

Essay

Unfamiliar Familiarity: by Tang Ling Nah

Exhibition period: 02 – 31 October 2009

FOST Gallery

From Form to Space The works by Tang Ling Nah (b. 1971) have always represented a powerful introspection into inhabited spaces with the simplest of media: charcoal.

Space embraces our being. We breathe and live in a space that is imbued with oxygen. We feel space on a sheltered trail in MacRitchie Reservoir Park or in a confined, staid HDB residential lift. Space, in its visual form as represented in art, can be defined by the elementary humble dot, line and plane. Accompanied by shades of light, space can 'escape' the two-dimensional surface of the paper to suggest the third dimension. Metaphysically, space is the playground of one's imagination.

Charcoal has a simple yet alluring characteristic. On paper, it can be a dense black material suggesting durability, yet it is easily smudged to produce 'grey'. We are at once drawn into the dark as much we are drawn into the light. Charcoal is made by charring fine sticks of wood, usually willow or vine twigs. This miraculous brittle tool is the key for artists to leap from lines, planes, form to space.

Tang's work draws attention to transitory spaces. Stairwells, foyers, interconnectors, barricades and passageways are often subject matters that appear in her sketches and final works. The use of *trompe-l'œil* illusionism in her work hints of a visual paradox. What appears to be a black hollow may turn out to be a solid black wall. These insignificant transitory, deserted spaces become the obsession and subject of her drawings, suggesting presence by depicting the absence. Imaginary figures appear to be descending the steps, or passing through the MRT station so quickly, that their slight movement is inconsequential, insignificant compared to the monument of time.

In a recent collaborative work *Consulting the Supernatural* (2009), shown at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Tang acknowledges another spiritual reading into her drawing practice—*Fengshui*. Staircases feature prominently in many of Tang's drawings, descending or ascending from eye level. From a geomancy perspective, the horizontal edges of the steps of stairs facing the front door, cuts and interrupts the flow of cosmic energy into one's home. In Tang's drawings, her staircases are often concealed from sight, turned away or simply turned upside down. And if her drawings are like front doors to these imaginary spaces, then the serendipity of abiding the esoteric, cosmic geomancy rules lends to a greater appeal of her work.

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Tang's work not only seeks the perfect balance of the heaviness of charcoal black, and the lightness of untainted paper, its various scales also engage the audience to experience the drawn space differently—both physically and mentally. Tang's commitment to her medium and subject matter produces some of the most evocative, powerful and intense drawings of our time.

Lim Kok Boon
(Art writer, critic and educator)
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