



The Essays – An editorial note

“Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something – an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words that I had heard from somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man’s as though there was more struggling upon them than a wish of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was incommunicable forever.”

– Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925,
F. Scott Fitzgerald

The essays that follow are an intuitive amalgam of individual perception and stock philosophical ideas that thread through the work of Yeo Chee Kiong. It is significant that all the writers register two consistent aspects despite the differentiating tones of their critiques. One is a sense of the unreliable (whether in physiognomy or philosophy) and the other is the necessary plane where (artistic) truth resides.

Questions of perception can be determined by physical cognitions, such as in Ruth Barker’s essay, of shadows and environmental phenomena. They can interrogate materials to put in place a matrix of sense and sensibility, such as in Tan Yen Peng’s offering in *Arena of Encounter*. They find distinct parallels in both with the concerns as shared by Boo Sze Yang.

Perceptions are both about our experiences and other detected phenomena around us, and a formal investment of symbolisms that have gathered import over time, through time. This harnesses the two dimensions of analytic and synthetic as Kant has offered, in our aesthetic judgments and reasoning.

The impossibility of finding a middle ground lead us to operate on a ‘sliding scale’, as Margaret Iverson has coined in reading critical historian Alois Reigl’s work. According to Reigl, we move between the sensations of the haptic (touch and 3 dimensions) and the optic (the visual field as conditioned by other scientific principles, such as the mathematical). Since time immemorial, we have learnt that as sentient humans, pure knowledge is actually that which we do not know or can not know. We rely on sensory reflexion to infer the higher consciousness, bringing us one step further to this as yet attained state of knowing. The essays here help us along, because they provide readings to the work of Chee Kiong which help sustain the multiple dynamic that conditions the existence of his work. The environmental connectivity is a precondition for sustaining the physical notion of who we are and what we think (that becomes an object) as Yen Peng suggests. Spiritually, we seek to return to a natural state of purity (only essence, without influence, without knowing) as Sze Yang indicates. He further intimates with the quote from

Picasso that children (in their innocence) represent the highest level of innate creativeness, and that once we become adults (with our experiences) somehow, there is a loss of the sensory purity that underlines the naïf, the fundamental being before anything else.

Sculptor Lee Loung-Chen helps to ground our return from the analogous realm of thought and objects; objectivity and subject. He points to Chee Kiong's practice as evidence of new form. That sculpture in the contemporary age is still about the making, just as Sam Ainsley maintains, in what is technically refined, ideologically sound with an expressive lilt (poetic). Any object that comes into being in our space, is not so much about its pure physiognomy (for that is unreliable) nor is it purely about the thought behind it (since that cannot be consistently shared by a diverse community of perceivers). It in some sense relies on an intuitive plane that we find ourselves temporarily occupying, outside time and outside space.

In the quote above, Nick Carraway, the narrator in Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's beautifully poignant novel, *The Great Gatsby*, presents the process at its finest. Although the quote is devastating in some sense, with an undertone of loss and the imminently tragic – it offers that we stand most often and for the shortest period of time, on the threshold of the all-knowing and the unconditional.

Chee Kiong's contemporary sculpture reaches far and long to an unprecedented horizon. As sojourners, we read legends about sailing vessels that set out to sea, thinking they would have reached the end of the world if they reach the edge of the sea-line as far as the eye visualises on the horizon. As though there is in evidence a sudden cliff of water that ships would fall over and be lost to forever. In truth, we come to the end of lives sooner than we can reach that horizon. And if we persist to stay the course, then we find ourselves on as many shorelines as diverse and unique as the people resident there. It is these shorelines that best describe the strain of an elusive rhythm that Carraway refers to, a familiar echo found in the different essays presenting what they know about the work of Yeo Chee Kiong.

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