

frigate

Home

Search

Reviews/Critique

Essays/Features

About Us

Contact Us

Archives

Shop



InterText: A Conversation with Justin Chin



Photograph © David Huang.

Justin Chin doing his thing onstage.

Gerry Gomez Pearlberg

In Justin Chin's poetic universe, reality is a semi-permeable membrane battered down by a questioning intellect. It's a world where desert mirages consist not of water, but of Coca-Cola and Fanta Grape soda. A world where Vishnu bumps up against Jackie Susann. A world of poems yet to be written: e.g., "Papercuts In The Afterlife" and "I Want Japanese Animè Hair." It's also a world of "Mistranslations," where narcissistic, over-privileged American tourists earnestly ask, "May I haggle?"/(I want to save US\$0.20)."

Alongside personal explorations, Chin's poems take on the most rancid (and entrenched) attributes of contemporary life — the profit motive, religious hypocrisy, racist stereotyping, neocolonialism, and more. These critiques are vivid and defiant, yet poetically innovative and frequently playful. Think "stealth conscience" — the poet luring you into the poem under one guise, only to shift gears once you're there. Take, for example, "I Buy Sea Monkeys," which begins with a child's rueful desire for a mail-order pet: "I was sea monkeyless//for twenty years." When the speaker finally gets his sea monkeys, the poem reveals its deeper themes — loss of youthful innocence as "magic sputters into another gutter"; the dubious nature of adult responsibility; and illness, mortality, HIV.

*This interview was conducted via E-mail from late 2000 through May 2001. In it, we talk about Chin's new collection, *Harmless Medicine*, and three poems from it: "Surrealist Bookmark," "Apocryphal Medicine," and "Nowhere Still." — GGP*



Gerry Gomez Pearlberg: In reading your forthcoming collection of poems, *Harmless Medicine*, I had a hard time narrowing down which poems to talk about with you because the book covers such a tremendous amount of ground. There's your extended poem about Matthew Shepard and contemporary gayness entitled "Homomonument"; and "Little Everest In Your Palm," a series of poems about traveling in Nepal; and your epic 11-part poem "Imagining America." Scattered among these extended, multi-part poems are a couple of dozen eclectic treasures with themes running the

gamut from your childhood fascination with magnifying glasses ["Magnified"] to a revisionist take on the story of Christ in "Neo Testament" on through to a critique of the pharmaceutical industry in [Surrealist Bookmark](#). There's an almost ravenous sense of eclecticism in this book.

Justin Chin: It seems eclectic, but the poems are all connected. The five sections in the book are each anchored by a long, epic-ish poem — the title poem ["Harmless Medicine"], "My Weakness," "Homomonument," "Little Everest In Your Palm," and "Imagining America." There is a motif of enlargement/magnification and reduction/minimization. There is a motif of survival, of finding a sort of fractured beauty. The eclecticism also, I think, replicates the mental state of dementia where one thinks of everything all at the same time. This is most evident in "Pride Pissed"

where speech and sentences and words fall out of the page, leaving holes. There are also two poems titled "Harmless Medicine," replicating the confusion and renaming process of dementia.

I think the greatest gift that poetry and literature and art make for me, is to work my mind out to think and to make the connections between things — between issues and ideas. So much of public thought in the U.S. via the media is disconnected. We are taught and encouraged to read and find out how what we read relates to us — it's the Oprah Book Club Syndrome, where every book, no matter what, can relate to your specific set of problems somehow. But the real work is finding empathy with something that has nothing to do with you directly.

Pearlberg: That striving toward connection is expressed throughout *Harmless Medicine*, the scope of which seems even more expansive than that of your first book, *Bite Hard*, by no means a "small" book in any sense of the word. But *Harmless Medicine* feels vast. In what ways do you see this new book as a departure from the first?

Chin: I'm not sure that *Bite Hard* was that cohesive a book. *Bite Hard* was written across a span of ten years. So it's more diffused. *Harmless Medicine* was written in a span of a year and a half. It's more focused, concentrated. It was a very difficult book to write. I was working with new poetics, new styles, new forms, and a really raw subject matter.

Pearlberg: In addition to your poet-identity, you're also well known as a performance artist. What's the line, if any, between your performance art and your poetry? And do you consider the poems in this new book "performance poetry"?

Chin: A lot of the poems in *Harmless Medicine* are performative. Some are like conceptual art pieces, in that they function as ideas and mind-things more than paper-things. Each art form bleeds into the other and informs the other somewhat. I don't think there ever is a pure product. There might be, but not in my world.

Pearlberg: In your experience, does the "performance poetry" label result in the poet getting a "bad rap" or different treatment? How has it worked for or against your work in terms of your ability to reach an audience and the critical response to your work?

Chin: There is a long history of performance poetry, tracing its lineage from the oral tradition, troubadours, folk songs, native chants and all that. I don't think what I do is performance poetry per se. In performance poetry, or "spoken word," as they call it these days, the primary method of disseminating the work is oral/aural — CDs and tape recordings. I pay a lot of attention to the sound of my work; I take great care in the language and the musicality of the language. I enjoy doing readings. But that does not make me necessarily a performance poet. More like a reading whore.

When someone calls me a performance poet or spoken-word artist, it's usually not done with neutrality. It's as if they're saying, the poor boy just cannot write, but he speak so good and fun-fun. Performance poetry does get a bad rap these days. Always has — how many bad beat-poet jokes have we seen before? Mainly because there is a lot of bad crap out there — manipulative, easy, fake plastic earnest. Not to say that there isn't a lot of printed crap, but the performance stuff is more immediate, easier to mock and ridicule than having to actually take the time out to read something before mocking it. But there is some really amazing work out there as there has always been in the history of it.

Pearlberg: Did you want to be a poet as a kid growing up?

Chin: I wanted to be a mad scientist. One driven not by evilness, but by some sense of wanting to be saved and redeemed and converted to goodness by the hero. It seemed that those people were more loved than the hero. My mad-scientist lab was somewhere in snow-covered Switzerland with an endless supply of hot cocoa. I also wanted to be the guy who researched and tracked the Yeti, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness

Monster. And discovered the secret of Easter Island. My parents wanted me to be a doctor.

I stumbled into my poetry by accident, mostly by way of rock music and top-forty pop. Poetry was a subject in school. I grew up in Singapore under a version of the British education system. English literature was a mandatory subject. Every year, we studied a Shakespearean play, a modern play, a modern novel, a local novel, and a smattering of poems from a smattering of poets. Not the best way to be exposed to literature, because so much of it was focused on getting the correct answers to essay questions. But I still loved it. I did horribly at it grade-wise, though.

Pearlberg: A mad scientist in snow with hot cocoa is a very cartoony image. Have cartoons influenced your work?

Chin: I like cartoons. I enjoy watching them even to this day. Well, the good cartoons of course — the Saturday morning line-up on the WB [Warner Brothers Network] is worth getting up early for. I read Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics avidly. I like how cartoons have this whole made-up world, where there can be no consequences to actions. Wile E. Coyote keeps getting killed over and over. Donald can be a brilliant mind in one narrative and a dunce in another. I love that. It's that way-off wacky fantasy world, the narrative that decimates the censor within us.

Pearlberg: That mad scientist/researcher feels like a real presence in your poems, many of which are infused with scientific language, not only in terms of medical issues and HIV, but as a broader source of allegory and image.

Chin: There are a lot of scientific and medical references as well as a lot of Christian references in the book. I was thinking back over my upbringing and my life and the building blocks that made it thus. Also, as queer folk, in the past decades and especially now, medical and scientific terminology has become as much a part of gay speak as any disco-dolly slang. It's how we speak, a new language we have to learn to negotiate our way through our queer lives in this epoch.

Pearlberg: Science sometimes feels like the only real news these days — the only news that's actually "new." Because all the others "news" feels so repetitive...same power struggles, same political nonsense, movies based on TV shows, TV shows based on movies, endless recapitulation.

Chin: News today is about entertainment and lifestyles. We don't have real news in the U.S. The science that filters into the news is in service of that bland lifestyle we are supposed to want. How many news reports about anti-aging formulas, anti-fat pills, anti-cholesterol pills do we need to have in one week? The real grit of science is lost — how we are constantly poisoned by corporations in air and food, how pharmaceutical companies are so damn evil, how we give up our freedoms to be enslaved to the idea of progress. What I hope is that the arts, poetry, writing and literature, will allow us to train our minds to think, so that we can question all the stuff, all the information, all the babble shoved at us in the name of "American Life," and "Progress" and "The Millennium" and all that hooley.

Pearlberg: America comes off as a major "character" in this book. American mass culture, creeping consumerism, as it infects the rest of the world is a repeating theme. Your poem "[Nowhere Still](#)," from the "Little Everest In Your Palm" sequence, is an especially terse and potent example.

Chin: I think "Nowhere Still" is more an observation of wealth and privilege versus poverty — how life gets reduced to things. Certainly, in the poem, the hay is probably worth more ultimately than the fake Gucci bag. Was it Blake or Frost or someone who said that the clarity of observation is akin to thought? America, or rather, the United States is a character as much as a setting, a stage set, or a perfume. It was inevitable since a lot of the work does have a political smear to it.

Pearlberg: Can you talk a bit about your writing process in general? When do you write?

Chin: I write whenever I can. When I don't feel poorly, or tired, or sick. I write a lot in my head all though my day; I take notes in my Filofax and in my notebook. Usually I get totally obsessed with an idea, a phrase, or a word and want to use it in a piece of writing. In "Homomonument," I was obsessed with the word 'astonish.' My new word *du jour* is 'pilgrim.'

Pearlberg: What are your reading habits? Your loves?

Chin: I like books that instill jealousy and feelings of insecurity and worthlessness in me and my art. I love books that surprise me and challenge me. It helps push me along. But I also like happy, silly books. I read as much as I can, across all genres. I love Carl Bark's Uncle Scrooge and Donald Duck and the Duck Family comics, as well as the newer Duck writers like Don Rosa. The duck stories are so wonderful and so well written, incorporating history and geography and mythology but with their own twist. Of course, you can also make an argument about the colonialist aspect of the work, the capitalist nature of it too, but hey... if we only read books we agreed with, life would be so darn boring.

I also love Alice Munro. She makes it look so effortless. She can write soft, slow, pretty stories with such underlying turbulence. Crafty and subversive — God, I love her work, but it always makes me feel so miserable and inadequate afterwards.

Rabih Alameddine's *KoolAIDS: The Art of War* is one of the most astonishingly brilliant books ever. It's one of those books that I wish I had thought of. The book is very dreamlike, fragmented but so grounded in reality. It's about the war in Lebanon and AIDS in America. It is past and present and future and employs all the fragmented thought patterns that we all have. We try to straighten (no pun intended) our twisted thoughts to write, but here, the twisted thoughts are used to create such a brilliant work. If I had thought of 1/32 of it, I would have been happy. It's smart and funny and structurally, it's how I would have tackled a novel — but now I can't, dammit.

Pearlberg: Let's talk about your poem [Surrealist Bookmark](#). I love this poem, with its numbered instructions and litany of warnings, its humor and pathos, and the way it starts off as sort of existential instructions for the use of an allegorical bookmark (marking "the book of life") before swerving into hospitals and the endless side-effects, surrealist and actual, associated with various prescription medications. It's a biting, funny critique of the Western Medical Model. What was the genesis of this poem?

Chin: I was in Edinburgh. It was December, winter, and a particularly beautiful day. I was going on an art-museum jaunt and it just so happened there was a retrospective on Magritte. The museum was incredibly beautiful, so much so that I was more enthralled by the building and its grounds than the art. But I was wandering around the museum and the last line in "[Apocryphal Medicine](#)" came to me—"A Magritte painting dipped in barbecue sauce." Very much in that surreal vein, huh. I might have been hungry.

Bits of "Surrealist Bookmark" came to me at the same time. (I usually get a chunk of words and phrases and lines in my head. I write it down and later I sort out what works with what and who goes with what.) I bought a couple of bookmarks at the gift shop to give to chums. I have this obsessive-compulsive habit of leaving a bookmark in a book after I finish reading it. And that bookmark cannot be used for any other book. So I was looking at this Magritte bookmark, and I was wondering how a bookmark might affect the reading of the book. Would it not be funny if you put your bookmark somewhere else in the book, I thought. Then I missed the bus back to town. So I wandered around and walked back to the city center. It was a great day.

"Surrealist Bookmark" was one of those poems that came really naturally and quickly. I think a lot of babble works its way into our psyche, which is how babble works, and so when you can make something out of it, that's

always great. I was thinking of the TV pharmaceutical ads as well as the papers that come in the bag of medications I get from the pharmacy, which I never read but should. I think every poem is a critique. Every work of art that works as art is a critique. Otherwise, it all goes into the pot of babble. I prefer Babel to babble.

"Surrealist Bookmark" is also very Yoko Ono, Fluxus-influenced. Sort of a homage to those instruction paintings and performances she did. Well, a lot of the Fluxus people — George Brecht, Ken Friedman, Nam June Paik, Robert Bozzi — did that. Fluxus is an art movement that I just adored in its sheer brattiness and intelligence.

Pearlberg: What, in your view, is the relationship between brattiness and art-making?

Chin: Art-making doesn't have to be bratty, of course. I just likes it that way. Brattiness is the slutty cousin to irony.

Pearlberg: Do you consider Surrealism an important influence in your work?

Chin: I don't think of myself as a surrealist in any way. Everything [in my work] is very thought out, edited, obsessed over, nit-picked. All the subconscious is subjected to the scrutiny of examination. I'm more influence by the Fluxus movement, which had its roots in Dada. Surrealism and Dada have been so diluted, so commodified — every bit of irony, smartness, and charm has been smacked out of it. It's coasters and bookmarks and cocktail stirrers, which could be interesting, but they end up as cute — not even kitsch, which I can handle. The word *surreal* is so overused in Hollywood movies, everything that is mildly bizarre is suddenly "surreal." Anything "postmodern" is also called "surreal."

Pearlberg: What, if anything, protects Fluxus from the same fate?

Chin: Oh, PLEASE! This is America. Everything is/can/and will be commodified. A lot of the more non-conventional advertising is derived from that conceptual art movement. Did you see the TV ad for the Internet company that bought the MLK speech*? I'm trying to rethink my ideas about commodification. If I can work it in my mind to make something out of it, to rethink how I should look at it in a somewhat more active light, instead of an icky light.

Pearlberg: You saw Yoko's retrospective at the Japan Society in New York City last winter. How was it to meet up with her work in person?

Chin: What I loved was how the work has survived all this time. How brilliant and smart it is, and how it is so charged with her political ideals. But most of all, I loved seeing how after years of people talking about her work and reducing it to either some weirdness, or shock — how it managed to survive all that reduction in the mass culture. I take hope in that — that perhaps one day, people can look at my own work beyond the shock or the comic or the grit to see it as a whole.

***Interviewer's Note:** In early 2001, Alcatel, a French telecommunications company, began a billboard and TV ad campaign featuring digitally altered film images of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963. The images manipulate the footage of the large crowd gathered to hear King's speech in the Washington Mall that day, showing King delivering his speech to an empty Mall, while (in the TV version) a voiceover intones, "Before you can inspire, before you can touch, you must first connect...." The ad was created by George Lucas's Industrial Light + Magic. The King family approved the use of Dr. King's image and speech in the ad campaign, for an undisclosed fee.

Pearlberg: Have you had a problem with that, Justin? That the subtleties and emotional tenor of your work might, for some, get lost under the humor or the directness of the language?

Chin: It is a problem because it blocks some readings of my work. I know that. Some people cannot get beyond the oogies, the icky — the stuff that makes you shudder with ick. But reading — real reading — is not supposed to be easy or relaxing. There's some work involved. Then again, I am guilty of that too. I distrust overtly popular books, the Oprah books, certain authors, books with a 'buzz,' gay books with naked men on the cover. I have been proved wrong: I stand corrected in my more premature denouncement of Amy Tan's work. I've learned to read it and appreciate it in a different way now. It's about being aware about the assumptions we bring to a work, either as a writer or a reader. Ultimately though, you want your work as a writer to have a good healthy shelf life. A nice long expiration date.

BY JUSTIN CHIN

Chin, Justin, *Bite Hard*. San Francisco: Manic D Press. 1997. Paperback, 128 pp. \$11.95.

Chin, Justin, *Harmless Medicine*. San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2001. Paperback, 160 pp. \$13.95.

Chin, Justin, *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, Pranks*. St. Martin's Press, 1998. Paperback, 160 pp. \$11.95

JUSTIN CHIN'S POEMS IN FRIGATE

OTHER WORKS DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

Alameddine, Rabih, *KoolAIDS: The Art of War*. Picador USA, 1999. Paperback, 256 pp. \$13.00.

Barks, Carl, *Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge and Donald Duck Giant Album*. Gladstone Publishing, Ltd., Giant Comic Album Series No.2. Paperback. \$8.95.

Barks, Carl and Don Rosa, *Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge Giant Album*. Gladstone Publishing, Ltd., Giant Comic Album Series No. 4. Paperback. \$11.95.

Friedman, Ken (Editor), *The Fluxus Reader*. John Wiley & Sons, 1998. Paperback, 320 pp. \$65.00.

Munro, Alice, *Lives of Girls and Women*. Vintage Books, 2001. Paperback, 277 pp. \$13.00.

Munro, Alice, *Selected Stories*. Vintage Books, 1997. Paperback, 545 pp. \$16.00.

Ono, Yoko, et al., *Y E S Yoko Ono*. Harry N. Abrams, 2000. Hardcover, 352 pp. (plus CD). \$60.00.

Ono, Yoko, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings*. Simon & Schuster, reprint 2000. Hardcover, 192 pp. \$15.00.

Ono, Yoko, *Instruction Paintings*. Weatherhill, 1995. Hardcover boxed edition. \$19.95.

Paik, Nam June, et al., *Fluxus/Video*. Köln, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2000. Paperback, 400 pp. \$50.00.

©2000 Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books www.frigatezine.com

All rights reserved on behalf of the authors.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on our site. Please email [<webmaster@frigatezine.com>](mailto:webmaster@frigatezine.com).

Back to [Frigatezine Home Page](#)