

Arena of Encounter (2005)

Coming upon strangeness.

A big, black blob of solid hovers over a thin column in the middle of a square stairway. (pg 98)

Two rectangular black "tables" (pg 104), not too tall and similar in size, stand quietly under the unique structures of some wooden beams in an interior. Both are sleek and visually appealing with their simple geometry. The table surfaces carry out a strange gloss and dark quality, absorbing and replicating any images within its reflective vicinity. On one table is a funny little object exactly the same shade of the table, one can't quite figure out whether it is merely resting on the table or have been "buried" into the surface. Vaguely observable on the gliding surface of the other table is a square area of matteness off the centre, its presence mutes and breaks the completeness of images reflected.

From the ceiling of a hall hangs another cloud-like, matte object of black-knitted material (pg122). A curtain of countless wools continues and showers down until they are barely touching the ground. Before one could draw up an account for this rather raw and peculiar body, it starts to wave swiftly suddenly. In a few seconds time another black, organic shape pops from within the wools with gentle struggles and squirms. Shortly after it has emerged fully, it wriggles silently through the space

taking its own time, and disappears from behind the door finally. We could recognize that it was a figure covered fully with the same black knitted material (pg 125).

At first glance one is surprised at the degree of change Yeo Chee Kiong has made in his new bodies of works. The previous emotionally expressive figurations are replaced by tranquil abstractness and conceptualism. This series of works, called "Becoming-Space of Object, Becoming-Object of Space" is the result of a complex searching process in the artist quest to rethink his artistic directions. Firstly, Chee Kiong attempts to situate himself and his art within the Eastern/Western context. Secondly, he has turn away from the more overtly autobiographical approach to emphasize instead on his inner thoughts and subjective mind. Lastly, as a sculptor, he faces the need to reconcile his love for the materiality of things he made with the possibility of losing it, as soon as he expands the dimensions of both the concept and the medium of his works.

It is within these junctures that the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception came in as handy remedy for Chee Kiong.

Although Chee Kiong has deviated from the narrations of personal, emotional experiences, the presence of a conscious "selfness" is still evident in

the way he uses the pronoun "My" in the titles: "The Flood, A Tree, and My Table", "A Cloud, Her Shadow, and My Darkness", "A Cloud, Her Darkness, and My Rainforest"...In his inquiry into a person's subjectivity, the first station is his own world before extending out to relate to the general "others" – represented by the "The", "A", and "Her" etc.

In Western philosophy, there is a tradition to establish a concept of the self as a unified being that is the source of a distinctive consciousness. Eastern philosophy such as Buddhism, however, denies the notion of the "self" as illusory and name it the locus of suffering. The Phenomenology of Perception put into question the long-accepted ideas of the "I" as basis of certainty in the West, as represented by Descartes' "I think therefore I am". It attempts to reveal the phenomenological structure of perception while providing an alternative understanding of our knowledge of the world as mediated through representations that we have formed of it within ourselves.

Chee Kiong's works are deeply informed by these ideas, but it is in no way explanatory of it. In questioning the liability of subjective knowledge in relation to phenomena around us and the acceptance of particular certainties as "reality", he provides neither formulas nor fixatives for the viewers, as the subjects (and objects) were put into a kind of auto-articulation system via

his poetic rendition. And the status of poeticism here is essential, since it allows openness and indeterminacy to articulate the fluidity of meanings and subjective perception.

Chee Kiong is clever in choosing to play with the most common of forms and the most usual of visual elements. By presenting things that are simultaneously the "familiar" and the "unknown", the viewers' perception and knowledge are immediately challenged. In the site specific "#14, The Black" (pg 107), the very familiarity of the form here works to conjure up several images or "meaning" for the viewers mind, yet one, then two, or even three possibilities would emerge to cancel one another out. The property of "blackness" here, too, absorbs and eventually swallows the mass itself.

"From the basement to ground floor" (pg 102) and "the flood" (pg 104) first deceives the viewers by pretending to be ordinary "tables", until one discovers that the objects that seems to be statically "resting" are indeed "floating" on a fluidic table top, and the peculiar matteness that appears on the second table is in fact a hollow that continues to be a stairway - a "4th dimension" that leads one from the surface of the table to it's "basement". The stairs in this work is particularly poetic, almost evoking a space that looms between wakefulness and dream.

“The constancy hypothesis forces us to admit that the ‘normal sensations’ are already there. They must then be unperceived, and the function which reveals them, as a search light shows up objects pre-existing in the darkness, is call attention.”

– **Merleau-Ponty**
Phenomenology of Perception

As Merleau Ponty recognizes perception as function of intentionality, Chee Kiong’s works seeks and demanded the viewers’ “attention”, so that “attention” is at the same time the site of arising assumptions and subjective conclusions in relation to a world the viewers would eventually have grasped.

Often there is discussion and dispute about the relation between art and philosophy, among which the most noteworthy is the essay “Art After Philosophy” by Joseph Kosuth. As an exponent and practitioner of conceptual art Kosuth asserts that art as the one endeavor which fulfills human spiritual needs, has replaced philosophy. For him art’s value was in its delivery of information while material manifestations were disposable. Chee Kiong’s “phenomenological” works posits otherwise.

In his deal with “reality”, “idea”, and “representation”, the “objects” sculpted or constructed by the artist situates the viewers in an arena from which one could examine the limits of one’s experiences. The operation of the system here is not through a set of “objects” that are linguistic signifiers, but are tactile encounters that conjures surges of irregular thinking in the mind frame. As such Chee Kiong’s works have chosen to be art of materiality

and experience, rather than art of abstraction and intellectualism.

“I choose to fall into the darkness, a darkness that a black cloud preserves for her shadow. I decided to conduct a magic black cloak to reunify my feature and sense. A black knitted object that covers up my whole body has presented an overlapping image within the shadow’s volume (black cloud) and the darkness’s volume (myself) three-dimensionally, it occupies the physical visual space as an object, and it present to the viewer a partially indefinable image of I myself. Can I suggest this condition as “Partially Indefinable sculptural Sensibility”?”

– **Yeo Chee Kiong**
The Quality of Night

When we encounters the black figure (shadow?) emerges from the shower of wools (rain?) and hobbles through the space with attention, we are confronted by a strangeness felt through the tension between the real object and the subjective perception of the viewer, between the illusory and the actual.

Chee Kiong’s deep belief in the connectedness of object, form, sense perception and feeling to evoke artistic sensations, is akin to phenomenology’s acknowledgement of the holistic interconnectedness of all things. As his works bring us to explore our experiential relationships with things around us, it offers us a phenomenological experience.

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