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**THERESA
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The field of marks that flows over each drawing resembles unpatterned lace, of inconceivable delicacy and craft. Where a semi-transparent web of lace enhances a body as it crosses skin, so we take in the materiality of indigo and white Gampi paper that Theresa Chong uses, her drawn lines weaving their way across its surface, joining together the linked points that mark their intersections. There will be hundreds of lines and thousands of points on any drawing. On the white paper the process is repeated on the obverse so that from the front a shadowy grey skein of marks appears to lie beneath the drawing, doubling its complexity.

For all their visual incident the drawings are extremely quiet. Their evenly repeated marks sweep across the paper with the delicacy of snow. The indigo paper drawings make me think of snow falling at night, and indeed Chong has taken some titles from the extensive Inuit meteorological vocabulary—"jatla" (snow between your fingers and toes), "Anui" (snow on ground), and "Nilak" (piece of fresh water ice). We should regard these as having an ideational rather than representational function, for Chong's drawings connect to multiple origins and meanings in relation to which resemblance functions like a take-it-or-leave-it accident, an incidental occurrence. The observation "snow

falling at night" is more important for indicating the kind of silence that settles on the land with snowfall. This is a particularly uncanny acoustic experience that inverts the soundscape, where the lo-fi drone of the city quiets and gives way to a hi-fi world of clear voices, footsteps, breeze in the trees, all of which we hear vividly. Chong's accumulating motifs, drawn with practiced deliberation, invite us into an equivalent silence where, as if simultaneously seeing and hearing, we feel the idiosyncrasy of each point and line with absolute clarity. Her purpose here is to open up a field of attentiveness that would deepen contemporary experience. The visual and acoustic materiality that provokes that mode of attentiveness is always there all around us, and Chong's drawings indicate a route towards it.

I think it's worth taking a moment to consider the silence of Chong's drawings in relation to the kind of silence that interests Murray Schafer, the Vancouver acoustician. As a sound ecologist Schafer evaluates noises, advising the suppression of some that are egregiously loud or intrusive and the conservation of others that might be vestiges of disappearing lifestyles and economic activities. Silence for Schafer is a corrective, a social entitlement which must be fought for. Chong's silence may have its environmental equivalents but what interests her more is an aesthetic

objective, a clearing, if you like, within the noisy carnival of contemporary art practices that would enable a particular attunement to the world. What we encounter in these contemporary drawings then is an idea of sensory engagement entailing acute looking and listening as an inveterate practice. In one of Schafer's more cosmic speculations we come across a link to Chong's work. Schafer suggests that silence can only be defined as sounds that begin before our birth and continue past our death. "Can silence be heard?" he asks, "Yes, if we could extend our consciousness outward to the universe and to eternity, we could hear silence. Through the practice of contemplation, little by little, the muscles and the mind relax and the whole body opens out to become an ear."

It's not surprising that the artist behind these delicate works, inviting us to hear a silence that preceded us, has been so moved by the Chinese scroll landscape paintings at the Metropolitan Museum. I like to imagine Chong wondering at Zen Buddhist artist Kuncan's *Wooded Mountains at Dusk* whose trees dissolve into intricately layered dots and smudges when viewed close up. The commitment of Chong's drawings to sustained contemplation is enacted through her working method as it patiently accumulates these fields of marks that come to push across the paper in shoal-like formation, as unpredictable but reflexive entities, capable of suddenly shifting patterns in unison. Chong's images are of barely marshaled chaos, of an internalized but incomprehensible principle of self-organization that provoke through contemporary forms the astonishment experienced before Qing landscapes as they conjure configurations of hills and trees out of anarchic ink stains into which we want to plunge all our attention.

Zen, landscapes, profuse imagery, surrender to intense contemplation, all lead me inexorably to one of the least likely comparisons. Alan Watts's pioneering 1950s writing introduced many young Americans to both Zen and LSD which he found to open onto similar liberatory experiences with regard to nature. He

introduces Zen as inviting a profound interrelatedness with nature, though unselfconscious contemplation and writes of his LSD hallucinations as generating the images of that ideal of integration. In "The New Alchemy," from 1960, Watts explains "The optical field seemed, in fact, to have a structured grain like a photograph screened for reproduction, save that the organization of the grains was not rectilinear but circular. In this way every detail fitted the pattern and the field of vision became pointillist, like a painting by Seurat." In hallucinations he imagines his eye as a microscope focused on images that are "infinitely rich and complex." From the great Beat and Hippie era poets like Belle Randall and Thom Gunn who did justice to the intensity of these new levels of interrelatedness we come across a language that opens up the core of Chong's drawings, where the vocabularies of aesthetics seem by comparison to be seriously disadvantaged.

...I journey toward
A distant door where strings of glass,

Twirling in the gloom,
Send sprays of colored light
Drifting like the universe across
The secrets of a single room.

I push the beaded curtains back
And Genesis occurs:
The Mysteries of Creation sift
And tumble past me in a blurred

Profusion on the papered walls
Dwindle and resolve themselves
In scattered, gleaming stars...*

Randall's world seems one recreated from scratch by her intensified visions where Watts's pointillism becomes a field of stars into which matter has dissolved.

Gunn's transformed experience also pushes at the limits of imagistic vocabulary as he writes of how he has entered into the kind of profound contemplation of material reminiscent of the Qing artists' landscapes, transfigured to the limits of language.

Terror and beauty in a single board.
The rough grain in relief—a tracery
FronDED and ferned, of woods inside the wood.
Splinter and scar—I saw them too, they poured.
White paint-chip and the overhanging sky:
The flow-lines faintly traced or understood.

Later, downstairs and at the kitchen table,
I look round at my friends.
Through light we move Like foam.
We started choosing long ago
—Clearly and capably as we were able—
Hostages from the pouring we are of.
The faces are as bright now as fresh snow.**

Likewise we wonder at the profusion in Chong's drawings, struck by their vision of plenitude, a hallucinogenic sublime that is drained of color and on which we gaze as if in the thrall of a grey dream. Chong's drawings have a different kind of intoxication embedded in their DNA, for they emerge from a study of post-World War II gestural painting, rather than from involuntary hallucinations. Struck ten years ago by a show of De Kooning's vellum drawings, Chong developed a procedure for converting the forms of exuberant Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes into her carefully plotted drawings. Buried deep within their dot and line matrices are vestiges of archetypal action painting gestures.

As a counter to the masculine teleologies of 50s and 60s abstraction I think of Chong's drawings

as rhizome-like, their marks exploratory in all directions, intersecting and spreading without hierarchy. Their density suggests neural circuits, with proliferating lines and nodes connected to multiple communication outlets. "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" goes the familiar introduction from Deleuze and Guattari's *One Thousand Plateaus*. Thinking of their interest in Virginia Woolf I started to read *To the Lighthouse* as if the relation between Mrs. Ramsay and the eponymous beam of light, incessantly rotating, was a rhizome of interdependency not so far from the productiveness of Zen meditation—"but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight..." Is it too far-fetched to imagine Chong's deeply-felt encounter with De Kooning's drawings similarly? Her resulting work had to be fully independent of its model for it to produce something vital from that meeting, and indeed Chong's images can be taken as marks of a liberated consciousness as it winds out into the world and back, connecting unpredictably to complex layers of unspecified life interest, much as Mrs. Ramsay's reflections meander so intricately around her environment of family, friends, and landscape. And indeed what else could Chong's marks be, so self-effacing in their drawn status, but markers of a wandering consciousness as it turns back on itself to connect the bright sparks of new impulses with dwindling sparks of ideas just past?

* Belle Randall, from "Genesis", *101 Different Ways of Playing Solitaire*, 1973

** Thom Gunn, from "At the Center," *Moly*, 1973

Mark Harris
London, Feb. 2013

of Kabul, 2007

Colored pencil and gouache on Echizen Gampi

25 x 36 3/4 inches

