and felt very bored. So I went into accounting, did that for seven years and took up a part-time fine art degree in 2003."

Chen is married to Jacky, a Malaysian she met while in secondary school in Singapore. With his wife set to be on tour with her exhibition for a considerable amount of time over the next two years, he recently left Hong Kong to take a one-year commercial pilot course in Thailand.

"I won't be seeing my husband for a year, but that gives me time to do what I like," Chen says while cutting open a book containing copies of *Vogue China* that have just been delivered to her studio. These were later shredded and used in a new body container for an art in Beijing.

The body container looks rather like an over-sized stocking worn over the entire head and body. When Chen performs in it, she writhes and wriggles her body quietly and slowly like a morphing caterpillar. "My parents are still puzzled as to what I do. Whenever people ask my mother what her daughter does, she says, 'I don't know. She is knitting all the time at home.'"

Chen likes to run ahead and attributes her ability to multi-task to her early responsibilities as the eldest of seven children. "My parents were busy and I had to look after my siblings and even attend parent meetings at their school. I was also a volunteer (Christie Yuen Shin), director of Shin Hwa Gallery on Aberdeen Street where the Hong Kong *Bookshelf* exhibition was held, met Chen three years ago when she was about to open Shin

Chen's work can also be seen at The Opposite House, a luxury boutique hotel in Beijing, as well as the Hyatt Regency Hong Kong in Sha Tin. Her book (編織·對白) (*Two-way Communication: The Art of Movana Chen*) was published by Kubrick in April 2008.

amphibian and bubbly, Chen is the quintessential live wire who's always the first to greet guests in her studio. She breaks into laughter easily and her upbeat, busy work makes one wonder if she'll ever run out of energy.

Her dress style is understated, a mix of Muji minimalism and IT edginess (IT refers to the Hong Kong fashion chain popular with young people for its funky and quirky style). Barely five-foot tall, Chen doesn't use make-up, doesn't bother with accessories and sticks to basic colors like black, navy blue and beige, and her shoes are always flat and comfortable. The asymmetrical fringe and wispy bob of her hair enhance her gamine-ness, but she reveals her feminine side when she starts knitting, a skill learned at a young age from her grandmother in Shenzhen. The knitting led her briefly into the fashion



Chen performed in her body container – with immediate effect. "She lay on the floor inside the body container, making very slow and spaced-out movements as if she were a caterpillar. They were very interested to find out what this object was."

Chen has been curator of Y99 Gallery in Happy Valley since graduating from Hong Kong Art School. A gallery job doesn't have to be nine to five. Even when Movana is not on duty in the gallery, she still gets the work done. That is the most important thing.

How will Pang cope once Chen goes on tour with her *Bookshelf* project? "Of course, it would be ideal to have staff working full time. But I'm willing to be flexible if Movana has other commitments. To be able to travel is a good thing for Movana, and we'll just have to try and find a balance in our working arrangement. We've established a relationship based on mutual respect and I'm sure we'll be able to come to an arrangement that works for both of us."

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A curator is like a chef. It is all about putting different ingredients together

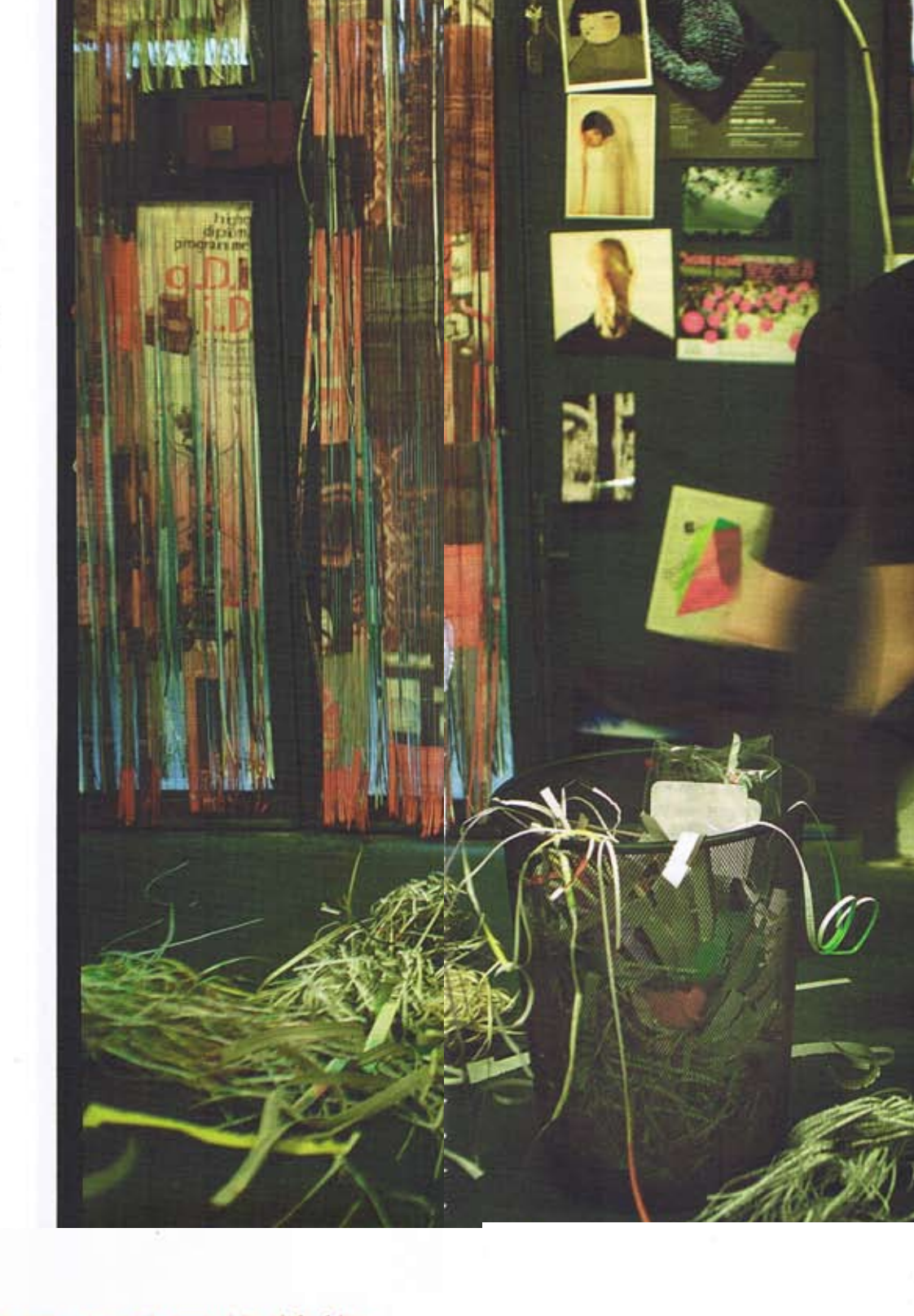
Hwa. "I was truly attracted to her personal charm as well as her work," she says. "She is a person who gets energy when she is with people. She knits in the MTR, at home, in her studio, and at the same time she keeps coming up with new ideas."

Attracted to Chen's work at first sight, Yuen Shin was keen to have her as curator of her new gallery. Chen decided to give it a try, which meant she had to juggle between two jobs every day and curate exhibitions for both galleries. After a month, she was worn out and gave up the Shin Hwa job. When Chen came up with the idea of knitting books, Yuen Shin jumped at the opportunity to host the exhibition.

"I didn't want to keep her in our gallery. She is a very good curator, and she is a very good artist. And if I were to choose for her, I would choose artist. She has the same idea as well. I was not that happy to let her go, but I was happy to let her go knowing that she'll have more time to do more work."

Visitors to Shin Hwa Gallery saw two examples of Chen's new direction: the pieces were mounted on large square boards. One was knitted from music books and had little musical notes sprinkled in rhythmic fashion throughout. Part of the work was more yellow than the rest, suggesting books of different ages. Chen deliberately preserved the Post-its on their pages. The other work was knitted from a combination of two *Tintin* comic books that Yuen Shin had given Chen as a Chinese New Year gift. The result was a jolly contrast of red, blue, black and white that resembled a jellybean while somehow emanating a feeling of nostalgia.

The second half of 2009 has been a particularly busy period for Chen. She was in Seoul in July for a group exhibition at the Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, then came back to Hong Kong to finish her latest body container in time for the *Vogue China* group exhibition in Beijing in September. Meanwhile, she continued to work on the *Bookshelf* project that kicked off in October,



Chen is thankful her gallery job brings a stable income and gives her flexibility and time to pursue her own endeavors – she finishes work at 3pm and has Wednesdays off – although she stresses that she wants to be an artist, not a curator.

Pang knows this and is comfortable with Chen taking time off now and then for her own pursuits. She adds, "I still rely on her to run the gallery. A gallery job doesn't have to be nine to five. Even when Movana is not on duty in the gallery, she still gets the work done. That is the most important thing."

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對一個從創作中取得最大滿足的藝術家來說，策展不是為他人作嫁衣裳，而是跟自己深愛的藝術「拍散拖」

as well as curating several exhibitions for Y99 Gallery.

In the midst of all this, she received a call one August afternoon from her father saying that her grandmother in Shenzhen was in critical condition after a fall. She spoke calmly to him, but afterward, she let out a sob, picked up her handbag, turned off the lights in her studio and headed for Shenzhen.

A few days later, after her grandmother's condition stabilized, she was her normal bubbly self again.

鄧麗雲 (Stella Tang), a lecturer when Chen was in her second year at Hong Kong Art School, saw early evidence of her ability to turn ideas into reality. "Her work has a communicative quality that you don't always get to see in other artists' works because there are artists who work in isolation," Tang says. "Movana is highly energetic and a good communicator, and her work reflects these qualities."

The goal of every artist is to create his or her own art, and Tang feels that Chen is slowly getting there. "My feeling is that being bombarded with all this recognition at such an early stage in her career has perhaps slowed the process a bit. Although she is still trying to find her own art, I do see that she is heading in the right direction."

"In school, the pressure to peer groups normally pushes an artist to work thicker head. Once she leaves school, she is required to do all that thinking independently without the help of teachers. This is difficult for any artist to do when she is trying to find her way within the artistic environment at large."

Tang, who is also an artist, is, in principle, against the idea of artists working as curators. Nonetheless, she concedes that Chen's job at the gallery has brought her opportunities that do not come of the way of most budding artists.

"On the whole, the kind of exposure an artist gets from curating is beneficial. Particularly at this early stage of her artistic development," Tang will say, "an artist isn't given such opportunities, she prolonged struggling period may force her to give up eventually. I hope Movana will make good use of these

opportunities to add depth and variety to the content of her work."

While many curators in Hong Kong are essentially coordinators, Tang says that a curator's job can also involve in-depth critical analysis. "As a curator, her job is mainly one of coordination and there remains much to be learned in terms of curating. As an artist, there is certainly room for further development."

鄧麗雲 (Lukas Tam), who taught Chen in her digital media and performance art, adds, "Movana's organizational skills are undoubtedly very strong, but contemporary art involves a lot of issues. It takes time for one to be able to curate an exhibition that can effectively express ideas and explore issues and opinions from different perspectives."

Chen admits she is not the perfect curator. While she is a model of efficiency at managing a gallery, she concedes she isn't good at writing and drafting curatorial statements.

This is her strength and her weakness as well as researcher for Hong Kong at the Asia Art Archive. Chen once approached Wen Yau about doing a performance in her body container, but Wen Yau was busy at the time. Wen Yau says that getting exposure through curatorial work is generally beneficial for artists like herself and Chen. "Some artists get involved in curating because it is a platform for social networking. It is a fact that curators get many networking opportunities that artists don't."

"There was one conference in the UK where my name-tag read 'Artist/Curator' and people started talking to me. Previously, when I said 'Artist', no one talked to me. People want to get to know the exhibition ends, and by then it may be damaged. The aim of the exhibition is not just to draw collectors and sell works. There's a deeper meaning to it," she says, referring to the "scroll" knitted from old books.

Chen says it is too early to say if *Travelling into My Bookshelf* marks a temporary break from body containers or a permanent new direction. What is certain, however, is that her work is evolving.

Lukas Tam says, "My feeling is that in the past two years at Y99 Gallery, Movana devoted most of her energy to her curatorial job. In the past two years, her attention has again turned to her own work. In the beginning, her work was more personal, but her social awareness has grown wider. This is probably as a result of her exposure to and contact with different people. I think she is doing more thinking."

Terry Batt was another one of Chen's lecturers at Hong Kong Art School. He is an associate professor of fine art at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, who comes to Hong Kong several times a year to guest-lecture. He says Chen is maturing as an artist because she is developing her own artistic language, which leads to artistic intensity, enabling her to explore themes in a deeper way.

"Within the language that she's established, with the relationship to fashion literature and magazines, there are slightly new directions that are taking place but they're subtle developments," Batt says. "I would prefer to see that happening rather than these really major shifts that some artists take on board from time to time. It's building on the language that's already established so that it becomes a logical and intellectual process." ■



together. Some like to come up with new things, some stick to the tried and tested. I myself like to fill the gaps. Perhaps Movana may not have strong ideas and themes, and she may not come up with plenty of works. What she usually has are general ideas for exhibitions which she'll find the appropriate artists to fit. There's a very personal touch to her exhibitions. Her style is comfortably familiar and down to earth, like home cooking."

周育生 (Kurt Chan Yuk-keung), associate professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, first saw Chen's work at her graduation show at Hong Kong Art School in 2006, followed by her performance at ART HK 08. He does not know Chen personally, and has had only brief chats with her at exhibition openings.

Chen says Chen has done well as far as her performance art is concerned but, as is the case for many artists of her generation, the "struggle" of her art isn't yet yielding to independent observers like him. "In terms of presentation, she's doing well. She has a sense of professionalism and maturity, and she's strong visual impact. The way she wears the body container, animal and plant, and doing

opportunities to "chance" encounters with people, the fact that she has had six solo exhibitions so far, including one in Seoul and one in Beijing, and many more group exhibitions raises the question has fame come too soon?

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resembles both animal and plant, and doing this in the midst of a very noisy environment, it makes a very strong impact and leaves a lasting impression on viewers.

"Her handling of her branding is very strong. It is a similar case for many young artists in China who have made an impact with one or two works and are very conscious of their branding. But maturity as an artist also requires an innate understanding of such things as the artistic environment, art history and an artist's own place in the ecosystem."

"As an observer who hasn't seen many of Movana's works, I wonder where her struggle is. Her focus has been on images and visual impact, and she has not produced a big variety of work. It doesn't necessarily mean an artist's work must keep changing. But an artist's concerns, doubts and how she arrives at something that fits comfortably with her talent are all part of the struggle in the creation of art."

Chan may have a point about her "struggle" or the lack of it, but the *Bookshelf* exhibition may change his mind. Yuen Shin says, "Magazines are mass culture. People read them and throw them away. We wanted to see her going deeper. After the Hong Kong art fair, she tried knitting with books. It's still the same shredding machine and the same way of knitting. But it's gotten more conceptual and personal. The books are lying in your bookshelf, and you write things in them, you keep them and the paper turns yellow."

"She has moved on a lot from the magazine period. And the whole project involves lots of communication with her friends and I'm sure she'll meet more people through this project. The body container is physically very personal. It sticks to whoever is wearing it and you are physically under the artwork and you see through it and people see you through the artwork. But this *Bookshelf* project is out of you. You are not touching it, just looking at it, and it can touch

your memory."

Chen stresses that her work is art, not fashion, but does she care whether her work sells? "It doesn't really matter. For example, for the *Bookshelf* exhibition, the main part of the work is not for sale because it is a traveling exhibition. Perhaps they will sell it in two years' time when the exhibition ends, and by then it may be damaged. The aim of the exhibition is not just to draw collectors and sell works. There's a deeper meaning to it," she says, referring to the "scroll" knitted from old books.

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