

Curatorial note by Daniela Beltrani

Ὁ δ' ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ.¹

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Whilst looking for Sanskrit words that more alluringly could translate into the colour white, I came across *sita*, which appears in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* of Hindu tradition. The term is used in reference to the elephant tusks (SB 3.13.33) and the lotus flowers (SB 3.21.19). Together with the privative alpha prefix, the word thus coined signifies a negation of whiteness at some level. The word applied perfectly to the works of three artists, which I serendipitously had the good fortune of appreciating within the space of a month in the spring of 2013, in completely dissimilar circumstances. Yet, all artworks, despite the diversity of mediums, made a profound impression on me for certain visual characteristics they shared: they were white or neutral in colour, but dark lines disrupted their purity. Conversations ensued and the visual impact became pregnant with powerful meanings.

The disparate yet profound simplicity of the works arrested me. I distinctly remember feeling as if the artistic gesture that had marked darkness onto the white surface came to the foreground in its very residue and manifested itself in an opposing unity. In other words, it became essential, stripped of unnecessary or distracting elements. It had created a content that counterbalanced its very receptacle in a subtle and concentrated tension of chromatic duality. One short digression here. To talk about feelings in art writing is not misplaced. Already Okakura Kakuzo in 1906 warned the readers of his *The Book of Tea* about the dangers of a misguided art appreciation.

It is much to be regretted that so much of the apparent enthusiasm for art at the present day has no foundation in real feeling. In this democratic age of ours men clamour for what is popularly considered the best, regardless of their feelings. They want the costly, not the refined; the fashionable, not the beautiful. ... It is this lack of genuine appreciation that is responsible for the pseudo-classic horrors that to-day greet us wherever we turn.²

I thoroughly share Okakura's view of art as, to some extent, spiritual: he considered art as a remarkable opportunity for "the union of kindred spirits" and for the art lover to "transcend himself" thus catching "a glimpse of Infinity."³ And he unequivocally states, "It is thus that art becomes akin to religion and ennobles mankind."⁴

Resuming my experience, I also could not help but associate the Aristotelian idea of potentiality with the whiteness. From the realm of my own imagination I could almost sense on my skin the inebriating fullness of infinite artistic possibilities being trapped on the surface of the untouched paper or canvas. And I could further imagine that once the implement had landed on that very surface, to transfer the immense wealth of inner wisdom the artist had harvested from her daily human experiences through the artistic process, choices would be made and a path would unfold in a dynamically creative actuality.

The essentiality of the elements and the monochromatic aspect made the potentiality-actuality dichotomy more manifest and palpable to me than polychromatic artworks. Quoting Andrea del Sarto's reflection in Robert Browning's poem, "less is more."⁵ Thus, I was inspired to explore that feeling and felt compelled to invite those three artists and a few more whom I sensed could respond to the stimulus of my proposal and be open to create new works in the process. In this way, the journey of aSita began.

¹ Quote, which Plato attributed to Socrates in *Apologia Socratis*, 38a. Socrates never left any writing.

² Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), 61-62.

³ Ibid, 59.

⁴ Ibid, 59.

⁵ Robert Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*, verse 78.

Over the course of almost two years, exchanges of emails, meetings and conversations amongst the artists and myself took place and slowly the original visual inspiration emerged in different ways according to both each artist's medium and their evolving artistic practice. This journey included a heart-warming camaraderie, which enabled us to share the many mundane tasks an exhibition is made of in a spirit of generous contribution according to individual preferences and talents.

Traditionally, in painting, the canvas is the postulate upon which the artist lays down her art. In Shojaie's research it becomes the very site for her exploration as physical woven object, whose essence is akin to the mysterious and pregnant materiality of *māyā*, the veil. And so Shojaie proceeds *via negativa* patiently removing and grouping warps and woofs (as in *Feminine* and *Masculine*) thus revealing the polarities and the space created in between them as necessary components constituting the unity. Their placement infers their essence in relation to one another, until Shojaie isolates its very ultimate Democritean element (as in *Portrait* and *Landscape*). The flimsy envelope of dried clear gesso adds an aura of imperfect fragility and impermanence. Shojaie invites us to look at it and through its essential quality, even beyond the deceiving use of the space in relation to it, to expand our consciousness until we perceive it a pure potentiality.

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
(William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," verses 1-4)*

Nair's poem encapsulates the mark of pen on paper, the voice that breaks the silence, the image that complements the words floating in the air. *Container* is a beginning that meets an end and thus creates a finitude that contains and excludes. But paradoxically it contains what it excludes. Time and space blur in the images of Nair. The subject is only subtly perceived, as its very existence is only a temporary loan. Clarity is not of the essence, as Nair is concerned with proposing for our consideration only the ethereal. The dust instantly gathered on the paper from the flapping of a bird's wings, once here and then gone.

Ong's images are drawings made with shadows of presence and connections. They are ethereal hybrids of physical and metaphysical, of existing spaces and abstract geometry, of reality and imagination. They live at the intersection of what our intellect can comprehend and our heart can remember. They distil the multitude of our mostly ineffable daily life experiences into a construction that our limited mind can etymologically comprehend and store, forlornly. They do so orderly and provide the illusion of logic. The geometry of the spaces taken in their individual finitude is quiet and without conflict. But as soon as they come together they generate tension and dispute, yet they also become aware of themselves in the controversy through the myriads of shadows of different shapes and density. The artist captures such tension and dispute in the most alluring way.

Since 2001 Yeo has been consistently pushing the boundaries of brush painting beyond its millenarian tradition and scholarly principles, to create artworks, which become a blend of artistic intention, control and independent material response. In a sense Yeo is collaborating with the materials in the creation of the works and thus questions and releases sole authorship of the work. She respects the complementing side of the collaboration and sets boundaries to her own intervention in a rigorous manner. Paraphrasing a verse from Rumi's notable poem, the artwork seems to emerge from a field "beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing."⁶ For this exhibition Yeo placed an amount of graphite powder directly onto a membrane on a speaker. After the substance comes into contact with droplets of water the artist releases from a giant dropper and the music blasts from the speaker, Yeo places a piece of paper over the speaker and captures the upward ejections to the sound of *We are Singapore*. The painting thus created is then transformed into a UV print on Plexiglass. The final result retains the memory of its scrupulous process in the marks that make up the entire image. Fragments of the story also emerge from a video the artist prepared to complement the appreciation of the piece itself.

⁶ Out of ideas of wrongdoing, in "The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition," translated by Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 36.

The collaboration between Wilson and Fondé responds aptly to the curatorial proposal with a series of diverse symbiotic artworks, which combine the artists' long established 2D and 3D practices, respectively. In the series of *Murmurations*, lines appear on paper as impressed through blind embossing and as shadows from drill engraving. Reduced to essential marks, grass leaves and birds move in equally evocative and effective dynamism. The theme of migration is so pertinent not only to the Singapore context in general, but also to both artists' personal situation as long-standing émigrés, and is perfectly embodied by exceptional examples of migrating fauna, such as the monarch butterfly and the starling. The collaboration becomes more dramatic in the two *Migration* series and *Sort Sol*, where the embossing takes on a more abstract quality, despite essentially representing lands, and the engraving is separated from its counterpart to allow it freedom and independent movement. The lines superimpose in a truly dynamic fashion as shadows, ephemeral, ungraspable to offer feelings of awe and wonder elicited by these encounters with miraculous fragility and alluring impermanence.

Syv Bruzeau's art piece, both as video and as live performance, is centred on the essentiality of the basic elements of dance in her practice: absence of movement, walking and breath. The first calls to mind Zeno of Elea's paradox of the fletcher, which Aristotle recounts in the book VI of the *Physics*, where the movement of the flying arrow is described as impossible because of its occupying an equal space when at rest or in locomotion. Walking is the basic element in dance, stripped to its very core. Breathing is the most essential duality of our life on Earth in the alternation of inhalation and exhalation and it sustains our very being. The interweaving of these three elements is carried out in a spontaneous and cyclic flow, where dualities are no longer questioned, but transcended in the surrendering of the weakened body. Committed discipline prepares the body; life experiences provide the endless inspiration; but the actual performance is open and not predetermined by a specific and strict choreography. It rests solely on the present moment. For the artist the movement is hinged on the spine, where she feels her memories are stored, from floating in her mother's womb to even memories of earlier lives.

I would like to conclude this short curatorial note by recalling Socrates' initial citation and read it in combination with a poem by the original Alexandrine poet Callimachus.

ἐχθαίρω τό ποίημα τὸ κυκλικόν, οὐδὲ κελεύθῳ
χαίρω τίς πολλοὺς ὧδε φέρει,
μισῶ καὶ περιφουτοῦν ἐρώμενον, οὐδ' ἀπὸ κρήνης
πίνω: σικχαίνω πάντα τὰ δημόσια.

*I hate the cyclic poem, nor do I delight in a road that carries many
hither and thither;
I detest, too, one who ever goes girt with lovers,
and I drink not from the fountain; I loathe everything popular.*⁷

Exploration of one's life should essentially and truthfully be carried out not on a path already trodden by others, but on one we create ourselves in order to embrace who we are and who we can become, the very meaning of our life on this planet. If we manage to achieve this, we would trace enriching marks. But if we do not, all we would leave behind after our earthly departure, is the infinity of possibilities and a blank piece of paper. *Sita*.

⁷ Callimachus, *Epigram 30* (transl. by J.W. Mackail)
http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/J._W._MACKAIL-SELECT_EPIGRAMS-24grammata.com_.pdf
(accessed 13 May 2015). In *Anthologia Palatina*, XII, 43.



Yeo Shih Yun (b. 1976, Singapore) is a full-time artist and Founding Director of INSTINC, an independent artist-run space. She received her Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing) from National University of Singapore, Diploma in Communications Design from LASALLE College of the Arts and, in 2002, Post-Baccalaureate (Painting) from San Francisco Art Institute.

As well as paintings and drawings, Yeo works with diverse media including silk-screen, video and painting directly on 16mm films.

Influenced by Abstract Expressionism, she is known for her strong energetic use of black ink and a passionate obsession with capturing the elusive moment that exists between chaos and order. Yeo has exhibited widely, both locally and internationally. Her recent exhibitions include *Choreographed Collisions* at Galerie Steph and *Lyrical Abstraction* at Singapore Art Museum. Her recent awards include the Sovereign Asian Art Prize People's Choice Award 2012.

Yeo Shih Yun

We are Singapore



Yeo Shih Yun, Future (2015), UV print on Plexiglass, 30 cm diameter

“Every artwork is created in response to the song *We are Singapore*. I might have helped by pouring graphite powder and water onto the blasting speaker’s membranes and catching the spills and vibrations on paper, but the real artist was the sound.

For a country as young as Singapore, to be where it is in the world in only 50 years is a remarkable achievement certainly worth celebrating. Everyone should celebrate. Everyone has benefited from living here and everyone should mark this notable achievement. As an artist, I feel very fortunate to be based in Singapore.

My way to celebrate is to use music and my art to create this special series of works. This series uses a national song, which is familiar to all Singaporeans, as the main source of inspiration.

Music is also an important part of my painting process. It is always at the background. When and how a mark is made is influenced by the rhythm, tempo and mood of the music at the moment. Still using black, but music is the artist and the artist is the instrument. The start of the series of works is the start of the song and when the song ends, the works are completed. After that, the marks made by the music are scanned digitally and then selected by the artist and printed on circled shaped acrylic sheets, which remind us of the vital role of the speakers.”

Yeo Shih Yun
April 2015

We are Singapore (1987)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HqiTrCNbVM>