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## Gusto



A panel from “stain,” a 2015 installation by Millie Chen on view in the Body of Trade & Commerce Gallery through March 27.

### **From the site of atrocities, Millie Chen forces us to look at our humanity in ‘stain’**

**Millie Chen’s latest exhibit uses floor tiles as base for works**

BY: [Joseph DiDomizio \(mailto:\)](mailto:Joseph.DiDomizio@buffalo.edu) Updated: February 11, 2015, 04:00 PM Published: February 11, 2015, 04:00 PM  
Traveling to capture footage for her most recent installation, Millie Chen came across an empty room. Chen was in Cambodia, in Tuol Sleng, the infamous site of a high school used by the Khmer Rouge in 1975, when she had the idea to photograph the whole room.

The result is “stain,” a fascinating new set of 80 panels on display in the Body of Trade & Commerce Gallery on Niagara Street. Each panel is a digital print of a tile from that room, with gouache and watercolor images painted on top.

Chen, an artist and professor at the University at Buffalo, explained that she was not sure if she was going to do anything with the photographs she took.

“What do you do with material from a site that had such atrocities?” she said.

Her first attempt at resolving that conundrum resulted in the three “Washed” prints that are each a single drain tile in the floor. The dull, brownish-gray tile surrounding the nearly sparkling metal drain cover provide a glimpse of what “stain” has in store.

What she finds in these 80 tiles is a floor tile palimpsest, ready to continue the thematic exploration of previous work like the “The Miseries & Vengeance Wallpapers” as well as the video installation “Tour,” which were recently exhibited at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Both of those pieces worked through the disappearing residue of human violence that has become overgrown by nature or suffocated by the din of history.

“There’s a layer of humor that lets you access it, but it’s much deeper than that,” said gallery director Anna Kaplan.

Littered with records and posters, a Slinky, Twinkies, a yellow smiley face pin, her mother’s address book, roller skates, a page from Chen’s high school yearbook, and other detritus from the zeitgeist of the 1970s, the tiles make straightforward juxtapositions that don’t easily resolve themselves the longer you spend with them.

This is mostly due to the ambiguity of the abstract blots and cracks in each tile, creating a creeping sense of unease in the back of the mind. There are chips and cracks in some of the old concrete floor of the gallery as well.

“I don’t know what happened in that room, but there’s a powerful suggestion because of the site,” Chen said.

Connecting the two sets of prints are ink drawings on the sidewalls of the gallery. The newest appears to be two clumps of hair collected from a shower drain, with its twirling tendrils spreading out and circling around one another, directing your eye smartly from the drain to the main attraction. On the other sidewall is “Exquisite,” a reproduction of the 2011 wall drawing of a head of hair without the head. Both drawings provide a very subtle sense of icky-ness to the exhibit, and balance a bit of the lightness from the pop culture surfaces by reminding us of the pieces of ourselves we leave behind every day when we’re not looking.

Chen brings this together with a pile of toenail clippings and a stray molar, which still looks moist, in two of the panels of “stain.” With these visceral reminders of the left-behind pieces of our own bodies, she pushes viewers to consider those darker pools of ceramic tiles, and how they could possibly break under pressure, and what part of us as humans cannot and should not be washed away.

review

What: “stain”

When: Through March 27

Where: Body of Trade & Commerce Gallery, 1280 Niagara St.

Info: 604-6183 or [www.btandcgallery.com](http://www.btandcgallery.com)

Joseph DiDomizio

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