

An Other Space 《另•外•空間》 : An Exhibition by Tang Ling Nah By Euginia Tan

In 1955, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan drew a distinction between the “little other” and the “big Other”, which is hereon referred to as the Other. The little other is a reflection or projection of the ego. It is simultaneously identified as a counterpart (a perceived likeness to the subject) and the specular image (a literal reflection of one’s body in the mirror). Conversely, the Other is deemed by Lacan as that which “designates radical alterity, an otherness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification” (*The Seminar. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*).

In conceiving of the Other as a space, artist Tang Ling Nah taps into a spatial dimension that we can associate with as something universal yet foreign, something visual yet imaginary. The context behind the exhibition title are the very roots that have us break down how we associate certain notions with space, language and identity. As seen in Tang’s extensive body of work, there is a fascination with the transitional quality of a space and how elusive it may be in terms of a personal interpretation. How can our minds re-read other/Other facets we know to be there, however limiting in our capacity to communicate its distillation? Where in the artist’s practice does her capturing of the two others reside?

Tang’s practice reflects on urban conditions—in particular the speed of life, the lack of interpersonal intimacy in the bustle of a city. Her fascination and dexterity with the medium of charcoal are akin to a child with bread crumbs, leaving a trail for her audience to follow. Charcoal smudges upon touch. It leaves a residue that lingers, hence it is an apt material for an artist to explore the invisibility of urban remnants. It is a messy, stark choice to portray the smudges a city has when multitudes of people, societies, cultures and ruling policies inhabit it enough to call it a place. The artist sees this city through her snow (or rather charcoal) globe, shakes it such that charcoal crumbs of unearthed emotion fall and cover the spaces she passes through. She presses her smudged fingers against its glass and continues to build her visual catacomb.

The Entrance

Jendela (Visual Arts Space), where the exhibition is encased, gets its name from *jendela*, the Malay word for “window”. Due to the presence of the louvred windows in the exhibition space, Tang has chosen to toy with the idea of windows branching into a duality of other/Other: in versus out; private versus public, reality and illusion flitting in and out of the viewer’s consciousness. Because a window is transparent, there are many ways light can pass through it. This creates an unintentionally pristine, poignant conveyance that the way we are roomed or housed is in fact the way the

light plays on our windows. Our windows are the openings we have allotted to the spaces that we centre our movement around. At the entrance, you are the witness. Then you realise, you are also being witnessed. The entrance is also your first realisation of an exit. You can either allow yourself to roam or turn away to leave.

The Courtyard

In addition to charcoal drawings on the wall that produce an illusionary space, Tang makes use of light and shadows to demarcate spaces in her allocated rooms (within Jendela). This is applied in three careful methods. Firstly, the artist makes use of natural light seeping through the existing louvred windows into Jendela. Secondly, artificial lighting is also introduced. Lastly, light is implied via the artist's sleight of hand in utilising charcoal drawings. Given that light conditions fluctuate throughout the day, so do the appearance of these rooms. You did not realise light could deceive. Sometimes long shadows are cast even when the light is weak. People have learnt to capture and even draw what it means to emulate light and matter, in a clashing irony of mockery or flattery. A light coursing through a room can be a source for unravelling; more than physical things being seen.

The Contemplation Room

As one proceeds, there is always a primal tendency to yearn for rest. A chair faces a window (a window faces the chair). Contemplation is a respectful ode from the artist to her viewer—a fixture Tang introduces to provide pause in the looming vastness of the space she has chosen as her canvas of choice. It is here where you choose to reciprocate with the exhibition. The movement outside sways in stop motion, you sit and blink. The window in front of you is not fully exposed, the sun and city are striped. There is a quiet confidence in occupying a space perfunctorily, perhaps that is how art is thus seen and felt. The frenetic energy of everyday motion recedes. If we choose to sit and ponder through the ebb and flow of light in this city, a room such as this becomes vital as a pulse.

The Safe

The allure of light in *CHAR-CITY* spurs the viewer to ponder the conditions of a calculated city. A minute magnum opus, Tang has somehow managed to suspend the charcoal-laden miniature such that it is fragile and focal, as all illusions were and are. Everything the viewer has passed has led them to this moment: the heart of the catacomb where there is but one resounding reminder about how small a city can be shrunk. Choosing to amble into the route the artist has provided and ending with the confrontation that this has been designed, the exhibition weaves seamlessly from pedestrian presence to jarring awareness. *An Other Space's* verdict is that we are never quite certain which perspective we can possess. We cannot resist the inevitability of our reduction.

As humans, we are reluctant to admit that we are prone to vulnerability, testament to physical and mental spaces we construct against indomitable factors like time and nature. We are unsettled in the realisation that just as human-made structures are erected with the possibility of demolition, so are our bodies and minds. *An Other Space* wrings this tension out of the viewer by allowing the vacuum of both other/Other space and mind to wormhole into moments where opposing sensations dominate. Our interpretation of the space in tandem with the artist's dioramic manoeuvring of space forces us to face these clashing options in each room. Caressed by the artist's forwardness in nudging forth our infant instinctive stirrings, *An Other Space* assures us that there is safety in relenting, be it to unpredictable light or monochromatic solitude.