

### ***Dust and The Silence in the Sun***

*“I believe that everyone has their own path towards reaching a peaceful state of mind. Mine is achieved through the meditative process of drawing.”*

When interviewed, “zen” was the first quality that Cheong Kiet Cheng brought up to characterise her new series and exhibition, *‘Dust and The Silence in the Sun’*. Whereas her previous works consisted mostly of colourful acrylic painting, this latest body of work introduces a technique of ink drawing on canvas and is predominantly monochromatic. The earliest piece to which she applied this technique, *Through the Eye of Flower* (2018) won the 2018 UOB Painting of the Year (Malaysia). Despite the new approach, her work is still centralised around the themes of family and nature.

Cheong admits that lately, she has spent a lot of her time focusing on meditation, which, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is a process of “giving your attention to only one thing, as a way of becoming more calm and relaxed.” When drawing, her mind would flow automatically like a river, and so does the tip of her pen as it dances mindfully on her canvas – a process that feels endless yet relieving. It is believed that the word Zen itself came from the Chinese word “Chán”, which literally translates as “quietude”. Juggling between her role as an artist and a mother, Cheong cherishes the tranquil moment that she would spend alone making her work, after taking care of her two daughters.

Over many decades, writers and philosophers have also sought to comprehend the purpose of art. In *What is Art?* (1897), Russian thinker Leo Tolstoy describes how art making provides “a bridge of empathy between us and others”, whereas French essayist Anaïs Nin views art as a way to “exorcise our emotional excess,” as described in *The Diary of Anaïs Nin 1931 – 1934* (1977). However, the way Cheong views her practise is closest to how American writer Susan Sontag considers art as “a form of consciousness”, which was suggested in her 2012 collection of essays *Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*.

Later on, Sontag affirms in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) that “every era has to reinvent the project of “spirituality” for itself” and that “in the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is “art.”” To Cheong, finding a moment to disconnect from her daily routine by immersing herself in her creation is a therapeutic experience; it is a form of mystification.

Through the first essay of the book, entitled ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Sontag elaborates how artists use the power of silence – an experience attained through the process of art making – to become more conscious of their own state of emotion. As she stated, “Silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture.” In accomplishing our daily life tasks, it is not rare that we get caught up in the mundane. This is where art would serve as a way to detach, reflect and remind ourselves of the happiness life brings – a moment of being grateful.

To Sontag, silence also serves as vehicle of communication for certain artists: “Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.” The absence of colours in Cheong’s drawings imbue an aura of silence, at the same time serves as a tool to convey her true feelings to the audience. Silence becomes a tool of conveying emotion, flowing from the artist’s heart to the tip of her pen, and all the way until it reaches the audience’s sight. It is, as Cheong describes, a meditative experience. Sontag states:

*“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling — this is the activity of art.”*

As part of Cheong’s new series are five round canvases. The choice of this format is not merely aesthetic, rather serves as a symbol of the cycle of life. Cheong questions what actually shapes the world we live in. By interrelating various living creatures in one frame, she came to realise that the universe constitutes of different elements that co-exist. Everything runs in circles, turning together in the same direction and at the same time.

Where and how do we human beings place ourselves in the cycle? To Cheong, the difference between humans and the rest of the creatures in the planet, is our ability to create. As the Irish poet Oscar Wilde points out in his philosophical novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), “the artist is the creator of beautiful things,” and that is simply what Cheong intends to achieve, as a form of expression of her great love towards nature and family.

Through the piece *Tree of Life* (2019), Cheong illustrates a tree as a whole; its wild roots allow the growth of a solid trunk that supports an ecosystem. Akin to the role of a mother, a tree is life giving. *A Song for You and Me* (2019) and *Encounter of the Islands I* (2019) are portraits of the artist’s elder daughter, whereas *Encounter of the Islands II* (2019) is of her younger daughter; two very important figures in her life.

*Chasing the Sun* (2019) is an auto portrait of the artist. Staring at the sky, there is a sense of positivity that is projected from her eyes, as if looking forward to a bright future. Looking closer into the details of this work, one would notice her technique of personification. What seemed to be merely rocks are actually mythical creatures in disguise. The piece *Origin* (2019) is another example of how she adopts myths and symbols in her work. It was accomplished as her attempt of learning and discovering Japanese culture, prior to her 2018 UOB-Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Artists Residency Programme. The drawing features the different gods and goddesses in Japan’s ancient mythology, and highlights the divine couple Izanami (In Japanese: she who invites) and Izunagi (In Japanese: he who invites), who, in this illustration can be seen holding a spear. According to the Kojiki mythology, the couple had a principal role in creating the islands of Japan and are parents to the gods and goddesses of the sun, the moon, the wave, and all others.

Another major work, *Train to Neptune* (2019) features her daughter in the center of the piece, with rabbits as creatures that she loves dearly, floating above her head. On the left side of the canvas is the artist herself. A colorful smoky substance flows from her mouth across the canvas, embracing her daughter and all the way to planet Neptune. The illustration is metaphor to the artist’s infinite and enjoyable journey of raising her daughter. Enriched by the presence of other fauna surrounding them and completed with alluring details, Cheong regards motherhood as a challenging yet marvelous experience.

The title *‘Dust and the Silence in the Sun’* sums it all: more than ever, through the pensive process of drawing, the artist has learnt to be conscious of the little things that life offers. As she draws, the world suddenly becomes silent, as if offering an exclusive moment only for her and her art. As the sun peeks through her windows and on to her canvas, dust is seen floating in the air, and all of a

sudden, a peaceful aura fills up the room. All of the slightest details in her surrounding contribute in shaping an introspective moment that leads her to comprehend the beauty of life. As the British philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong suggest in *Art As Therapy* (2013), “art is a tool that can variously help to inspire, console, redeem, guide, comfort, expand and reawaken us.” All of these facets of art seem to be manifested in Cheong’s practise, but most importantly, this series has served as her means of reawakening. Through portrayals of family members, depictions of flora and fauna, and representations using myths and symbols, the realities of life are metamorphosed into imagined worlds, and transformed into exquisite works of art.

*“In realising this series, I have found joy and inner peace. Like all other things that matter, art became inseperable to my life.”*

Amanda Ariawan