

## high on prose

# PHANTOM LIMBS, FAMILY TIES

SEPTEMBER 25, 2013 | HIGH ON PROSE | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

The art exhibition *Phantom Limb* is currently showing at UTS Gallery on Harris Street, Sydney. It features the works of three artists: Owen Leong, Shoufay Derz and Cyrus Tang.

*Phantom Limb* could just as easily have been called *Family*. Time and again, pieces in this small, lively and moving exhibition reveal not only phantom limbs but also their near echo, family.

### Bloodline



Owen Leong's photographic diptych, *Bloodline*, is a case in point. Leong makes creative use of blood and honey to signify family ties. In one panel, the artist's own arm is tied to his father's by a piece of string. The artist holds a piece of honeycomb, and honey drips along the arms of both son and father. In the adjoining panel, we see the artist's arm again, still holding the honeycomb and glistening with honey, only this time his father's arm has gone. There's also a deep blood wound on the artist's wrist. An artist of a different mood would make these kinds of seem ominous. Why were father and son tied together? How did the artist get a cut on his arm? But the warm bright light that suffuses the piece invites a more generous interpretation. This is an affirmation of a family line, as embodied by the intertwined arms, the blood and the honey. Leong wonderfully uses all the textural properties of honey to beautiful, resonant effect. The honeycomb beams like a medallion of light, an organic source of vitality. Its membranous pattern mirrors the family resemblance between the older Leong's and younger Leong's arms; they're both recurring patterns. I can't help but think that the similarities in colour between the honeycomb and the Leongs' arms are racialised here to express the strength of the artist's Chinese heritage. The translucent, syrupy surplus of the honey suggests it's a purifying liquid form of the dried blood. It's as if to say: family sometimes feels like an open wound that never heals. But also: our bloodlines can continue to replenish, sustain and transform us long after our parents have gone.

### 18 June 2013



Cyrus Tang's installation artwork *18 June 2013* adopts a more haunted and haunting view of family. Tang has taken casts of her mother's and her own body parts as they embraced, then fragmented and dispersed them. Some pieces are arranged on the ground. Others, including the image of her mother's face, are suspended by wires in the air. The installation seems eerily frozen in time,



18 June 2013 by Cyrus Tang

with no context for either the original catastrophe that led to the bodies' dispersal or their excavation.

Tang's mother's face peers out at us—and beyond us into the present and future—yet her expression is hard to discern: she could either be appealing for help or be sitting in silent judgement of us all. As we survey the shards of the intermingled body parts, it occurs to us that, literally, no parent and child could be closer to each other than this. Yet the installation doesn't particularly evoke closeness or warmth. Instead it assumes the delicate, precise poise of ritual; it's a fraught if finally deferential arrangement of pieces that at once belong together and remain apart. As our eye arrives at the ground, we are alarmed to see bones scattered there. Who do they belong to? Tang used cast glass cow bones—organic matter that has been aestheticised and cleansed of viscera—to represent someone otherwise missing from the installation: her late father, who used to be a butcher. A triangulation emerges from this tangle of bones and bodies: from the mother's face, to the anchoring presence of the bones symbolising the father, to the space that Tang has created for herself somewhere in between. Tang's artwork achingly captures both the connections and the breakages between parent and child. In doing so, it archives the complexities of all family relationships.

### on the other hand





*on the other hand* by Shoufay Derz

In Shoufay Derz's monumental installation piece *on the other hand*, two giant fountain pens hover over a slab of dark stone that bears a copy of her late father's handwriting. Simply and affectingly, it states: "silence". Absence begets a number of material presences in this artwork. For a start, the loss of the father has clearly generated the artwork itself. Moreover, although the concept of silence expressed in the piece connotes a figurative void (that is, the loss of the father's voice, the emptiness created by his absence), the written word 'silence' takes up actual physical space within the gallery. The slab of stone it's written on is man-sized, leaving the impression that this body of writing now replaces the body of the absent father. This is an outsized piece; it has a scale that was once reserved for representations of history and religion. Not that it apotheosises the father exactly. Rather, it zooms in on the artist's own relationship with her parent. What we are seeing, writ large, is the artist's forensic focus on the material artefacts left behind by her father, on the physical vestiges of his memory. I think we're also seeing father and daughter brought together, in a way, through their shared expression—is it a request? Or a hope? Or just a description?—of silence. Maybe that's why there are two pens in the piece, standing side by side: on the one hand is the father, on the other hand the daughter. Standing in front of this piece, you feel like you might be intruding on a private and, yes, quiet moment between father and daughter. But then, amid its large scale and depth of feeling, you feel privileged to be witnessing a kind of renewal of their relationship after its initial loss—a renewal only made possible by and through art.

All three artists approach the theme of family from the perspective of a child who engages with the influences of his or her parents. But that doesn't necessarily mean this exhibition can only be appreciated by children and not by parents. And of course, there are other riches to savour in this exhibition besides the ones in the three pieces I've just mentioned. This exhibition will resonate widely for many people, which is fitting. All families leave a mark, whether you're part of the whole or the phantom limb.

***Phantom Limb* runs from 10 September to 11 October 2013.**

**Where: UTS Gallery, Level 4, 702 Harris Street Ultimo, Sydney.**

Owen Leong

Cyrus Tang

## Shoufay Derz

 OWEN LEONG CYRUS TANG SHOUFAY DERZ PHANTOM LIMB FAMILY UTS ART GALLERY

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