

Like Water, the Child, his House

“Iron rusts from disuse; water loses its purity from stagnation ... even so does inaction sap the vigour of the mind.”

– **Leonardo da Vinci**

When Chee Kiong approached me sometime at the beginning of this year to write an article for his solo show *The House*, he said I could write about anything. He had invited a few of his other artist friends to write as well, hoping to solicit and tease out a range of perspectives and readings of his work. As an artist myself, I have always believed that good art should speak before it is spoken of. Great art enlightens, fuels the mind and ignites the potential for imagination and realisation. I tend to agree with Rodin when he said, “Art is contemplation. It is the pleasure of the mind which searches into nature and which there divine the spirit of which Nature herself is animated.”

I would like to begin by contemplating on the subject water; an element which I think is significant in many of his work, though its presence is usually hardly noticeable at first sight. The notion of water is prevalent in most of his work either physically, suggestively in his titles or in its various stages such as taking the form of a cloud. This formless substance sets the stage for a multi-faceted encounter with the inanimate object-installation. It provides the means

for physical interaction between the viewers and art objects in the most natural and unobtrusive way. Water is a strong metaphor for the uncertainties and indistinctness of many of our life experiences.

Chee Kiong’s water is still. Which in a way is not auspicious according to Chinese Feng Shui, where water should never be stagnant. In Buddhist thought, all things are aggregates of Mind and Matter which are products of 6 Laws of Nature¹.

(1) Pathavi is the Law that solidifies.

(2) Apo is the Law that liquefies.

(3) Tejo is the Law that gives cold and heat.

(4) Vayo is the Law that makes motion.

(5) Akasa is the Law that makes space.

(6) Mano is the Law that causes the continuous process of Mind.

Pathavi or solidity is the element of expansion. It is due to this element of expansion that objects occupy space.

Apo or fluidity is the element of cohesion, it pull particles of matter together to form a cohesive whole. Liquid possess the strongest cohesive force, unlike solid objects, they coalesce even after separation.

Tejo is the element of heat which causes motion in all things.

Vajo is the element of vibration or motion. We need a fixed point of reference to ascertain if an object is moving, but in Buddhist thought, there is no absolute stillness.

Everything is in motion, relatively.

In this sense, the water in Chee Kiong's sculpture could not be absolutely still. In fact, the water is constantly in motion; it does so unnoticeably and almost invisibly. Superficially, this is simply due to the frequent changes in temperature and pressure in the environment and vibration caused by movement of the visitors.

In his work, water doesn't just simply reflect the object world like a mirror or serve as a carrier; it is an exemplification of the highly unreliable and unstable nature of our perception of the material world. Like water, our perception is fluid.

From here, one might be able to slowly comprehend what Chee Kiong meant when he talked about wanting *"to articulate the possibilities in the process of 'perceiving' and 'mis-perceiving'..."* and to "evokes circumstances that are beyond or against common definition and perception of things and phenomena in our world."

We are used to saying 'seeing is believing'; but our perception of the objective world is highly unreliable.

A few years ago while holidaying with my wife on Cheju Island, South Korea; the tour guide brought us

to a location called the Magic Road. Apart from a few trees lining the two-way tarmac roads with a fairly steep slope upwards, there was nothing magical about the place. The guide told us to get down and asked the bus driver to make a U-turn so that the bus faces down slope. He then asked the bus driver to switch off the engine and release the parking brakes. The bus rolled backwards, and uphill.

Many philosophers agreed that perceptions are one's interpretation of the world and realities such as 'a black table' or 'a shadow' are but consensus of perceptions. Cognitive psychologists believed that we learn to make sense of the world around us by creating models of how things actually are. As we acquire new knowledge, we make changes to this model and thus, the model that we create to help us understand reality is usually provisional. If that is the case, all perceptions of the objective world would also be provisional.

I think most would agree that young children usually speak the truth. As such, would the perception of a child be closer to the truth?

American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said "To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial [way of] seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."

Many of us have forgotten that we were once a child; when nothing seems to fail to astonish us; when the storm and the rain would send us screaming in fear or joy; when the shadow was a playmate who always disappears whenever the light goes off; when a table could be a house and a chair a joyful ride; when the world was never a familiar place but a mysterious black forest waiting to be explored. Great artists like Picasso yearned to be a child again. For him, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

The beauty of Chee Kiong's sculptural works is found in its simplicity. There is a certain playfulness in the way he put things together, like a wayward child, he may exaggerate, distort, change or embellish certain parts of a "table" symbol in order to reveal something unique or special about a particular object or activity being depicted. The highly descriptive and poetic titles he gives his works reveal a preference for narration though his work may appear non-functional and almost minimalist. Chee Kiong obviously takes pleasure in creating and telling stories, but the objects he creates are symbolic and very much a result of his conceptual understanding rather than observation of the world around him. Most children by the age of five or six would have developed a repertoire of graphic equivalents or symbols for the things in their environment such as a house, a tree, a person, and so on. The child perceives and models his/her world from the heart with their hands through their eyes. We may not fully comprehend what the child draws and why he may colour the sun blue, but you would find yourself totally bewildered by

his gibberish and account of his story. To grasp the meaning behind Chee Kiong's objects demands no less than a redefinition of precepts in the material world we inhabit, but more a return to a stage of purity, where 'The house, in which mind lives is somewhere in the heart.'²

Like iron which rusts from disuse, art loses its edge if not challenged. Like water, art loses its clarity from stagnation. When an artist creates with his mind in his heart, the viewer needs to respond with both his mind and heart too.

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¹ BUDDHISM THEORY AND PRACTICE, U Maung Nu, Former Prime Minister of Burma Published by Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University Bangkok, 1983. <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/nubuddhi.htm>

² Ibid.