

Blackness, Night, Shadow: Darkness in the Work of Yeo Chee Kiong

“Choose the darkest position possible, because this will help your eyes to become dark adapted. Unlike the expansion in size of your pupils, which happens almost instantaneously when you move into a bright light, dark adaptation depends upon the concentration of a particular pigment in the retina of your eye. This accumulates after a period in the dark and may take 15 – 20 minutes (or even longer if you are tired), but will enable you to see faint objects. Although it varies between individuals, most people are able to see quite well in the dark – enough to be able to move about without falling – by the light from stars alone.”

*– How to Identify the Night Sky,
Storm Dunlop and Wil Tirion*

I first met Yeo Chee Kiong in Glasgow, Scotland, where he told me he had lost his shadow.

As a long term resident, I had never noticed that for much of the year, the light that breaks over Glasgow’s skyline is so thin that the city produces very few black shadows. Glasgow’s shadows are the muted blues slung beneath carparks and motorway underpasses, livid-slashed with florescent punctuation and sodium yellow

sub-clauses. Even in the height of summer, Scotland is never striped by the stark blackness of tropical or equatorial shade – that pure shadow, which is entirely unadulterated by light. In Glasgow, Chee Kiong felt the loss of his black shadow. In Glasgow, Chee Kiong felt the lack of Nothing.

The losing of one’s shadow is an important business because it is the loss of one’s absence. If we cannot see what is not, we may find it becomes increasingly difficult to see what is.

Through their Nothingness shadows show us what is solid or even what is ‘real’. When we were very young children learning to see the world, shadows helped us interpret the spaces around us. As adults, if an object casts a shadow, we can assume that it must be a physical object dense enough to prevent the passage of light through its body. Because of this, even though the shadow is in many ways a banal light phenomenon, it is far more culturally complex than its relatives the reflection and the rainbow. The shadow is a moment of night-in-day, of dimness, eclipse and lack of clarity. The shadow is a darkness, and darkness lends invisibility, concealment, blindness and threat. The shadow is also however, the point of definition. It is able to underline an object with an authority borne of contrast;

'this object exists' says the shadow, 'because I exist, and what am I? I am Nothing'. In this way, the presence of Nothing is enough to assure us that Something is present. The pocket of darkness becomes a spatial cue that allows us to orientate, and to see.

Or so it seems. In painting, the depiction of shadows within a painted image is the mark of painting as representation – and so partly of painting as illusion. The painted mark is non-solid. The 2-dimensional painted object casts no shadow and yet the painter reproduces one on the canvas. The painter uses a depiction of the absence of light to cue that we are intended to read the painted object as if it were solid. Here, the painted shadow within the painted image becomes either an indicator of depth (as in chiaroscuro) or an optical referent (as in the tradition of trompe l'oeil).

In sculpture, however, matters are more complex. The sculpture, traditionally, is a real object, which should have no need to indicate its own physicality in relation to the physicality of the world. What does it mean to make a shadow solid? In Chee Kiong's practice, the gesture is a moment of playful paradox that seems to ask how we balance a knowledge of presence with a certainty of absence. By building a shadow in clay, plaster, or stone,

he makes solid the very demarcation of solidity, a demarcation that should itself be without material qualities.

Through his sculptural practice, Yeo Chee Kiong involves us not only in an investigation of what is and is not there, but also of how objects might relate both to themselves and to the spaces in which they are seen. In his essay 'The Identification of Overlapping' (2004) the artist tells us that

"It seems that the trembling of my mind is not caused by the object/space that is presented in front of me, but by losing track of the system [of categorising spaces and objects] that I always referred to."

– **Yeo Chee Kiong**
The Identification of Overlapping
2004, Number

It is this sensation of the trembling mind, this physical, almost Bachelardian, response to an internalised quandary of conceptualised space that we see embodied in Chee Kiong's work. His sculpture becomes the concretised form of a sustained and formal inquiry into what visually, optically, and theoretically might be a space, and what might be an object. The artist's

gaze divides his surroundings astutely while his work at times subverts these divisions, paring down the structural presentation of a room into carefully denoted parts through the placing of sculptural objects. Describing these spaces and objects alternatively as 'values' or even as 'tools' for orientation and perception of the world, the artist negotiates his work between the binaries of what he has called "the opponent and respondent in a kind of categorical obligation." To discuss the production of art as a moment of equation between the contesting forces of what is and is not there, is to frame a lyrical tension. Sculpture here becomes the promise of the glimpsed, the making visible that which was not visible, the making solid that which should be Nothing. By implementing the notions of presence and absence – of space and object – as tools, Yeo Chee Kiong builds himself a structure of logic that becomes both the foundation of his perception of the world, and the underlying structure of his sculptural investigation of that perception.

So I asked Chee Kiong what he had been reading lately, and inevitably Bachelard came up in conversation. In 1958, after all, Gaston Bachelard taught us that:

"Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which binds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything."

– **Gaston Bachelard**
The Poetics of Space
1958, Beacon Press

The question of yes and no is also a question of being and Nothing – the Nothing perhaps, of the shadow that tries to usurp our conviction in that very binary. Many different kinds of being have been distinguished and contested as minds have pondered the relative states of existing and subsisting that the universe offers. We may believe, as Meinong claims, that while objects, spaces, and even shadows exist, those universal qualities that are outside physicality and time – such as numbers, or the difference between colours – merely subsist. And what of imaginary things, like the Hydra? Meinong suggests that as fictions these do not exist, but have only an essence or 'Sosein' that lends them presence. Clearly there is a hierarchy here, with certain things seeming to exist more than others. How we can be sure how much something exists (or indeed 'whether something is') is a fundamental preoccupation of philosophy that underlies much of how we can conceptually orientate ourselves within a world of objects and things. Is there really any identifiable thing that we might independently confirm? It seems as though there must be, if we follow the logical premise that 'everything either does or does not exist'. This statement confirms that any given thing – let's call that thing 'X' – either does or does not exist. At least one thing therefore – X – either does or does not exist. This proves that there must be at least one thing, given here as X. Whether that thing exists or not is a different question.

Yeo Chee Kiong is surely an essentialist in this sense, in his conviction that establishing an

object's presence or absence must precede all other questions. He has after all suggested that a primary engagement as a visual artist is for him to establish the properties of containment, adjacency, overlapping or mutual status between the succession of objects and spaces through which he moves: the determination of object-hood against the void – the finding of X within the realms of not-X's. The sculpting of shadows allows Chee Kiong to inquire after Nothing, and the highly finished, glossily polished surfaces of his work reflects our questions right back at us. The sculptures generated by his investigation are often enigmatic. As a series of forms we find the shapes of what is and is not there made visible and tethered to an idiosyncratic but inarguable logic.

All together now...

*“Me and my Shadow,
Strolling down the avenue,
Me and my Shadow,
Not another soul to tell our troubles to,*

*And when it's twelve o'clock, we climb the stair,
We never knock, for no-body's there,
Just me and my Shadow,
All alone and feeling blue.”*

*– Verse and chorus from 'Me and My Shadow',
Lyrics by Billy Rose, 1927,*

Ruth Barker

Curator, Writer, Sculptor (Glasgow)