

# Mel Chin: Disparate Acts



September 2–November 1, 2014  
Rowan University Art Gallery

# Mel Chin: Disparate Acts

Mel Chin emerged as an activist artist in the mid 1970s with works that were largely motivated by political, cultural, and social circumstances. Over the next forty years, he has created a myriad of installations, public art works, performance-based work, video, sculpture, objects, and public engagements works that, in their very making, defy easy classification. Chin rejects formulaic artistic boundaries, freeing him to make independent choices that explore multifaceted concepts through a variety of materials, media, and even venues.

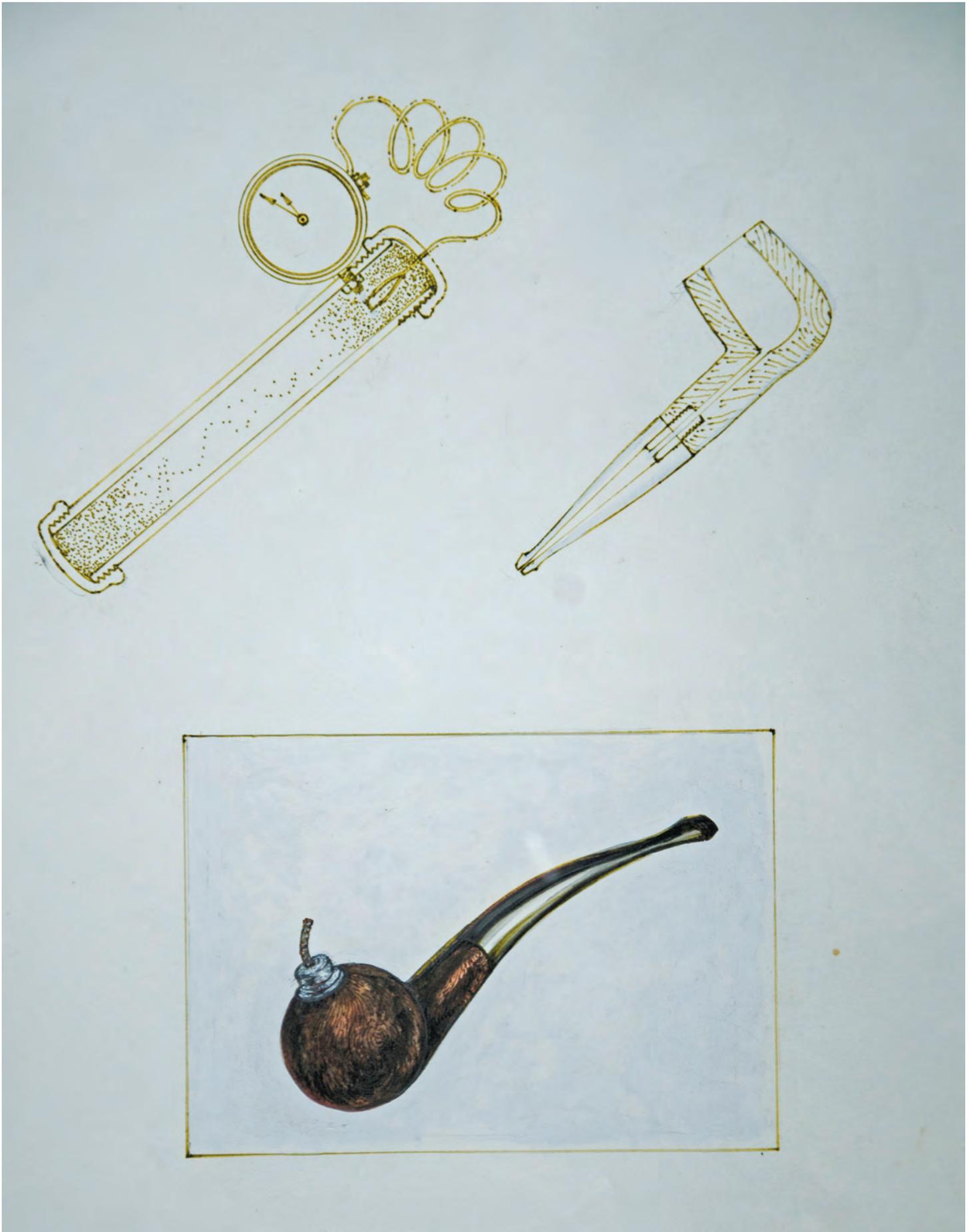
Chin became fully immersed in the activist aesthetic with the ongoing installation, “Revival Field” (started in 1989). In this early environmental art project, he is recognized as a pioneer in the field of phytoremediation, in which hyperaccumulator plants are used to absorb toxic metals from contaminated soil. This work ushered in a practice, which he returns to throughout his career, of creating works in collaboration with other groups

and people across sectors, including scientists, naturalists, government agencies, and other artists.

The GALA Committee Collective, which Chin formed, created a conceptual public art work, *In the Name of the Place*, between 1995 and 1997. The group harnessed the subliminal power of television to insert activist imagery as props and backdrops in various sets of American prime time’s *Melrose Place*.

Chin worked with software engineers to create *KNOWMAD* (1999), a video game that reinterpreted the rug patterns of nomadic people into virtual media. The game is based on mapping patterns of Central Asian and Middle-Eastern tribal people and the way gamers utilize memory.

Chin’s film, *9-11/9-11*, was a joint Chilean/USA production that sought to contrast the events of the World Trade Center terrorist attack in 2001 with the US-supported military overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende twenty-eight years earlier. The hand-drawn, 24-minute animation



Corsican Connection Study for The Elementary Object, 1992, ink, correction fluid, paint, pencil on paper.

depicts fictionalized characters in the two events, interlaced and woven together, resonating as a shared memorial to a terrorizing experience.

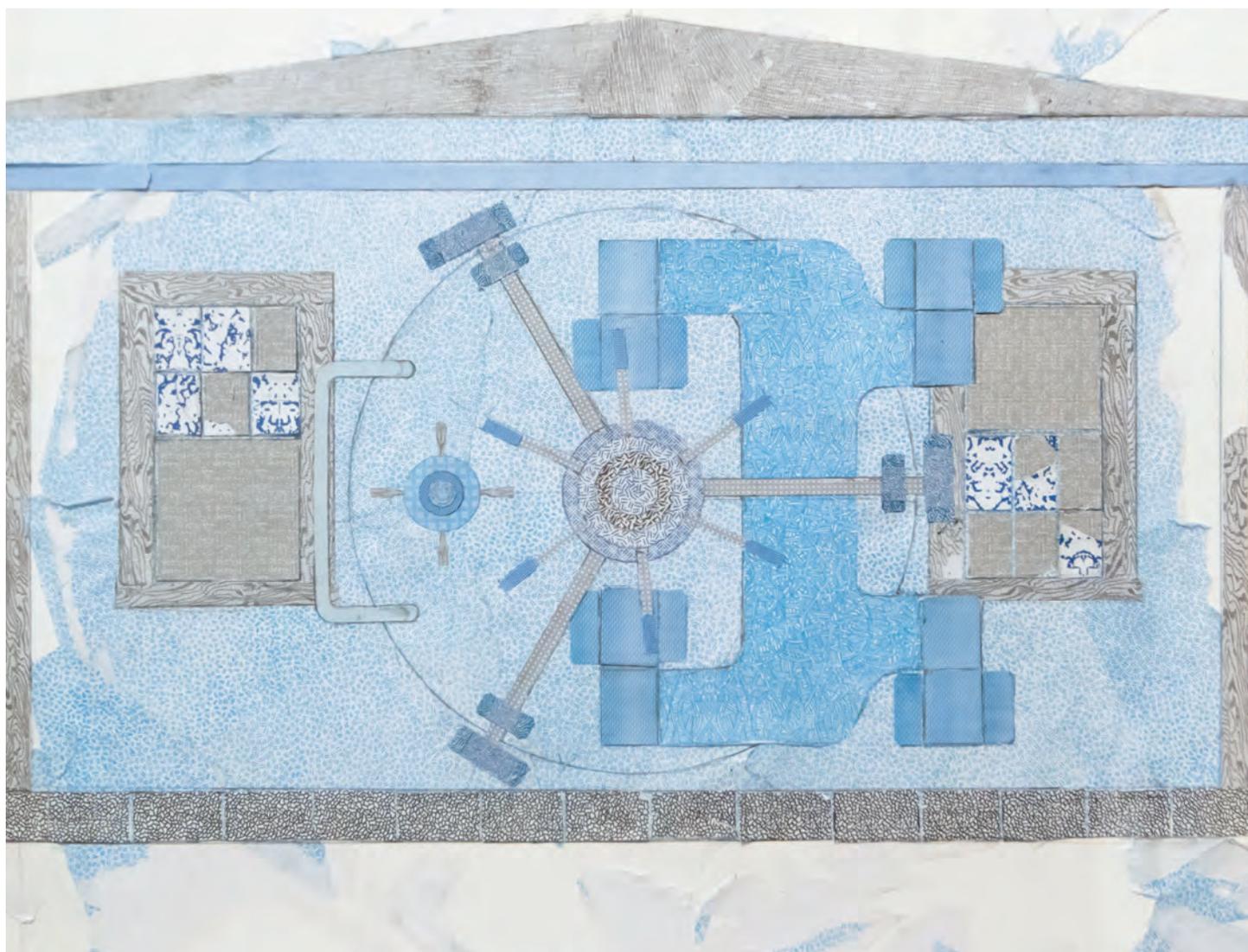
The thirty-four studies, drawings, and sketches included in *Mel Chin: Disparate Acts*, function as a window into the genesis of his social activist works. Evident are the many materials Chin used to realize his diverse and complex ideas and turn them into three-dimensional narratives, often matching material to concept to heighten the impact of its message.

The selected works in the exhibition focus on this process and thematically question the objectivity, reliability, and integrity of information, facts, and events when compromised and corrupted by political, social, or cultural agendas. Highlighted

in this text are eight of the works that best illustrate this premise, beginning with the collage, *Safety Paper Safehouse*.

This collage represents *Safehouse*, which served as headquarters for Chin's public intervention, *Operation Paydirt / Fundred Dollar Bill Project*. This ongoing effort advances public education and community engagement through the creation and collection of Fundreds—original, hand-drawn interpretations of \$100 bills. Chin created “hardware” for a 10-foot diameter functioning bank vault door and attached it to the façade of an abandoned house—the *Safehouse*, which is located in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans.

The project brings attention to the continuing indefensible situation in New Orleans, and the



*Safety Paper Safehouse, 2007-2014, security envelopes with graphite, glue on ragboard.*

rest of the country, and the need for funding to eradicate childhood lead poisoning from the homes they live in, the soil they play in, and the schools they attend. This critical health issue, largely ignored by the government and the corporations that caused it, affects the people least likely to have the means to escape it.

*Safety Paper Safehouse* is composed of torn and pieced together patterned safety paper from envelopes used to mail government and business financial documents. The misalignment of edges and intermingling of the torn and cut paper in the composition of the house and vault door evoke a vulnerability and instability that echo the narrative in the actual site-specific work. Chin posits, “If anything, it mirrors the instability and disparity of our capitalist economy and the conditions we live in.”

In contrast to the fractured composition of *Safety Paper Safehouse*, the piece, *Corsican Connection Study for The Elementary Object*, suggests an engineer’s blueprint schematic. The deliberate rendering is so meticulously and cautiously executed that it’s as if the slightest deviation from a precise line would cause the work itself to detonate.

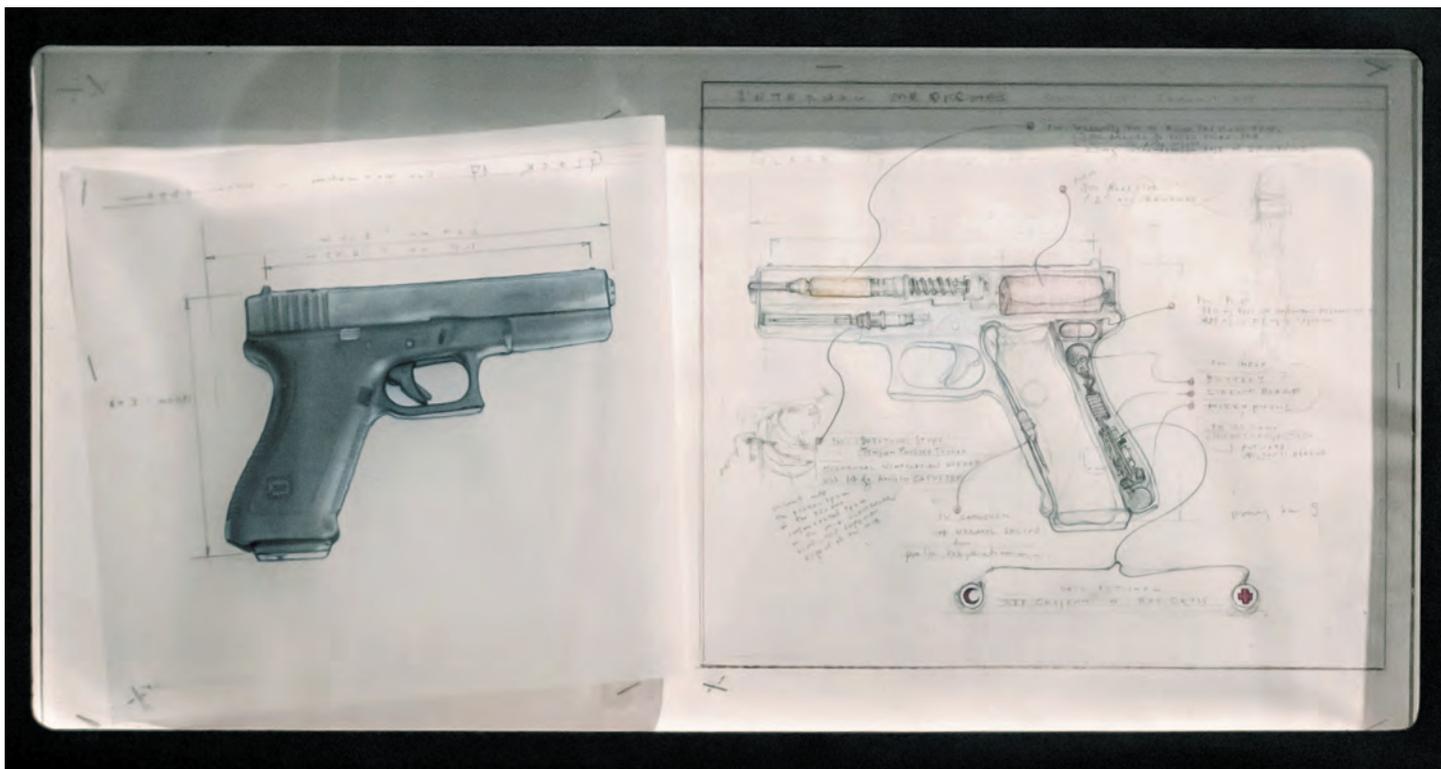
The drawing depicts a type of smoking pipe often associated with “genteel” society, aristocrats, intellectuals, and those in positions of wealth, power, and influence. It is also a common prop in popular culture, historical art, and literature. One can’t ignore the reference to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous Sherlock Holmes character and his most often used phrase, “It’s elementary.” The pipe here is wood and rounded and closed with only an igniting wick protruding from the top. The diagram above the pipe drawing illustrates the interior mechanics of a pipe bomb and the pipe. In an ironic twist, the pipe, or pipe bomb, is a metaphor for the explosive power and the destructive impact of Eurocentric ideologies and thoughts on vulnerable societies and economies.

The title reference to the island of Corsica recognizes the political unrest that happened there between the Corsican separatists and the French government. It is also home of the type of wood, briar root, most often used to form the bowl of this style of smoking pipe.

Equally volatile is Chin’s study for *Internal Medicine: Home y Sew 9*. Sketched on tracing paper, the image appears as a transparency in keeping with x-ray films, MRI images, or security scans. We can see the inner works of a GLOCK 9-mm handgun reconstructed by Chin, in his words, “into a strap-on, self-contained, action-activated, fully functional, self-inoculating, self-medicating, emergency gunshot trauma treatment kit.”

Once again, ironically, this weapon of choice for both law enforcement and urban gangs is devoid of bullets, rendering it harmless and into an apparatus for saving the lives of gunshot victims. In the illustration, bullets are replaced with the components of a field first-aid kit that includes an ACE bandage, a microelectronic radio, saline with IV needle and polyethylene tubing, painkiller Percodan, epinephrine, and an angiocatheter. Chin noted throughout the drawing descriptions of the items and where they should be inserted into the gun. Drawn at the bottom are indications of a crescent moon and a cross as yet another proposition that Chin’s “kit” does not discriminate.

Another example in which Chin has used medium to heighten the explosive impact of issues is found in the work, *The Syrian Wheel*. In this interpretation of a noria, red ink is a metaphor for the ongoing bloody war in that country. Chin has long admired the geometry of the norias along the Orontes River in Syria and the Al-Muhammadiya at Hama, which served as a model for his 1976 installation, *Waterwheel/Keeping Still*. Chin returned to produce an image of this wheel as a lamentation about the destruction of monuments, civilians, and the dying prospects for the Arab Spring movement.



Internal Medicine: Home y Sew 9, 2014, graphite, colored pencil, staples, pigment on paper.

Thickly applied and in layers, the ink drips down the surface of the paper as if it were blood pouring from a wound. The wheel floats in space, devoid of any anchoring foundation, further emphasizing its decline as cultural icon within the landscape.

*Saza (Punishment) Wrap Projection* is a commentary on another kind of tyranny. In this mixed-media study, the naked body represents the Pakistani poet and novelist Jam Saqi. Military dictator, Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq imprisoned Saqi for nine years for his anti-government activities. Chin became aware of this case through the efforts of Amnesty International, executed this work, and then auctioned it to raise funds for the organization.

The figure appears beaten both physically and psychologically. Chin has drawn the image in graphite in a delicate and measured manner, as if to evoke the powerlessness of political prisoners and their circumstances. Half the body is in detail, while the other half is reduced to an outline as a commentary on the invisibility of the missing.

To the left of the figure are two vertical clubs. One is a diagram of a club swaddled with a type of bandage. It is light in weight and tonality, and floats in space as if an apparition. The impression is nonthreatening at first, but becomes so when one realizes the bandages symbolize human skin as a metaphor for the inextricable linking of the body with pain and torture. The other club is a solid form made of dark and densely colored wood and tar. It seems to rise off the surface of the paper, becoming weighty and foreboding as it reveals itself as a weapon.

Turning to more philosophical and cultural awareness projects, Chin uses a wood-burning technique in the mixed media study for *Signal: Campfire and Historic Associations*, a site-specific work commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority for the Broadway/Lafayette Subway Station in New York City. Working in collaboration with Peter Jemison, a member of The Six Nations of the Iroquois and Seneca Tribe, Chin sought to promote the historical significance of the Native





*The Syrian Wheel, 2014, ink, butcher paper.*

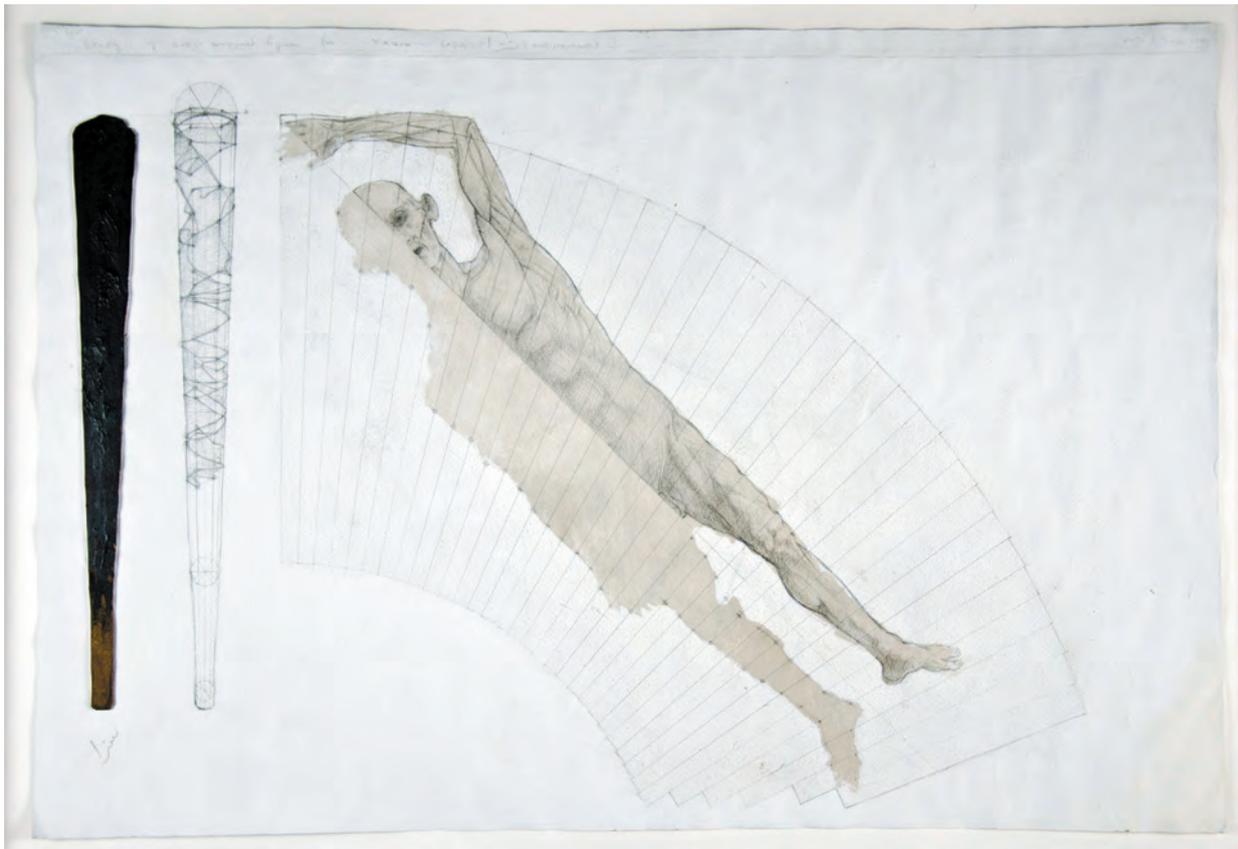
American trail now known as Broadway.

Wood-burning, or pyrography, as a carving technique is aptly used to illustrate the burning flames associated with the Council Fires of early Native American tribes. The carving depicts the Native American practice of felling trees with a fire built around the base of the tree. A strip of birch bark veneer, the same wood that Native Americans used to make their canoes, is applied to illustrate the tree. In this depiction, the tree is burning,

giving off smoke from the flame, or a smoke signal.

The symbols to the right of the tree study are derived from Masonic Compass & Square insignia. Transformed into highly decorative variations by 17th Century Native Americans, they came to be symbolic representations of the Council Fires. Inspired by this merging of cultural references, Chin incorporated the decorative patterning of the insignia into the actual site-specific work.

Several of the drawings and studies in the



Saza (Punishment) Wrap Projection, 1985, Silverpoint, wood, tar, house paint. Detail.



Signal: Campfire and Historic Associations (concept study) 1994, wood-burned plywood, paper, birch veneer, ink, graphite, paint, and brads.

exhibition include frames designed and fabricated by the artist, and function to extend the narrative out into the physical and personal space of the viewer as three-dimensional objects. The frame for *Signal* has been actually burned to represent soot from flame embers.

In his drawing for a commissioned piece, *Study for Sea to Sea*, the glass of the framed drawing is curved to imitate the curvature of the glass globes indicated in the design. The curvature of the wood framing represents the buttress used as support for the globes and are reminiscent of the structure used for the locks of the Panama Canal.

*Sea to Sea* is an installation created to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the Panama Canal for the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. Chin chose to create a work that focused on the oceans that the canal connects and not a visual representation of the canal itself. The concept is to create two unique cinematic portraits, one of the Atlantic and one of the Pacific Oceans. The ribbons depicted in the drawing represent currents of data and research collected and contributed by scientists, then combined by Chin to create films that become composite portraits of the oceans.

Equally dramatic as the frame style for *Study for Sea to Sea* are the frames designed for *The Lead (Pb) Point Portraits*. The frames are imposing, heavy and impenetrable canvas-wrapped structures complete with hand-crafted leather buckles attached to the sides, representing the rigidity and confining effects of a straight jacket.

Chin selected three subjects to contrast behaviors consistent with the effects of lead poisoning. The portrait on the left is of Al “Chainsaw” Dunlap (*Al/White Reaper*), the former CEO of Sunbeam Corporation. As a result of his greed-driven actions, he decimated the company. Established in 1880 and known for making the Best Electrical Appliances in the late twentieth century, Sunbeam filed for bankruptcy in 2001 because of Dunlap’s directives.

*William (Dark Reaper)* is a portrait of William Garner, who, at age 19, was convicted of arson that resulted in the deaths of five children in 1992. Garner’s public defenders argued at his clemency hearing that he deserved a stay of execution due to his “violent and dysfunctional” upbringing and “limited intellect,” with a history of developmental disorders since birth and brain impairment from lead poisoning. He was eventually executed by intravenous lethal injection at age 37.

Lead was discovered in the hair of Ludwig van Beethoven (*Lud-Wig*) when x-rayed in 2005. Determining lead poisoning as a cause of death remains inconclusive, but it does offer a possible explanation for his chronic health issues, infamous temper, and “mad genius.”

Chin drew the portraits on a grid of file folders, the choice suggesting exposing sensitive and disturbing information contained in documents and case studies of lead-poisoned subjects. The skeletal and ridged, lined facial structures of these larger-than-life portraits have their pupils pierced out of the paper, emphasizing the vacant and detached characteristics of brain-impaired subjects. Some areas of the drawings have faded to a ghostly white because of oxidation of the lead point (Pb) medium, an appropriate metaphor for the invisibility of lead in our environment.

Additional works in the exhibition are as equally compelling, both analytically and prophetically, as the ones cited. Some are infused with humor and irony, while others are inspired by philosophy, mythology, and poetry. In all, *Mel Chin: Disparate Acts* serves as a survey of an area of Chin’s work that seeks to raise awareness of political and social injustices and the desperate acts that governments, regimes, and fanatical groups impose upon its citizenry. To see those narratives emerge through the careful and thoughtful blending of materials and media is an opportunity for a more intimate dialog and exchange with this artist.

—*Mary Salvante*



Study for Sea to See, 2014, *graphite, watercolor, medical tape on vellum.*



The Lead (pb) Point Portraits, 2012, *metal point (lead) on prepared ground on recycled file folder and accounting paper, artist-designed frames: Plexiglas, wood, canvas, leather, and brass.*



The Lead (pb) Point Portraits, *Frame detail.*

### About the Artist

Mel Chin was born in Houston, TX, in 1951. Chin received a B.A. from Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1975. With numerous awards and grants from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, Art Matters, Creative Capital and the Penny McCall, Pollock/Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Rockefeller and Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundations, Chin has created many commissions, public art installations and one-person exhibitions around the world. Venues for solo exhibitions have included: Storefront for Art and Architecture, NYC; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Menil Collection, Houston; and the Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia. In 2014, the New Orleans Museum of Art presented *Mel Chin: Rematch*, the

first major retrospective on the artist to date.

Chin's work was documented in the popular PBS program, *Art of the 21st Century*. His proposal for a New World Trade Center was part of the American representation at the 2002 Venice Biennale of Architecture. A major one-person exhibition, *Do Not Ask Me*, was seen at the Station Museum, Houston, TX, in 2006. His film, *9-11/9-11*, a hand-drawn 24-minute joint Chilean/ USA production, won the prestigious Pedro Sienna Award, Best Animation, National Council for the Arts and Cultures, Chile, in 2007. He was awarded the Fritschy Culture Award 2010 and was a finalist for the International Award for Participatory Art in Bologna, Italy. He received the 2012 Public Art Network Award from Americans for the Arts. And he was awarded a John Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2015.

Other projects and public commissions have been installed at diverse sites such as New York City's Central Park; Pig's Eye Landfill in St. Paul; Floriadepark in rural Netherlands; Eco Tec International in Corsica; the San Jose Public/ State University Library, San Jose, CA; Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Arts Festival; The New York Times Magazine; West Queens High School, Queens, NY; the City of Corpus Christi, TX; and the St. Roch neighborhood, New Orleans, LA. Group show venues have included: Fifth Biennial of Havana, Cuba; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain; Kunstmuseum, Bonn, Germany; Kwangju Biennale, Korea; Smithsonian Museum, Washington, D.C.; Museum Of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, P.S. 1 and Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

Chin has been awarded four Honorary Doctorates from RISD, Providence, RI; MICA, Baltimore, MD; Green Mountain College, Poultney, VT, and CCAD, Columbus, OH.

## Exhibition Checklist

Dimensions are with frame

*Pregnant Leda (study)*, 1984, document repair tape, colored pencil, graphite on sketch paper. 13.5 x 12 inches.

*Reassembled Anatomical Study for Myrrha P.I.A. (Post Industrial Apocalypse)*, 1984–2014, graphite, marker, ink, methyl cellulose, albumen, and pigment on trace paper. 42 x 34 inches.

*Saza (Punishment) Wrap Projection (study)*, 1985, silverpoint, wood, tar, house paint on paper, artist-made frame. 26.25 x 36.25 inches.

*Fabrication Bed for Venus*, 1986, Vulcan's Hot Net in the pattern of Venusian Y&C sulfuric acid cloud banding. (Study for Venus: *Operation of the Sun through the Cult of the Hand*) fire and acid-scarred plywood. 50 x 19.75 inches.

*Open Mouth Leadhead: Concept Drawing*, 1986, (Vein study for Saturn: *Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*), photocopy, ink, graphite on notebook paper. 13.5 x 12 inches.

*Enlightenment of Thomas of Coventry*, 1987, (Study for Uranus: *Operation of the Sun through the Cult of the Hand*), paper, graphite, nails, text book illustration, artist-made frame. 8.75 x 8.75 inches.

*Lecture Ax Artifact*, 1987, (Study for prop made for a performance/lecture, New School of Social Research, NYC), Collier's Encyclopedia volume, graphite, colored pencil on museum board, wax, pigment. 9.6 x 11.6 inches.

*Principle of Polarity: The Orbital Rebus*, 1987, (Study for Mercury: *Operation of the Sun through the Cult of the Hand*), ink and graphite on vellum, artist-made frame. 23.75 x 23.75 inches.

*Corsican Connection Study for The Elementary Object*, 1992, ink, correction fluid, paint, graphite on paper, artist-made frame. 27.75 x 21.75 inches.

*Signal: Campfire and Historic Associations (concept study)*, 1994, wood-burned plywood, paper, birch veneer, ink, graphite, paint, brads, artist made frame. 30 x 48 inches.

*Ruin (first version)*, 1995, erased U.S. currency, five-dollar denomination. 11 x 14.5 inches.

*Sword is the Word: Dispatcher Fabrication Document*, 1997, graphite and applied digital printout on pattern paper, artist-made frame. 16 x 37 inches.

*KNOWMAD: Legend and Mapping of Animation Vision (layout study)*, 1999, marker, ink, pencil on graph paper. 22.5 x 20 inches.

*Gertrude's Girdle (third layer)*, 2003, electric stylus marks on Japanese paper, artist-made frame. 25 x 25 inches.

*Study for Render*, 2003, wax and pigment fragments, map on museum board. 23.3 x 17.5 inches.

*Pattern for Silver and Stone (study for "I Don't Want To" Serving Tray)*, 2005, graphite on paper. 22 x 26 inches.

*Study for Shape of a Lie: Concept Drawing*, 2005, colored pencil, watercolor, graphite, ink on paper. 21.25 x 27 inches.

*Study for Shape of a Lie: Sheathed Irrationality Piercing the Lie*, 2005, ink, colored pencil, methylcellulose on vellum, artist-made frame. 14 x 16.5 inches.

*A Magnified Call Out (concept drawing)*, 2006, graphite on paper. 12 x 16 inches.

*9-11/9-11 Storyboard Development Sketches, 2006–2007*, Scene 130: La Monde /Twin Tower rocket/plane attack, Scene 26: L. Da Vinci and D.I.N.A. screaming shadow, Scene # unknown: Julia's Descent detail, graphite, ink, pigment on animation paper.

*Safety Paper Safehouse*, 2007–2014, security envelopes with graphite, glue on rag board, artist-made frame. 21 x 29 inches.

*Construction Document: The Cabinet of Craving*, 2011, colored pencil, graphite on tracing paper, shoe polish and marker on pattern paper, artist-made frame. 25 x 38 inches.

*White Ground Study for the Bat and Dove*, 2012, ink, pencil, paper on board, artist-made frame. 14.5 x 14.25 inches.

*Bilateral Mycological Entity (Mushroom)*, 2014, graphite and colored pencil on paper, artist-made frame. 16 x 19.5 inches.

*Internal Medicine: Home y Sew 9*, 2014, graphite, colored pencil, staples, pigment on paper, artist-made frame. 15 x 29 inches.

*Objet de Liaison (Mopar Ball-joint)*, 2014, rust, shellac, glass, artist-made frame. 10.6 x 10.6 inches.

*Study for Sea to See*, 2014, graphite, watercolor, medical tape on vellum presented in a test projection screen, artist-made frame. 27.25 x 32.5 inches.

*The Lead (pb) Point Portraits, Al (White Reaper), William (Dark Reaper), Lud -Wig*, 2012, metal point (lead) on prepared ground on recycled file folder and accounting paper, artist-designed frames: Plexiglas, wood, canvas, leather, and brass. 60 x 42 x 5 inches each.

*The Syrian Wheel*, 2014, ink on butcher paper, artist-made frame. 28 x 28 inches.

## Acknowledgments

It has been an honor and a privilege to be the curator of Mel Chin's first one-person exhibition in New Jersey. This exhibition marks an important step forward in the mission of Rowan University Art Gallery to provide the highest standards of excellence in contemporary art programming for the benefit of our regional community. It has been an extraordinary opportunity, and I am grateful to Mel Chin for his generosity and support in making the exhibition so thoughtful and unique. The sentiment also is extended to Helen Katherine Nagge for her support and assistance with the production of this catalog.

Additional thanks go to Art Department Chair, Susan Bowman; Professor of Sculpture, Charles Tucker; and Mel Chin's assistant, Bradley Tucker, for helping to make the exhibition possible. I would also like to thank my preparator, Armando Ramirez, for his expert handling and installation of the artwork and for the assistance of the gallery interns, Thomas Reed, Chris Lesniak, Samantha Kovnat, and Paterno Franz. Finally, many thanks to Tom Kloskey for his editing and catalog design.

—*Mary Salvante*

*Curator, Gallery and Exhibitions Program Director*

This exhibition was made possible in part with funding from The New Jersey State Council of the Arts.

Images courtesy of Mel Chin and additional photography provided by Veronica Diaz.

Cover: *The Elementary Object*, Corsican briarwood.

Back Cover: *Signal*, detail.





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