

The thing itself – the art of Yeo Chee Kiong

*“The marble index of a mind forever
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.”*

– William Wordsworth 1770 – 1850, *The Prelude (bk. III)*

*“Q: Why didn’t you make it larger so that it
would loom over the observer?”*

A: I was not making a monument.

*Q: Then why didn’t you make it smaller so that
the observer could see over the top?”*

A: I was not making an object.”

– Architect, painter, sculptor Tony Smith’s (1912 – 1980)
replies to questions about his six-foot steel cube 1962

In 1508, the Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti was summoned back to Rome, after fleeing from an original commission that was never completed, the marble tomb of the della Rovere Pope, Julius II. Instead he was asked to begin work on what is today, the most famous and complex artwork of all time, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (Capella Sistina). It has been said that even through the 4 years and 4 weeks that Michelangelo worked on the ceiling, he harboured hopes of returning to his original love, sculpture, and the project that remains unfinished, the massive tomb of Pope Julius II, which today stands as the artist left it, in San Pietro in Vincoli. Brusque, occasionally hot-tempered, feisty and impetuous to his passions, Michelangelo is perhaps remembered for many feats including the fantastic Sistine Chapel fresco painting, but scholars constantly remind us of the peculiarity that he was

at heart, first and foremost, a sculptor, a master who dreamed with a chisel and stone. With fewer than 10 easel paintings, and two fresco cycles of the Capella Sistina and the Capella Paolina to his name, Michelangelo’s career was a lifetime of liberating what he considered the forcefulness of physical beauty inspired and inside a concrete form.

In the studio of Yeo Chee Kiong, there stands a wooden structure painted in black and blue. It is a massive life-size piece of two arched forms hinged together in the middle. They resemble a window or a door, with the inclinations of the typical shapes, and how a window or door opens and closes. The work is unfinished, but where it stands, it takes up a forceful presence, of the unaccounted for, the remnant, the subject and object, the thought in process. The paint smell is strong and the pigments are so rich, they form clear layers with an irregular gleam. It is a work that Chee Kiong confesses he is not sure how to finish. And there it stands, a peculiar reminder of options and choices, and the significant unknown.

I first met Yeo Chee Kiong while working on the exhibition Peranakan II aptly titled ‘The Humble Form’. His presented work constituted an openwork piece of carpentry resembling a table receptacle, containing liquid and a lime green mass that would float upon the water. The work was titled **Two drawers, her blood and my marriage in a monsoon season (pg 135)**. Our conversation then was limited

to how he was to ensure that the liquid would not spill onto my gallery floors. He was in effect being allowed to fall under the radar of prohibited substances in my galleries. In some respects, Chee Kiong continues to fall under the radar of many things. The frequency of his thoughts operates on an alternate plane. His creative enterprise therefore is not so much about making something out of his thoughts. It is to make something resist the 'thing-iness' even as conceived by his own thoughts, to consciously assert and deny all the physical notions of objecthood.

Chee Kiong isn't quite sure why he became an artist, and he isn't quite sure whether he should be labelled both either a sculptor or a conceptualist. He began his post-elementary school days by thinking he would become a musician, but somehow realised he probably wasn't very good at performing. He spent some years in the rigours of practice and perfection, but the two remained like parallel lines, never meeting. In 1990, he enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, graduating 3 years later with a Diploma in Fine Art, majoring in sculpture. Again, he entered into the rigour of practice and perfection, this time, he tells me, working in the commercial domain. Singapore's various street, national and cultural festivals drummed up enough work for object-making, from the decorative to figurines. Chee Kiong confides that he became very good at sculpting human figures

true to form. His work was refined, fast and in demand. He earned a decent living. Then, in the fall of 2002, he packed his bags and left for Glasgow.

Two years at the Glasgow School of Art meant two years of being nothing but an artist. It meant two years of forcing himself to develop relative fluency in English, since he was quite alone in this foreign city, where English was the only medium of instruction and communication. Chee Kiong found some of the challenges included resisting the urge to 'hang around' the comfort zone, in a community of those who still spoke Chinese abroad. For all his efforts at grounding himself in a western vernacular, Chee Kiong's graduation work was a masterpiece of the mute. His original work highlighting his **Shadow (pg 111)** form remains an ephemeral memoir, while a repeat performance is captured on video, aptly titled **Somebody took over my shadow in Glasgow (pg 114)**. Chee Kiong shares that while he adopted his 'shadow', he was not as active as the character documented in the latter video. It is in fact a profound undercurrent that objecthood or non-objecthood cannot be premised on its physical manifestation regardless. Time and space continually interfere, effecting changes that we are unable to predict or control. We are, our concepts are, our thoughts and ideas are, inevitably, invariably, conditioned by an unknown query, that is best embodied by the phrase, "What (could) happen(s) next?"

We are forgiven for thinking that this precipice occupies a precarious position for an artist who chooses to make objects. Robert Morris says in his Artforum notes of 1966, "Sometimes there is a puritanical scepticism of the physical in it [sculpture]. The lesser work is often stark and austere, rationalistic and insecure....for a long while, the duality of thing and allusion sustained itself under the force of profuse organisational innovation within the work itself...[however] Duality of experience is not direct enough." Perhaps this is where we can locate the work of Yeo Chee Kiong. A stroll through his **The House (pg 48)** exhibition only serves to align our perspectives and experience to an ostensible 'now'. A refreshing estrangement from all our realities (and even his, perhaps) to seek out new meaning, new value.

"It began with a chair," said Chee Kiong. "In Thailand, there was no word for a 'chair' before the Chinese imported that piece of furniture." The reason for this was simple, since chairs were not a part of Thai living to begin with. Today, in Thailand, it is named 'kow ee', extremely similar to a Chinese Hokkien/Teochew pronunciation for an actual chair. The importance of this being and non-being demonstrates that we live within a matrix of classifications – ironically regardless of form and function. If we peel back the layers, older Thais would not know what a chair was since they never used one, hence they never needed a label for one, yet a chair existed even at that time and has been in existence for the extent of civilisation as we know it today. A chair has four legs and is raised above the ground. It has a flat

plane where we rest our weight, seated, bottom first, our back against an upright plane. This is form adapted to function. Obviously to a Thai person who never used a chair in his life, both form and function are irrelevant. There is no concept of a chair, therefore a chair does not exist. And if the Chinese did not lend the word to them, perhaps the Thais may have ended up calling it a *robodigit*.

In some ways, it could be a positive direction to resist the biographical construction of how Chee Kiong came to make all the things he has made to date. The process is less chronological and spatial than it is a form of relativism. If Einstein could make a sculpture out of $E=MC^2$, perhaps this is the oracle that finds its eternal flame unquenchable: one part air, one part matter, one part reactivity, one part of the momentary. "The idea," Sol LeWitt once said, "becomes the machine that makes the art." The self-effacement of the creator avoids total conceptualism, since to conceive is derivative. It also steers clear of the consciously dictatorial and biographical. Chee Kiong has several times offered that his work is about asking and answering questions. They are about possibilities you never dreamt of until you thought about the impossible.

And so **The House** came into being.

Context is a particular exercise. It demands an un-stemmed tide of association and meaning, figures and abstract-ions, risk and recourse. The emblems of the house are individual works created not for any specific reason. They justify a collective only by being placed in the same space,

with some offered coherence as designed by the map leading you through the various rooms. Chee Kiong states firmly that the beginning of the house hinges on the building of the 4 unbearably light columns, suspended solid capitals in basic Doric or aspiring to something even more basic than Doric. From these, the fluted columns wear down in trains of white wool. There is no base, giving you the impression that you need to keep your head up to believe that these are columns of some kind of architectural mien.

The columns are a development of the original storm cloud, executed in black raining wool, and the rainforest arbour, executed in green, herbaceous and lush with again, wool. The strands are dense in all formations. I struggle my way through it and the strands get stuck. They are caught in my watch, my handbag strap, they mess up my hair and drag over my eyes. I find I am pushing my way through just to find the way out. "You have to go through it slowly," Chee Kiong advises later, "then the strands will part gently and everything will just flow around you." I don't know about the flow, but I was quite enamoured of the 'hair-raising' experience. I liked that I had to struggle, that everything was untidy and incongruous. In sum, I liked the idea that I was going in, looking for the way out.

Material and movement are central to Chee Kiong's work for the moment. With this portico, we stand on the threshold of the original sense behind what Chee Kiong aspired to. The cloud, he says, as a immaterial material; a cloud is evaporated solids (water), visually resembling the tangible, but in

truth, ever weightless, ever formless. And stillness proposed as an impossible notion: it is to defy inert objectivity into latent subjectivity. This is one reason why the water pieces are important, especially where floating forms are part of the installation. Such movement is not so much a kinetic function in form, but a bold aria to environmental displacement. Musician Frank Zappa once said that musical performance was a form of sculpture: "the air in the performance," he said, "is sculpted into something." The objectification of Chee Kiong's discourse, between the stillness of the water and the form hewn from it as floating predictably inert, is self-conjuring. In a matter of hours, both the water and the form move. Chee Kiong has footage over long periods in which he captures minute change in both position and direction. The work, for all its concrete bearing in the receptacle that holds the water and the hard floating object, is essentially formless. Chee Kiong could perhaps be aspiring to derive formlessness from forms – themselves changelings wandering an environment enchanted by inexorable time and space. These are the constitutions of the **Four Nights (pg 69)** and something such as **The Last Supper (pg 57)** table. Like **Two drawers, her blood and my marriage in the monsoon season (pg 135)**, they are constructed to contain liquid with objects floating above. Chee Kiong is precise about the water level. It must come right to the lip, whereupon in absolute stillness, the momentary manifestation is a smooth, glass-like solid. It is inevitable that several fingers and hands have disturbed the water and effected spillage. This brings us to another aspect of Chee Kiong's work: how to make the solid permeable to other solids.

He started with the colour black, whereupon he constructed a black receptacle. This he filled with water and the resulting effect was a massive form that resembled a solid, but in effect, he could push his hand through the 'solid' water. The intention is not so much for visitors (or even Chee Kiong himself) to go around pushing through these apparent 'solids'. They are reductively about the nature of objectivity ruling out the physical and the metaphorical. The blackness doesn't necessarily mean anything, the water doesn't necessarily mean anything either. Together, they also don't represent anything, except the proposed idea that one solid can permeate the other solid, an imaginary defeat of both concept and object. Some might find this notion contentiously spurious and frivolous. But its exploratory findings span far and wide into Chee Kiong's practice. Two objects in evidence demonstrate the sophistication of this. An older work now called **A Room of Darkness, Her Shadow, and My Eye (pg 126)** and a stainless steel piece, **A found frozen cloud at Ben Nevis (pg 67)**.

The first is a plaster summation of illustrating both light and dark; transparency and obscurity. The work began with the concept of an aperture resembling windows found in a monastery. On a small scale, it uses solids (the plaster and form) to both dictate and defy the ephemeral (shadows and light), creating a poetic resonance of something along the lines of darker than dark, blacker than black. For instance, if the object is black and the light falls on a part that re-creates a shadow falling on the same object, this shadow is black but evident, thus, "blacker than black."

The powerful notion of an imaginary defeat is manifest. We think we have reached the utmost, but something continually defies the extent of our understanding and receptivity. Likewise, **A found frozen cloud at Ben Nevis (pg 67)** is a truly shining example of objective defiance. It takes on the standard bulbous, cloud-like formation known in Chee Kiong's work. This time, it is emblazoned steel – hewn from fire, but cold to the touch; visually compressible, curvaceous but sharp in its imagery. It is an object taking up space, but reflecting what's around it on the shiny surface. It is everything and nothing. Like its title, surely if we found a frozen cloud on Ben Nevis, this is what it would look like. And surely if we attempted to take it home, it would dissipate before our very eyes. The laws of science tell us it is impossible to bring the found frozen cloud at Ben Nevis home. Yet here it is, sitting in the House, in a gallery space.

"Works of art are analytic propositions." Joseph Kosuth states in *Art after Philosophy* in 1969. "That is, if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact." Using the fundamentals in Immanuel Kant's theoretical discourse on the aesthetics of art-hood, he distinguishes as Kant does, between analytic (to read the inherent symbolisms) and synthetic (to read using empirical or experiential data, i.e. facts). He goes on, "A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art." It is somewhere in between these two planes that we aim to lodge

the workflow of Chee Kiong's practice. Between a quarry of associated symbols and ideologies and the simultaneous archive of known and assembled facts in experience, lies a network of tributaries, hosting the undiscovered, making its way into a delta of spontaneous revelation.

In his video piece **A Winter Afternoon at the Bottom of the Lake (pg 68)**, Chee Kiong shares with some pride, how the filming and editing later of this piece, offered itself, as it were, as the work of art in process. The visual footage is a trick of the eye itself, filming the moment by moment events of a fairly ordinary day in passing, as reflected in the partly frozen surface of the body of water. Chee Kiong himself was surprised by the many goings-on that he missed out, even though he sat with the camera and stared at the same scene while the footage was being shot. To him, it evidences that though we are operating as fully aware and sentient humans in our environment, there will always be, without fail, an optional sub-consciousness that resists logical experience and intervention. Chee Kiong regards this as his 'third eye'. Many things relentlessly become apparent, *in spite* of the natural affairs of life and living, *in spite* of what we think we already know, even those things that we know that we don't yet know. The work of Chee Kiong so far borders on the infinite gestalt of becoming, the consequential commotion of finding oneself and one's beliefs amid the uprising.

In the paucity of such gravitas, one derives release in perhaps the inconsequential. In the commotion, some of Chee Kiong's works find appropriate

resolution in a timely fashion. Like his **The Table, A Chair and My Pet in the living room (pg 58)** and his collection of **five trendy wigs (pg 60)**.

The first work is a pristine construction, undisturbed by ambivalent redress. The work is clearly anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and morphological in a domestic furniture sense. The curved legs are direct, as are the drawer knobs that resemble eyes and other features. A vase of cut flowers stands like a modernist reproach. It clearly states 'I am a table, a chair and a pet and I am in the living room'. Its simplicity and readability is not so much about presence, but a thorough lack of absence. Like the Ben Nevis frozen cloud, what else could it be, but? Similarly, the five trendy wigs, named for **Eclipse, Whale, Cloud, Storm and Rain (pg 85)** provide a parallel morphological concept. In part millenary goods, in part human anatomy, in part natural allusions, they provide a dissembling charge. The wearability of these wigs is highly suspect. The portraits demonstrating their function are incongruous with their forms. In some sense, the images line up blankly like old family pictures perfunctorily decorating the reception parlour of a traditional home. What are missing are dates – like 1889 to 1932, to emblematised the figurehead into another personal memoir. Instead they remain somewhat familiar, somewhat anonymous. The remnants of their posturing and our blow back into reality are the unblocked confections displayed in the shelving unit below where they hang.

"I like landscapes," Chee Kiong says, indicating the wig that has a tree-like form sprouting above.

From this, you get the feeling that the infinite promise of a wide, variable universe is what obliterates the boundaries and borders of both time and space. In Scotland, the battlefield of Culloden is one such plain. The flat ground is tree-less and surrounded by an unending horizon. To put yourself in such a space is to run the risk of being discovered. The wit of the wisdom is not how much you can conceal, but how much courage and boldness are made manifest in the unforgiving, raw and dewless dawn. It is a plain where anything that is out of place becomes a conspicuous retort. The works of Chee Kiong annotate epics in vivid but terse epigrams. They offer open-ended proverbs resisting the one dimensional, in meaning or physical value.

At the back of the house, one finds two works that seem to offer some closure if but temporarily. **When the shadow is tired (pg 72)** and **The Sarcophagus of a Dreamer (pg 73)** are placed resolutely with such presence, one genuinely feels we have come to the end. The tired shadow is Chee Kiong's knitted form when he embodied the shadow in Glasgow. It rests on not quite a table, not quite a drawer, not quite a chair or stool, but an open format accommodating both the former and resembling the right height of a seating item. Next to it the sarcophagus lies still, "Big enough," affirms Chee Kiong, "to fit a full-sized man inside". It is a reclined head, faced upward, a cloud like structure billowing from its mouth. The cloud recedes into a dip, holding a volume of oil that like the liquids in other structures, is filled right to the lip, edge to edge, a still, perfected alignment of liquid and solid, both in the permeable black that is

the oil, and the receptacle that represents vapour or a cloud emitting from the mouth. Chee Kiong plays with another association, the speech bubble found in comic books. Speech bubbles are funny things. In conventional representation, the clean-lined oval with a sharp pointed tip symbolises outright speech, while the cloud-like bulbous ones rear-ended by smaller circles symbolise unspoken words, or thoughts. Contemporary graphic novels push the boundary further to dispense of the speech bubble. The text becomes inextricably linked with the image, part thought and speech, part dream and reality, hallucinatory and vivid, a cacophony that contrasts the silence of stock imageries. The imperfect seam slicing the head belies the hermetic quality of pure use-less object-hood. It is somewhat container, somewhat whole. It tentatively offers some concept of encapsulating or liberating. The hollow space (is there really a space at all if we can't see it) inside echoes in our imaginations.

The House is in effect a valley of echoes. Like a natural landscape, it is altering moment by moment. And when the geographical profile changes, thus changes the sounds it reverberates.

Yeo Chee Kiong is uncertain when asked if he is happy with the way the House turned out. He relates a recent experience with a co-artist who was producing some work in Glasgow. His doubts register with a sedentary thoughtfulness. There is a mixed feeling, Chee Kiong offers, of how the work feels old now. Although he enjoys the individual pieces to a certain extent, he is not sure if the House doesn't feel a little dated. This coupled with a

suggestion that he doesn't really make things (the wool pieces for instance were fabricated in China by skilled craftsmen, as much as the furniture pieces were made by a carpenter friend) any more. He points to the plaster work of **A Room of Darkness, Her Shadow, and My Eye (126)**, which I had said was possibly one of the more important pieces in the show. "You are not the first and only one who has said that. Several people have said the same thing," Chee Kiong tells me. This work, he continues, was hand made. Crafted from plaster and sanded and polished before an unexpected pigmented grain revealed itself [which led me to mistake the work as wood], the work is a marvel of human potential beneath the sculptor's pure hands. It is literally, as leWitt implied above, the idea that became the machine that made the art.

On 4th June, 1967, renowned art-maker, Jacques Lipchitz was interviewed in the Chicago Tribune. When asked about his role and purpose as a sculptor, he replied, "All my life as an artist I have asked myself: what pushes me continually to make sculpture? I have found the answer...art is an action against death. It is a denial of death." Yeo Chee Kiong is an abstraction of life, by that we mean, the paring away of all the extraneous to reveal some essential being finding its way into a concrete expressiveness, that cannot self-validate. He is like in Wordsworth's perfect quote, that "marble index of a mind forever voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone". And from Tony Smith's perspective, the size range of use-less forms (that is, sculpture) beget themselves in a continuum between monuments and objects. Somewhere

in between, there remains an infinite zone of imperfect meanings and imperfect values. To resist the absolute, is to resist death.

A walk through this house by Yeo Chee Kiong indicates the homecoming to all our beginnings.

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