

Multiple Readings

Text by Hsiung Lu-Fang

Held at the Jendela Gallery at the Esplanade from 28th January to 27th February 2011, New Readings is a showcase of artworks by three visual artists, namely Lee Yu Juan, Wyn-Lyn Tan and Yeo Shih Yun.

By examining the exhibition from different perspectives, Hsiung Lu-Fang attempts to piece together her varied insights.

Walking towards the Jendela, I am greeted, at first glance, by a baffling sight. Calligraphy De-constructed by Lee Yu Juan, situated directly opposite the gallery sitter's reception counter, features three paintings hung on a wall, a trapezoid of black marks on an adjoining wall, a narrow plank of wood, and what appears to be two framed pictures or panels lying face down on the floor. As I stand hesitantly at the entrance of the gallery, the gallery sitter assures me with a friendly smile that the items on the floor and the plank of wood leaning against the wall are all part of the artwork.

Perplexed, I move along into the space, totally unaware that by walking through an inconspicuous doorway consisting of a black diagonal beam above, stretching downwards along the side of the gallery walkway, I had in effect just become a part of Yu Juan's artwork titled De-construction #1.

What had puzzled me was not so much the form of the artwork, that it was a site-specific mixed media painting installation consisting of some rather "unusual" and specific objects, but that I was unable to decipher the intended purpose for this particular arrangement of various elements.

As it turns out, the aesthetic arrangement of the various objects is the intended end in itself. Inspired by Chinese calligraphy yet wanting to move beyond the boundaries of the genre, Yu Juan has essentially broken down calligraphy into lines, shapes and forms. She explains that her use of the white wooden panel on the floor, the plank and beam structure is to provide viewers with a means of engaging with the entire gallery space, beyond the confines of a two-dimensional surface. "On the whole, it was a more formalistic approach and response towards the site, paintings and the objects", as compared to a more conceptual approach of choosing materials for specific meanings.

In the next section of the gallery, three works by Wyn-Lyn are featured. Two of them - The Pure Possibility of Emptiness and Poetics of Space - are acrylic and oil paintings on canvas, with large mirrors on the floor below the paintings that extend the sense of scale and perspective. Wyn-Lyn's bold and sweeping brushstrokes have a visual resemblance to those made by Chinese ink and brushes, while her lyrical and abstract compositions of colours, layers and text conjure memories of Chinese landscape paintings complete with lines of poetry or verse.

Her third artwork titled New Horizons, features an intimate array of glassware with photographs embedded within them, installed in a wall-mounted transparent box with a mirrored base. Taking a closer look at the images in the mirror at the bottom of the clear case, one notices that certain images are only visible as mirrored reflections. In New Horizons, it seems as though questions of reality and illusion are being addressed.

Meanwhile, a piano melody resonates throughout the entire gallery, audible even from the entrance of the long arc-shaped space. As I walk further into the gallery space, the source for this recorded music is finally revealed. Spontaneously composed and played by the skilled pianist Tze, Voices of the Forest is the soundtrack for Shih Yun's short film titled The Conversation. This video documents the fluid ink marks made by a Chinese ink brush tied to a tree branch, moving in tandem to the rhythm of the wind.

This poetic gesture and playful idea inspired by Tim Knowles's series of drawings created using pens attached to the tips of tree branches, is the premise for Shih Yun's extensive body of works, which dominates the gallery both in terms of sound or auditory space, as well as the actual physical space occupied by the artworks. From the original Chinese ink drawings on paper created through "conversations" between Shih Yun and a number of trees in Labrador Park, Singapore, to silkscreen prints on framed linen canvases, to black pigment on transparent film - the prolific array of marks and various modes of presentation made a strong visual impact and swiftly captured my imagination.

These whimsical artworks brought to attention an often overlooked fact - that trees are also filled with life - and further emphasized this by imbuing them with a sense of personality, as "artists" in their own right. Familiar natural elements such as these trees, and even the wind, are now seen in an unfamiliar and extraordinary light. As Shih Yun explains, "In many traditional Chinese paintings, bamboos and many trees are depicted. In these works of mine, artists are not representing trees or bamboos but the trees are making their own representation of themselves. I like this paradigm shift."

Commissioned by the Esplanade and positioned in conjunction with Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts, one possible way of interpreting the exhibition New Readings as the accompanying leaflet and text suggests, is through the medium of Chinese ink - that the artworks on show are all in some way or other connected to this medium, be it exploring new methods of working with Chinese ink or being inspired by Chinese ink brushstrokes and marks.

Yet if this is the case, then Wyn-Lyn's works occupy an ambiguous position, since two of them are technically acrylic and oil on canvas, even though they feature broad and sweeping brushstrokes reminiscent of ink marks made by a gigantic Chinese calligraphic brush. The inclusion of *New Horizons* - a mixed media artwork comprising digital prints, mirrors and glass; devoid of any direct or indirect trace of ink - would be a discrepancy that is difficult to ignore.

Even if we overlook the inclusion of *New Horizons*, or alternatively attempt to understand this group exhibition as one that presents new Chinese, Chinese-inspired or related artworks, subsequently there are also several other questions which may be worth considering. Namely, what are the intentions and ideas of each artist as compared to the greater framework in which their artworks are contextualised.

One example is Shih Yun's use of Chinese ink and brushes, which is due both to her love of ink itself and working with ink, as well as being a natural by-product of circumstances and available resources. As a contemporary visual artist who experiments freely with the ink medium and who has employed non-traditional painting tools such as household brooms, watering cans filled with ink, rollerblades, water-guns, toy robots and remote-control cars, her artworks can easily consume a large quantity of ink in a single session of art-making. The availability of the kind of ink chosen is thus a requisite consideration.

In the case of *Conversations with Trees*, Shih Yun's decision to use Chinese ink brushes was also based on her experience of the versatile range and aesthetic qualities of lines and marks that can be expressed with a Chinese ink brush as compared to other painting tools. It was especially important that the chosen tools to be tied to the tree branches are able to capture a sensitive spectrum of strokes and marks with as little human intervention as possible, so as to "remove the gesture [of the hand] from it all", giving rise to drawings of "absolute freedom and honesty".

Shih Yun observes that "The ink medium itself complements the works but the medium does not play the lead role but a great supporting role. The work, painting or film, plays the lead role." From this perspective, even though Chinese ink and brushes are a crucial factor contributing to the successful execution of *Conversations with Trees*, they still pale in comparison to the central ideas which form the core for this body of artworks.

Hence, if the exhibition has the specific aim of generating dialogue regarding new methods of working with Chinese ink, or new Chinese, Chinese-inspired or related artworks, then the selection of artworks to be included, the range and number of artists using Chinese ink in new and varied ways, or artists with a stronger consciousness of Chinese art, culture or philosophies, would have contributed to a more impactful exhibition with a clearer focus or more distinct message.

As it is, *New Readings* feels somewhat segmented as an exhibition. The artworks were presented in three sections according to artist and sub-theme - *Calligraphy De-constructed* by Lee Yu Juan, *A Suspended Stillness* by Wyn-Lyn Tan, and *Conversations with Trees* by Yeo Shih Yun. Although this is a logical and understandable decision due to the nature of the works and the shape of the gallery space itself, the unfortunate result is an underscored sense of divergence, which is not helped by the fact that the number of works by each artist is not balanced and disproportionate.

Reflecting upon the artworks on show, it strikes me that a solo exhibition comprising a single body of artworks by any one of these three artists, or even an older contemporary artist who works with traditional Chinese art mediums in his or her art practice, may in fact have worked out better on the whole, and still fit in under the Esplanade's overarching thematic umbrella of *Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts*.

As a general viewer, I did enjoy most of the artworks featured in *New Readings*. In particular, Shih Yun's body of artworks felt the most successfully executed both in terms of concept and craft, and the apparent depth and scope of her focused experiments, the energetic and enthusiastic exploration of her concept a delight to experience.

Wyn-Lyn's artworks have potential, but as the artist herself notes with self-awareness and candour, the two paintings would have worked better in a smaller and enclosed space to heighten the sense of scale, enabling viewers to enter more easily into her work. Placing the large mirrors beneath the paintings on some sort of platform, might also have provided a solution for the distracting marks on the gallery floor.

As for Yu Juan's *De-construction #1*, the selection and arrangement of elements beyond her paintings felt somewhat extraneous, lost in the open spaciousness of the *Jendela* gallery. Looking at images of Yu Juan's ink paintings featured on her website, I personally feel that these works are much stronger and more engaging.

On the whole, the individual artworks for *New Readings* are generally well-considered and executed, but fit uncomfortably together as one exhibition. While the ambiguous areas in concept and curatorial direction can be alternatively viewed as potential topics that can spark dialogue and discussion, it's hard to say the same with regards to the execution and presentation of the exhibition. In terms of the overall balance of works, set-up and volume of sounds, placement and selection of artworks - these are details that would require more thought and attention.