

Dust and The Silence in the Sun - A Solo Exhibition of Cheong Kiet Cheng

"I'm into meditation these days because it helps me delve into a state of emptiness and mindfulness, which enables me to enjoy the present with a pure heart. I feel blessed when the universe is in harmony with us. With something as simple as my gaze into the sun's morning rays, I see glittering dust floating in the air and beaming at the balcony. I treasure these lucid moments where, in silence, I wake with the universe."

Above was Cheong's statement when I was visiting her studio home in early July 2019. She gave me an insight on why the exhibition was titled as it was. Further along in our conversation, she continued to clarify her daily challenges of art-making:

"My daily routine is centred around my two young daughters. As my husband (also an artist, Hoo Kew Hang) works a steady job, I have to manage domestic duties independently and try my best to pursue my passions at the same time. In balancing between reality and dreams, I find time after sending my two toddlers off to nursery every weekday morning. After this task, I would spread out my canvases on the floor near the windows, letting the sun rays lay on the empty white space, and slowly but surely fill them all effortlessly with my ArtLine pen. My drawing process mimics embroidery – its continuous thread sews together different elements of nature. I keep moving, drawing one line and another without a pause. My visions flow and flourish on my canvas. My process is meditative and my outcome is magical. I could do it eternally."

I remember my last encounter with Cheong in 2017 when I curated the 101 women artists show at the National Art Gallery. Cheong sent in a painting entitled *Here I Am* (2017), which was a full-scale self-portrait. The painting showed Cheong barefoot, standing still in an unconventional yet relaxed and confident position, the front of her bare-skinned body facing the audience. She appeared like an angel spreading her wings, her breasts covered with feathers, her enchanting fiery aura complemented by her spiky hair, and her two smiley eyes looking far above eye level, sparkling and flawless. Below, her tummy is covered with mystical clouds, anonymous faces, flora and fauna, and a baby lying near her left foot. The demigoddess portrait exuded strength and self-empowerment, contrasting the background's dry and rocky landscape. The way Cheong dignifies her body and forcefully confronts the viewer through her painting is tremendously mesmerising, like a phoenix rising from ashes, manifesting a refreshing new energy of her life.

The following year, Cheong's large scale work entitled *Through the Eye of Flower* (2018) won the 2018 UOB Malaysia Painting of the Year. This piece was a result of her new artistic approach of ink drawing on canvas. Shortly after, she was selected for the prestigious UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum's (FAAM) Artists Residency Programme in 2019. '*Dust and The Silence in the Sun*' exhibition aims to display her new series of drawings produced both during and after her month-long residency in Fukuoka. Cheong uses her consciousness of the universe to employ her distinctive and subtle approach, shifting away from colours impelled by ink drawing that she had previously been drawn to. In this black and white series, the artist focuses on stories that are reminiscent of the life journey of her daughters and herself. Before drawing, she roughly marks the new composition based just on memory. Once she begins drawing her central subject, the other images would grow around it like a mind-map, each line marked like the chain of a story and so, the imageries in each painting are both interconnected and infinite.

Throughout Cheong's art journey, she reveals her great love towards nature and her family. Through her artworks, every piece of land she has explored or adventured is turned into a utopia, where she tries to retrieve old memories of the earth beyond any existing reference. Cheong uses modern myths and symbols as analogies in her work. Therefore, her works speak loudly despite her simple objective, that is, to portray pure happiness. It is great to witness Cheong's courage in art making despite the challenges of maternity. The themes surrounding womanhood ought to be reviewed from the perspective of women artists, and through a historical narrative. These themes should not be excluded from central discourses, as they show the real conditions of women in a politically, economically and socially systemised structure.

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