

## Erika's Wonderlands

### Foreword

by Michael Leong

Erika couldn't have chosen a better title for this interactive book, this extraordinarily conceived catalogue of wide-ranging imaginative acts and artifacts: taken together, these various and varied works, installations, and performances constitute, indeed, a virtual wonderland.

More precisely, the experience of contemplating Erika's works lands us fully (as if we were piloted by a gentle and masterful hand) in a state of incredible wonder — not the fictive wonder of some alternate world or fantastic ontology (as in Lewis Carroll's famous wonderland) but the often overlooked wonder which teems within the very folds and creases, the nooks and crannies of our own vibrant reality. So in the photographic series "Far and then Farther" (2007), two toddlers tower like giants in the foreground — the one on the left with a red mitten firmly fitted on his right hand and the one on the right with a green mitten dangling from his left sleeve. Such a variation of detail makes this small but delightful discrepancy as exciting and as full of life as the colorful amusement park in the background. It is a matter of looking, to be sure, of receptiveness and careful attention, but it is also a matter of framing and juxtaposition, of arrangement and counterpoint, of a sensitive awareness to surface and scale. In "Morning Glory," one of my favorite pieces from this series, a head of dark brown hair rests (incredibly, inconceivably) atop a bed of morning glories, creating a vivid, almost hallucinatory mingling of organic forms and textures (the fact that hallucinogenic effects have been attributed to morning glory seeds further coalesces the concept of the overall composition.) And even while this piece is firmly rooted in the materiality of everyday existence, its surprising and fragmentary strangeness suggests some fantastic narrative to which we are not privy — like an innovative fairy tale from the future.

"Instead of narrative method," said T.S. Eliot in his classic essay "„Ulysses, " Order, and Myth," "we may now use the mythical method." So too, Erika deftly employs what might be called "the fairy tale method." If, as Eliot claimed, James Joyce manipulated "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" in Ulysses as a way "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," then Erika's works — especially the series "Seven Swans" (2000) and the video "Rumpelstiltskin" (2003) — parallel the magic of fairy tale and the facticity of contemporary life as a way of re-enchanting our secular, post-Enlightenment world. This re-enchantment can be seen in Erika's more spectacular/performative modes — such as in "Miss Fancy Pants" (1996-2000) and, again, "Rumpelstiltskin," two projects which show how playful acts and personal rituals can salutarily disrupt and transform public spaces. But such re-enchantment is also evident in subtler (but by no means less powerful) ways in recent endeavors like "An Enlarged Heart" (2010)

and “preschool” (2005), both of which draw on the affective ties and phenomenology of motherhood. In the former, Erika quite literally “enlarges” the clinical and ultimately elegiac phrase of the exhibition title (which references the loss of a family friend due to an enlarged heart) to accommodate a compassionate and utopian connotation — not illness as metaphor à la Susan Sontag but a caring re-metaphorization of illness, as if the figure of metaphor, itself, could allow the wondrous work of magic. Written in chalk by the artist’s six year old son, the phrase “AN ENLARGED HEART” (complete with backwards Ns) from the exhibition’s title piece points to an almost “fairy tale ending” — that the participants involved had their hearts enlarged through their loving concern. If such an ending (which is not, in fact, an ending at all) seems naïve, it is naïve with a backwards “n,” pierced as it is by the sometimes unpolished, sometimes charming, and always unpredictable vicissitudes of reality.

The lenticular prints of “preschool” that toggle from one image to another as you alter the angle of viewing seem to enact a kitschy, Cracker-Jack-prize-like magic of their own: now you see it, now you don’t. Now the bed is made, now it is covered in clothes. Yet the way Erika embeds temporality into the photographs to signal seasonal change, the shifting of sunlight, or the entropy of familial domesticity makes us consider the landscape and architecture of the everyday with a quietly serious, almost lyrical pathos. Erika is an artist of many talents who, like an expert conjuror, effortlessly calls upon the resources of a myriad of media — photography, video, sculpture, textile — and as you will see throughout these flickering pages, she fluidly assumes a dazzling array of roles — from playful personae like Miss Fancy Pants or eXtra Spice to artist as mother and artist as daughter. Now you see her, now you don’t. Now you see her again.