

The rebellious act of stitching:

A look into Cheng Yen Pheng's solo, *Frugal Living - It's Mulberry Season*

Resilience may translate into different forms. As an artist who responds to the environment and community that surrounds her, Cheng Yen Pheng shows resilience by placing herself in the liminal spaces between different conditions that shape our nowness; her works embed concepts of 'self-sufficiency' in an age of environmental destruction, 'care' in times of hypercapitalism, and 'craft' in an era marked by machine-mades. Although her perspective tends to be personal, her choices and thoughts are inseparable from our collective realities.

More precisely, through Yen Pheng's new body of work 'Frugal Living - It's Mulberry Season', resilience is decoded through the act of stitching. In this series, Yen Pheng intersects the common and immediate perception of stitching as something feminine and delicate, with the fragility of mulberry paper as the main medium adopted, as well as the struggles and gains of living. Resilience seems to be reflected by Yen Pheng through negotiations; between art and nature, between softness and hardships, between what we desire and what we must bear. Yen Pheng refrains from completely accepting or refusing the conditions that are given to us, by searching further for something else to offer, which often sees her establishing a symbiosis between contrasting conditions.

The six-meter long work *Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) perfectly captures Yen Pheng's negotiation with the struggles and choices she must make in life, as she recounts her personal and deeply moving experiences through embroidered illustrations on self-made mulberry paper. In 2017, in search of an equilibrium between urban living and her proximity with nature, Yen Pheng decided to move out of Kuala Lumpur and into the countryside. Embroidered onto the first part of the work are houses accompanied by a sunflower. Serving beyond ornaments however, they are markers of the beginning of a new phase for her and daughter, as they found their new home; a charming traditional Malay house in Batu Arang. The decision was not without controversies, as family members were initially against the idea, and problems kept on occurring along the early days of their settlement there. The consequences that come with this decision are symbolised here by figures of snakes. What should be admired however, is the way Yen Pheng transforms the concept of these snakes as danger, and consider them as learning curves instead.

There is a La Fontaine-esque feel to the work *Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022); just like a fable, it is filled with depictions of flora and fauna. Sure enough, as Yen Pheng admitted, animals and plants have been their "best friends" in that home. Yen Pheng pinpointed a scene in which her daughter is surrounded by dogs. The "kampung" (village) dogs have in fact been their guardians all this while. Mulberry trees, which gave title to the series, are featured prominently in the work. As she explained, "*The more you pluck it, the better it grows; you'll get more fruits too.*" Subscribing to a 'frugal' lifestyle, whereby the artist tries to maximise the resources that are available in her surroundings before choosing to source from elsewhere, she has been producing her own mulberry paper since 2019, as part of her artistic creation. And though mulberry paper was already present in her previous series entitled 'It's been four years since...',

we witness her paper-making technique getting more advanced here, as she experiments with a natural dying process applied to different sheets of paper, which she then combined together.

Echoing her previous series in which she created a dinosaur-shaped sculpture from a patchwork of sandpapers, Yen Pheng also depicts the figure of a dinosaur in *Land Tortoise in Kampung House* (2022) - however in a more abstract manner. Ambivalent, the dinosaur figure here consists of delicate floral shapes, repeated and combined together into a monstrous creature. Indeed, this duality is what Yen Pheng seeks to express; in her role as a (caring) mother, and her daughter's status as (an innocent) child, there are times that they have the urge to release their 'monstrous' emotions, such as anger and sorrow. Even with the closest individual in our life, there is a constant need to self-adjust and find balance amidst the dynamics of human personalities.

The technique of patchwork also reappears in this new series through three works *Bits by pair* (2022), *Bits by bits* (2022), *Bits and pieces - assembled* (2022), this time combining rectangular pieces of mulberry paper instead of sandpaper. The artist recalls the process as meditative; it is not a form of storytelling, rather an exploration of a repetitive gesture and form. These works were results of her attempt to keep "bits and pieces" of her mulberry paper experimentations together, which then became a continuous habit that she enjoyed.

Traversing different temporalities, from memories of the past to the present, 'Frugal Living - It's Mulberry Season' opens up a window for audiences to discover a glimpse of the artist's definition of a home. Home as a space that is unmovable, while it witnesses change and growth, presence and absence as days go by. Home as a meditative state. Home as a shelter and protector, as one resiles against all odds that shape today's world.

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